

Community Advocacy from Ground Level to State Level

*Moderator: Nell Green Nysten**

*Panelist: Miguel Rojas-Flores***

Austin McNichols: Okay, everyone, we're going to get started with our next panel, Community Advocacy from Ground Level to State Level, and a huge thank you to Nell Green Nysten from [Center for Law, Energy, & the Environment] (CLEE) for being our moderator today.

Nell Green Nysten: Good morning, everyone. That was a really fantastic introduction from Camille to some of the issues that are facing disadvantaged unincorporated communities, and it's so exciting to see her again. Haven't seen her in ages.

I'm Nell Green Nysten, and I'm a Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Law, Energy, & the Environment here at Berkeley Law, and I focus on water issues. I want to welcome everyone to this session on Community Advocacy from Ground Level to State Level. We'll be hearing today from Miguel Rojas-Flores about his work advocating for drinking water solutions with unincorporated communities in the San Joaquin Valley, which is a great follow-up to what Camille was giving us a window into earlier.

Much of what he'll be sharing, I think, will also be really relevant to community advocacy work in other contexts. In a minute, I'll pass the mic to Miguel, who has prepared a presentation to share with us. He describes it as a high-level overview that covers how we engage ("we" being Community Water Center) with community members from the first door knock to taking up space at the State Capitol.

After his presentation, we're going to shift to sort of a discussion format where I'm going to ask several questions and we'll have a little back and forth, and then we're going to end, and try to leave a lot of time for your questions. So first, I want to share a little bit more about Miguel. He was born and raised in

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Merced, California, as we got a little preview earlier, and grew up in communities affected by environmental issues from air quality to food access.

Miguel's interest in science and public health led him to obtain a Master of Science degree in Environmental Health Sciences. Throughout his various work experiences, from engaging with youth to engaging with farm workers, Miguel has seen firsthand the importance of relationship building. It's these interpersonal connections that often lead to a better understanding of problems and solutions.

Now, with his work as a Community Solutions Advocate at Community Water Center, Miguel builds connections with community members to learn alongside them, advocate, and empower. They work collectively to make progress towards the human right to water. This is such important work, Miguel, and I'm really looking forward to your presentation.

So, take it away.

Miguel Rojas-Flores: Thank you so much. Yeah, so just a quick introduction of myself. My name is Miguel Rojas-Flores.

I was born and raised in Merced, California. I actually grew up in South Merced, which, yeah, thank you so much, Camille, for sharing about that too, because there are still community members right now who are struggling with access to drinking water. So today, first I also want to reiterate, I am a Community Solutions Advocate at Community Water Center, which is part of the organizing team, so we're out in the community.

Today I'm really excited just to be here to share a little bit about how we center our organizing around drinking water and the human right to water to make sure that community members are at the center of all of our efforts. To do this, I've split it up into these sections. I'm going to be sharing a little bit about who Community Water Center is, what do we do, some of the water challenges that we face here in the state, and some of the organizing strategies that we use on the day-to-day.

The meat of this whole presentation is going to be the implementation example. I'm going to be walking you folks through what a long-term solution looks like and how we go about it with community members by sharing a little bit about some of the different communities that we're currently working with in Tulare County. Each of them is kind of at a different phase in terms of their community project.

So hopefully that will help you guys get an understanding of what the long-term solutions look like that we support with Community Water Center. With that being said, Community Water Center was founded about twenty years ago, twenty years in this upcoming September, actually, by Susana de Anda and Laurel Firestone in the Central Valley. Our first office was opened in Visalia, which is in Tulare County.

We then opened an office in Sacramento that could focus a little bit more on state-level advocacy and policy, and about eight years ago, we opened an

office in the Central Coast in the Watsonville area. With all of this, the goal is to assess community needs, to learn together with community, and to figure out what solutions these folks were interested in pursuing and how we could best support them.

Also, to share a little bit about how Community Water Center is structured, we have several teams. We have a technical assistance team, we have a policy team, communications, and community organizing, which is the Community Solution Advocate team that I'm a part of. All of these teams play a super important role in making sure that we're able to deliver quality support to the communities that we work with.

The really cool thing about my job, as I mentioned, is being a community organizer. My favorite part of my job being a community organizer at Community Water Center is that I get to help build and maintain the relationships with community members.

