

# Northwest PUBLIC HEALTH

## Environmental Justice Action Group

By **Latricia Tillman**

"A community that educates and speaks out for itself can best protect itself," is the mission of the Environmental Justice Action Group (EJAG) of Portland, Oregon. EJAG is a community-based, membership-driven organization founded in 1996 by a group of north and northeast Portland residents to address significant environmental health hazards faced by residents of those communities. EJAG embraces the organizing strategies established during the civil rights movement and is dedicated to developing and using community-based leadership among people of color and low-income communities to address issues of environmental justice, health, and safety. Jeri Sundvall, the executive director, and other EJAG activists have spent the past seven years educating community residents, policy makers, and local power brokers about environmental justice and the effect of policy decisions on low-income communities of color.

EJAG has had several significant victories in its brief history. "Healthy Albina," a report produced by EJAG and the Oregon Environmental Council, mapped many environmental health threats present in the Albina neighborhood in north and northeast Portland, home to many people of color as well as low-income families. The report showed that 55 percent of all toxic emissions reported in 1995 in Multnomah County originated in the Albina community even though only 13 percent of the county's population lives there. EJAG used a survey on asthma, administered by high school community organizer trainees, to raise awareness of air pollution as a major factor in disproportionate asthma rates in the community. A follow-up study conducted in partnership with Lewis and Clark University confirmed that asthma rates in north and northeast Portland are 14 percent, almost three times as great as the city rate of 5 percent and double the national rate of 7 percent.

Sundvall and EJAG recently leveraged their public health data and community organizing strategies to defeat plans to expand the interstate freeway that runs through north Portland. Not only did EJAG's participation in the I-5 expansion project protect vulnerable communities from increased exposure to air pollution, it also educated policy makers about the consequences of their decisions. As a result, policy makers on the I-5 Task Force also voted unanimously to develop a community enhancement fund to provide some redress for past political decisions that have unfairly affected Portland's low-income neighborhoods. That community members and policy makers alike are more aware and proactive about environmental justice is a testimony to the effectiveness of the Environmental Justice Action Group.