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An anti-asthma group for each of your lungs

By Robert Price, Californian Columnist

This town is big enough for the two of them. At least that's what I'm hearing from both of the nonprofits that have set themselves to the task of fighting asthma and the other respiratory ailments so common in Bakersfield.

With asthma attacks accounting for more than 3,000 emergency department visits in Kern County each year -- nearly half by children, for whom breathing problems are the No. 1 cause of school absenteeism -- there's plenty to work on.

But why two anti-asthma nonprofits, when one enlightened, aggressive, well-funded, multi-faceted organization would probably be adequate? Answer: local control.

The new kid on the block is the Asthma and COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease) Education Center, or ACEC. The organization (nonprofit status approval is still pending) is led by longtime charity/foundation manager David Parker and Sharon Borradori, who was an asthma educator for the American Lung Association's Bakersfield chapter for 20 years.

Borradori says the American Lung Association has moved increasingly into the public advocacy realm, pushing for legislative action on things like emissions and global warming. She says the ACEC, conversely, is all about direct contact with asthma sufferers and at-risk groups.

"The piece that's missing in Kern County's fight against asthma is the direct services part," Borradori says. "There's a lot that's being done in the advocacy part, and that's all very important, but in the meantime there are people who are sick today. It's not about advocacy, it's not about policy change, it's about what can we do now, one-on-one, in schools, in the workplace."

Some ACEC board members, like oil-company environmental specialist Jim Robinson, are also on the local American Lung Association board.

"There's new (Lung Association) management at the state and local level, and they took all the decision-making from the local board," he says. "(The ALA is) still serving a purpose, they've still got validity. We just wanted to put local efforts into the hands of local people."

Susan Wiggins, program director with the Lung Association's Bakersfield chapter, says advocacy is an important part of what the organization does -- it's got to work on the big picture, too -- but it's certainly not stopped educating people.

"We've got MAC, our mobile asthma clinic, which we take to schools and health centers and all sorts of events," she said. "We talk to people, ask questions, refer people to doctors. And we're starting a program to work with school nurses to work with kids at school."

The Lung Association runs an air quality flag program in coordination with local schools: Color-coded flags alert staff, students and anyone else paying close attention to the air's breathability that day. The ALA advocates for clean-air vehicles, clean-air school buses, idle-time reductions and continuing research into an asthma cure.

Those activities are beneficial and worthy, Robinson says, although some pursuits might sit uneasily with potential benefactors who have ties to the oil industry, a major player locally.

He believes the two organizations can coexist quite satisfactorily, each complementing the efforts of the other. They're off to a shaky start, however: The ACEC and ALA are hosting separate fundraisers April 10 within a few miles of each other, and at roughly the same time. In fact, riders in the ACEC's Woody-Y Century and Family Fun Ride cycling event are likely at some point to go whizzing past participants in the ALA's Healthy Air Walk. ALA organizers didn't know about the conflict until I told them; the ACEC says the overlap was unintentional.

Everybody, take a deep breath. We'll eventually get this straightened out.

TWO APRIL 10 FUNDRAISERS

Asthma and COPD Education Center's Woody-Y Century and Family Fun Ride

Cal State Bakersfield

Rides starting at 7, 7:30, 8 and 9 a.m.

Details: cyclingforasthma.com

American Lung Association's Healthy Air Walk

Yokuts Park, Bakersfield

5K walk starts at 10 a.m.

Details: www.californialung.org/about/events/healthy-air-walk-bakersfield