It's truly a privilege to spend as much time in the community as I do, especially getting to meet someone that's a total stranger at first to someone that I now see as honestly a mentor, someone that I'm learning from to better do my job.

To quickly give an overview of water challenges, I won't go into too much because I know there's going to be a lot of experts today that have already started talking about some of these challenges, and that will continue talking about these challenges as well. The main question that I want folks to kind of ask themselves is: What is going on with our water here in California?

The reality is that we are facing a drinking water crisis. There's an estimated one million people in California who lack access to safe drinking water from their taps, whether it's in their homes, their schools, community centers, or parks. Something that I really want to highlight is, that number does not include the over 90,000 domestic wells that are also at risk for water contamination or going dry.

And of course, these domestic wells are typically found in unincorporated communities that are usually low-income, disadvantaged communities, and communities of color.

Now that we know a little bit more about the problems here, I won't go into too much detail about that, but, like, why are we here and what led us to this point? That's a very long and complicated history. That includes certain agricultural practices, such as the over-application of synthetic fertilizers, which leads to a lot of nitrate contamination. California also just has a very complex history of water law and policy that has also led us to this point.

But the really cool thing about today is seeing so many people who are interested in learning more about this, and learning more about folks who are actively doing the work to make sure we're making progress towards the human right to water.

Now, to get to the part that I really like talking about, it's the organizing strategies.

A lot of what we do is just making sure that we're talking to people on the ground. No matter what community it is, especially when it's a new community, we always start with face-to-face interactions. We go out and we door knock. We want to make sure that we're talking to people and listening to them. We want to know what they know in the community. We want to learn about what they've seen, what they've experienced. Everybody here is an expert in your own life.

That's the same thing in these communities. I don't need to go and tell them that we're in a drought crisis or something because they've already experienced a dry well or they have one right now. I don't need to go tell them about water being dangerous because they already don't trust their water, right?

A lot of it is just going door to door, talking to them, getting to know them better, and also sharing whatever information and resources we can offer at the moment. We also want to make sure that we educate as we start to learn more about what the community wants to learn more about. That means telling them more about the technical side with support from our technical team, our policy team, to help inform and better educate the community.

We also do a lot of advocacy, helping community members advocate for what it is that they need. That could be at committee, that could be at board meetings, city council meetings, that could be legislative visits in Sacramento, and way more. And most importantly, we always want to do our best to implement solutions, whatever they might look like.

In this picture on the bottom right, this is actually the 1,2,3-TCP study, or pilot study is what we're calling it. It's out in the Central Coast region. 1,2,3-TCP is a contaminant that is basically the remnants of a pesticide that was banned in the '80s. So even forty years later, we're still dealing with the contamination from this pesticide. This study puts a filtration system to help clean out that contaminate. It's also attached to a UV filtration system so that it can also clear out some of the bacteria.

This is just one unique example, and it is in partnership with some engineering firms, just getting creative and meeting the community's needs where they are. With a lot of this, the whole goal is to not only support the community, but to help them get empowered so that they also start taking a leadership role in these solutions as well.

Now, to dive into the implementation example, this is the part where we kind of start going towards long-term solutions, but before getting into that, it always starts with interim solutions or what I call emergency solutions and resources. The reason I call them that is if your well goes dry and your house has no running water, that is a crisis. That is an emergency for you and your family.

If your water is contaminated, then it's a health risk to drink it, to take a hot shower in it, that is an emergency for that family. Most people refer to them as

interim solutions, but they are really like emergency resources. After we start door knocking, we make sure to connect folks with these resources.

One of the ones that we offer with Community Water Center includes free well testing. We always talk about what is in your water, *que contiene tu agua*. We want to make sure people are informed about what's in their water.

I think this is really important because not only do we provide the well testing—that's my colleague Lauren right here doing the water sampling from the well—we go back and we take the results. We make sure that we walk them through all these results, even if they are at a safe drinking level.

We still want to explain, like, why did we test for arsenic? What is arsenic? And the testing we provide actually is also starting to include PFAS testing, which is an emerging contaminant. Emerging not because it's, like, starting to grow, emerging mostly because it's kind of a newer contaminant, and there's really no regulations around that. There are recommendations from universities and different policy centers, but that's another one that we're also testing just so that community members know what's in their water.

A lot of this is also done in partnership with a lot of different organizations. We all know California is a massive state, and there are a lot of communities that need access to resources. So, here's just a list of some of the folks that we partner with consistently.

Self-Help Enterprises, they do their own well testing. They also provide emergency drought services in the Central Valley. If your well goes dry, they can help provide hauled water to your house while you start to look for a more long-term solution. We also work with management zones that are under the CV-SALTS policy here in California. We work with a lot more nonprofits, whether you're in the Central Valley or out in the Central Coast.

Now to get towards long-term solutions. Once we've been in the community and we've been door-knocking, we've been having these conversations one-on-one or with a few neighbors, we've connected them to some resources, and we've learned more about what's going on in the community, there comes a point where it just feels natural, and it's also a very important point, that we bring folks together.

At these committee meetings, we actually refer to them as *pláticas*, which translates to discussion or discussions in English. The reason we call them *pláticas* is because that's what they are. These are discussions with community members because, like I mentioned earlier, we're not experts in their community. We're not experts in their lives. We have all this information about technical stuff, policy, *et cetera*, but we want to make sure that we're learning together, right?

At these *pláticas*, it's also a chance for us to hear, like, what are the ideas that community members have for their community? What are their concerns? What information do they need to be able to make decisions about their drinking water? Because it's going to affect their house, it's going to affect their family.

Camille even brought up a good point about property value. Like, if you have no water, your house, it's going to be difficult to sell it or to try to move, even if you wanted to.

So these pláticas and discussions, they're just so important to us to be able to better learn what the community wants from us and what they need for themselves. But a really cool part about this, and again, this is kind of like the organizer part of me, it's really cool to see the relationship between neighbors start to change, too. Because sometimes these folks might have lived next door or a few houses down, or, like, just around the corner. They've never met each other, haven't really talked to each other. And on that first discussion, they're getting to know each other, and then months later, they come in as good friends. And it's just so cool to see that building of a community, that sense of a collective starting to happen, which, in my opinion, is really powerful for communities to start organizing themselves as well.

In Porterville, this is actually the community where I'm the lead organizer for. We're working in northern and southern areas of Porterville. The city itself is pretty big for a city, but out in the periphery, these red areas, there's about 290 households, all of which depend on domestic wells, and they are not within city boundaries.

Communities like this on the fringes, on the periphery are so frustrating to me because, for some of these folks, there is a water line in the street right in front of their house. Like, it's right there, and they don't have access to it for multiple reasons. Sometimes cities just don't care to really offer it.

Sometimes cities will offer it for a very expensive price. For example, in Porterville, some of the prices we've heard that were shared with me from community members is \$10,000 to \$15,000, which is a very expensive price to pay, especially for a low-income community, farm worker community. Not anybody just has fifteen grand just laying around, right? In the testing that we provided in this area, we learned that a lot of the wells are dealing with high levels of nitrates, 1,2,3-TCP and PFAS.

After we've had a few committee meetings, I didn't put a picture here, but my favorite committee meeting was the most recent one. A committee member actually offered to share her home, so we had the community meeting at her house in the driveway, and it was really beautiful because you don't even have to worry about driving because your neighbors are just walking on down the street to join this collective effort. But at that meeting, we learned that community members were officially like, "Yeah, we want to learn more about long-term solutions. We want to learn about filters, about different things that we can do in this community." So, the next step for us would be to support them with a feasibility study.

A feasibility study is a study that would basically look at all these different potential solutions, like what if we gave everybody a filter? What if we connected everybody to the city's water system? What if we created a new water

system? To basically figure out what would be the most feasible for that community. So right now, that's what we're doing. We're in the process of getting that started. The study will be shared with community members for feedback, making sure that we are answering the questions that they're curious about. We're going to be sharing it with the city of Porterville because it is their water system that might be included in this project and any other potential project partners just to make sure that we're getting the best quality answers and results from this study.

Before moving on, this is an example of what a long-term solution looks like at the start of the process. We've been organizing in Porterville for about a year and a half now. That's just kind of how long it took to meet over half of the community members and to start really engaging with them to learn more about, like, what is next steps for you guys as a community.

Going towards the middle of a long-term solution project, so once the feasibility study has been done, once it's been reviewed and everybody's, like, on board for a long-term solution, such as consolidation, which, by the way, means getting connected to a water system.

To talk more about that, I want to share a little bit about East Orosi. It's a community that was originally serviced by the East Orosi Community Service District. A lot of stuff happened. I won't get into it. Every bump that could be hit along the way to water justice has been experienced by this community.

That special district no longer exists. It is a small little water system. Now it's been administered by the County of Tulare, and it's actually going to be connected to the nearby Orosi Public Utilities District and their water system, after twenty years of organizing—and honestly much more. That's just the time that Community Water Center supported them with. Plans have been finalized. A construction team has been selected for the project, which is really cool because now this community that's been struggling for twenty years is at a moment where we can actually celebrate construction starting soon. It's a long-overdue justice for them.

Lastly, what does it look like to kind of finish out a project? What does it look like once construction is done?

The community of West Goshen is a small community off of Highway 99, just outside of Visalia. Most of these, all of these folks depended on domestic wells. There was contamination of nitrates, 1,2,3-TCP, and uranium. They were all able to get connected to a water system, the Cal Water water system, which also administers the water for the city of Visalia. It is a private entity. It's not a public water system. And it was huge.

We had a groundbreaking ceremony celebration right here in the left. We could see one of our amazing community leaders who really led the charge and rallied her neighbors for this project, speaking. That's a picture of the construction where the main pipe was going to be extended.

The really cool thing that came out of this project, too, is that community members who wanted to keep their wells, in addition to getting connected to the water system, were actually able to keep their wells for outdoor use. This is really important because if you live out in rural communities, you might have an acre, two acres, or more, and so a water bill from a system would be very expensive.

At the state level, there's three initiatives that have been super important. The Human Right to Water in 2012, the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA), which helps support with water quality and water quantity, and the Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience. These three initiatives have helped so much in terms of making progress.

Infrastructure is expensive. Emergency resources are expensive. All of these committee members helped lead the charge with that. They were at rallies, they did legislative visits, [and] they did a lot of media campaigns to support with that.

Even today, Community Water Center is out in Sacramento at the Nitrates Expert Panel just so that community members can share their experience with nitrate contamination and why better regulations are needed. In conclusion, at Community Water Center, we really prioritize trust. We prioritize building trust in relationships with community members to be able to get the best solutions possible for these communities. And, more importantly for me, advocacy.

For me as an organizer, seeing community members show up at the state capitol or at a city council meeting or anywhere where it is that they have to use their voice is so empowering because the folks who are the most impacted by this crisis are the ones using their voice to lead that charge. It's very powerful, especially for the folks who are immigrants. For me, being the son of immigrants, it's just very inspiring to see. It gives me courage to also speak up and continue this kind of work that we do.

And that's pretty much it. It's a high-level overview of what I shared. You guys can scan the QR code for a much more in-depth resource about what we do for our organizing efforts. And there's my contact information in case anybody wants to connect with me after.

Thank you.

Nell: Thanks so much Miguel. So now we have a few questions that we wanted to chat about. And the first one is something that maybe a lot of people might have already thought about, but if not, I think they will realize it is very timely. I wanted to know more about how the work that you do has been impacted by the current political climate. There are so many things going on that I'm imagining are affecting your work in various ways.

Miguel: Yeah, we all know. It's not even the elephant in the room. We all know what's happening.

From the start, we actually lost a multimillion-dollar grant for the Central Coast. So that community that was being provided for by the EPA at the federal level. That took a huge toll on us and also the community members because they

were pretty much promised this money to start this work, and it was taken from them.

Then in my work personally in Porterville, there's just been a lot of ICE and immigration enforcement activity, which has very much pushed us towards creative ways of, like, how do we meet this moment? I mean, it's a scary moment because even the community members that I've established really good relationships with, even they're nervous still when I knock on the door because they're like, "Who are you?"

And for the folks that I'm still trying to connect with—I mean, it's already weird sometimes to open your door to a stranger, right? A lot of folks tell me, "I thought you were a solar power company or someone coming to sell me something." But now there's this anxiety and this fear in the communities that it might be an officer who's going to basically terrorize this family.

A lot of what we've done is we've made ourselves very visible. So, like, when we go out into the community, we have clothing that has our logos. We have bright blue, high-visibility vests. Our cars are all marked. We basically just made sure you can read Community Water Center on our faces, just so that community members can know who we are.

We've also really been fortunate that community members have stepped up. If there's a neighbor I haven't met with, like one gentleman, Ruben Beltran, he's an amazing leader, he was like, "You know what? I have time right now. Let me just walk you over and introduce you to my neighbor," which is an amazing thing, because they know, even with the stuff that's going on right now, people still need access to these resources. So that's some of the stuff that we've done to kind of meet the moment.

Everything that's going on, I mean, I don't think there's ever been a smooth time in water justice or environmental justice. And so any curveball that comes, we just have to do our best to learn, to adapt, and reach out to community members. Like, what can we do to make sure we're still serving you and helping learn with you?

Nell: Yeah, thanks for that. I wonder if you could tell us a bit more about what it looks like to prepare community members for some of the different types of advocacy actions that you mentioned that are directed at decision makers, and how your strategy might vary depending on the situation.

Miguel: Yeah, that's a really good question. Advocacy at a water board or a city council oftentimes will be public comments. So, when we prepare for that, similar to the long-term solutions, we'll host these pláticas, these community meetings to share, like, what is the scope of the meeting? What is the goal of the agenda that's going to be shared about? We help community members practice their stories, make sure that they're sharing the stuff that they've shared with us if they feel comfortable. We help them connect their lived experience with the initiatives or items that we're advocating for. That's especially true for local-level advocacy.

In Porterville, for example, they're not part of the city. I think that one's even more interesting because it means community members who aren't actually represented by this council have to go and take up space. It can be very intimidating in general, even if you are a resident or a constituent of these city council members. But we basically explain who's on the city council, who are these folks, and why we are talking to them. We just make sure that they're going into that room and to that podium with as much information so that they understand why they're there, and why it's important that they share their story.

We also—if they have any doubts, you know, it's also just motivating them, reminding them that this is important work. At the state level, we often get together. Community Water Center is actually the physical sponsor of another organization called AGUA, or the Association of People United for Water.

This brings together a collective of a lot of community leaders from a lot of rural communities. These are folks that they might be living thirty miles apart, but they also have nitrate contamination. They have a lot of the same issues, so they come together to discuss action steps. Community Water Center supports them with transportation to regional water boards or up to the state capitol to advocate to legislators, the State Water Board. And all of that is—we explain what proposed bills are, what we're doing or covering or we're advocating for. We want to make sure as we explain these bills, we also check in. Does this resonate with you? Do you think this would actually help solve some the issues you're facing?

Nell: I know you've talked about this a little bit, but I wonder if you could say more about what sorts of issues frequently come up for communities who are seeking long-term solutions?

Miguel: Yeah. Honestly, the biggest issue I think is always money. It's funding. It's access to resources and financial resources if you want to get connected to a water system, especially if it's a public water system. With a city, they don't want to pay for that infrastructure because technically and legally, they don't have to provide these resources to folks who are not within their boundaries.

Or for community members that are just very isolated, like if you want to build your own water system or if you want to get filters to folks, those are also very expensive. For example, with nitrate contamination, you would need a reverse osmosis filter, which can easily be, like, ballpark \$15,000, which is a lot for these communities.

Then also just making sure that people can actually attend a lot of the efforts and meetings we have. One of the things we've started doing is providing childcare and making sure that we're providing food. If we're meeting at dinner time, we should be providing dinner, right? We want to make sure these meetings and these action items, and any kind of advocacy actions that we do, are as accessible as possible.

If a community member really wants to attend but they need a ride to the meeting, we'll go pick them up because we want to make sure that they are there and that their voice is being heard. And if folks can't attend, we'll check in with them before or after just to share what was talked about, and if there's anything else they would want to add or want us to share at those spaces too.

Nell: And you mentioned that for these long-term solutions, you're often maybe dealing with some entities like a city that you might be trying to partner with in a certain way, but they might be unwilling partners. So I'm wondering how you navigate that, or if you could share any insights into how that works.

Miguel: Yeah. Really at its core, it goes back to our organizing and building trust and relationships. That's what we have to do, with not only the elected representatives of a city, but their city staff. If they're hesitant for whatever reason, we want to lean in with curiosity. We want to ask them: "Why? What is the hesitation?"

For example, some water systems are already stretched for capacity, or they have failing wells themselves. They're just concerned about meeting the need for the people that they're responsible for right now, which is very valid. Then it comes to working together with them and strategizing and sharing information, like, "Hey, right now there are funding opportunities that we can help to not only expand your system or other kinds of resources, but to actually upgrade them and modernize them."

It's just about getting to know what their worries are, meeting them where they're at, and hopefully building that trusting relationship with them, too. Of course, I'm thinking about East Oroshi right now. There's a whole list of higher and higher levels that you can do in terms of how to engage with folks who may not want to participate, which is really sad because these community members just want safe drinking water. Safe and affordable drinking water. But the really cool thing on the flip side is, if a city council member is really supportive, getting them to come to these community spaces.

It's one thing for me to say, "The city is on board. The water board is in, it agrees with you." It's a different thing for someone on that board or at that table to come out into your community and say, "Hey, I support you. I'm going to help champion this." That's really powerful.

So, yeah. That's just some of the things that we do.

Nell: Thanks. Now I think we want to open it up to everybody. Feel free to ask questions.

Audience Member: Thank you for being here and thank you for sharing. I have a question since most of us here in the room are law students. I'm wondering if you could share about if you've had any experience working with lawyers in your work and what, from an organizer perspective, you view the role of lawyers and how we could support people like you doing your work?

Miguel: Yeah, thank you. A lot of the work that I've gotten to experience with support, in terms of interacting with our legal team, has been East Orosi. If anybody has the time, look into the community of East Orosi.

It's a very long saga of, honestly, criminal activity that's been happening in that community and nearby communities. To share a little bit more, the Orosi Public Utilities District has basically been looking for every legal way to delay connecting East Orosi's water system to their water system. And our legal team, I think, probably spends most of their time on that. So whenever we wanted to meet at the county for some kind of decision, the Orosi Public Utilities District's legal team would try to send a letter or something to delay it. Then, our legal team has to look at it.

I'm not a lawyer—they're the ones who are the experts in terms of the legal access. But, my job with them is when something gets too complicated, or I just don't have that basis or foundation, they will come with us to these community meetings, and they'll be there in the community to answer those questions for folks. Sometimes it's supporting them with translations. Sometimes it's just helping them, kind of like how we'll help them prepare their talking points.

If I'm confused, community members are probably going to get confused, too. So just practicing with them as they're going to go talk with community members directly, or if it's a one-on-one conversation—because we are the ones that often have this more personal or interpersonal relationship—we will make sure that we're saying to the community member, "Hey, this is my colleague. This is what they do. They're a lawyer." They're the ones who have been kind of doing the heavy lifting behind the scenes.

But we also do a lot of work with easements too when it comes to consolidation. That's a whole other world. For West Goshen, it was definitely a problem. We ran into a hiccup with an easements issue. And again, it involved bringing in community members, because they also want the solution soon. They want it now. So whenever those hiccups happen, bring in the legal team to help them explain what's going on, what the delays are, and also what are the next steps. Like, how can the community help make that happen as well?

Audience Member: You mentioned earlier that one prong of your advocacy efforts is legislative advocacy in Sacramento. I was wondering if you could just talk a bit more about what that process is like, and when you arrive for a day of talking to legislators in Sacramento, what your goals are, and what your communication tactics are in those kinds of spaces?

Miguel: Yeah, those days are usually really long because we're coming up from Visalia and community members all the way down from, like, Porterville, which is even further south. And then we have folks from the Central Coast.

But we provide food, we provide transportation. From Visalia, we often get a lot of community members to join us, so we'll charter a bus to make sure we all travel. And also traveling together is very powerful. There's a saying, *La unión hace fuerza*. "There is strength in unity."

So even from that get-go, we make sure we're providing breakfast, lunch, if we're going to stay really long, dinner, providing snacks, water, hydration. So just trying to make it as accessible as possible. With the community meetings that I mentioned earlier, there's one community member I often volunteer to pick up because she lives pretty far south. She isn't able to drive herself, and her family works a lot in the fields and the agriculture sector, so I will go pick her up and make sure she can join that bus. We are looking at the dietary needs, too.

Once we actually arrive to Sacramento, by this point we've been able to review whatever proposed bills we're going to be covering and advocating for. As an organizer, I often already know, like, "Hey, this community member experienced a dry well," or, "this community member is paying a really high water rate for water that's also contaminated." So I kind of know their stories already, and I tell them like, "Hi, you've shared you pay really high water rates. Here's this bill right now, SB 1125. It would help create a water rate assistance program." And then basically go through whatever the bills are. And again, double-check, "Does this bill sound like something that would actually support you?" If they say yes, then I help them prepare, and if they're interested in participating in those visits, I explain what the room is going to feel like and how it's going to go.

I usually am one of the staff there who just does the introduction, who we are, who are the community members here. I also provide translation for the folks who speak Spanish when maybe the staffer doesn't speak Spanish. I help them practice, especially for the folks who it's their first time.

I mean, even me to this day, I get scared going into those lobby visits or advocacy visits. It's a scary space. So for these community members, I tell them too, that it can be scary, but we're going to be there together. Don't worry about messing up, because the fact that you're showing up is already powerful. We're taking up space. So we help them practice. We recap, like, "Hey, how did you feel about that meeting? Did you feel like you were able to share everything you wanted to share? Is there anything else you want to add before we go to our next meeting?"

And one of the things I try to do, too, is—if anybody's ever done legislative visits, it can get really busy really fast. Sometimes they'll just want to meet with you in the doorway. I try to always find a place for us to sit because we're having a discussion. Even if it's only fifteen minutes, we are having an actual discussion, and I want community members who maybe took a whole day off work and lost out on some of their income for this to actually get the chance to sit down and talk with the staffer.

It can depend on what it is. On Wednesday, I was actually in Sacramento for a Senate committee hearing on SB 1125, so I got to drive four community members who went. One of them was a speaker as part of the committee, and then the rest wanted to go just to show that they were part of AGUA or they were part of a community and they supported the bill. That was a first for me, actually.

So even I didn't really know too much about what was going on and what I was going into.

But of course, our policy team in Sacramento were really on top of explaining everything to me and to the community members. And it was also a very powerful thing to see her, her name is Marta Curiel, be right there in front of that committee and share her story and explain why that bill is important and why it's needed.

Audience Member: Thank you so much. I'm really impressed by everything you've been able to accomplish with your work.

I'm from an unincorporated community and was an organizer there, and I think the thing that would come up the most in our organizing was the fear of repercussions of drawing attention to ourselves. In these underserved communities, people come up with their own solutions, and the solutions might not be legal. Among my neighbors and family, there was this idea of, like, maybe we'd rather risk having a contaminated well than the county finding out that our well's not up to code and making us bear the cost, and we can't afford it, and then we have to move.

So, I'm wondering if you've encountered that, and how you deal with that fear of engaging with these entities that could help but could also cause more harm?

Miguel: Yeah. That's an amazing question and one that we try to be very conscious about. Some thoughts come to mind, some of the most common ones that happened in some communities I ended up going to. They wanted to continue towards consolidation, so connecting to a water system. Of course, the next question is like, "Well, how many connections are going to happen in this property?"

And depending on who you ask or what paper you're reading, it might say there's only one dwelling or house on this property, but they might have more that just haven't been up to code or been permitted, and that's definitely a conversation we want to have with folks, and we're very transparent. In some cases, some of our team can support them with seeing if they can get it permitted or up to code.

In other cases, if they choose not to, then we're never going to pressure anybody into doing anything. We want to make sure that it's their decision. That's a really tough one. And another thing that I think about, too, you mentioned, will I get in trouble if my well's contaminated? That's a really common concern, especially for property owners who rent out their properties that have wells. I've met a lot of tenants who we are still trying to test their wells so that they can learn what's in their water. The tricky part with that is a well test requires the permission of the property owner, not the tenant.

And sometimes these property owners live in the community, sometimes they live in SoCal or out of state, and it can be very difficult, especially if they have a property management company kind of in the middle. So, one thing we

always explain to folks is, and even if you're the owner yourself, you're not going to get in trouble. We kind of want to make sure we know what their concerns are. Like, you're not going to get in trouble. There's not going to be a fine if it's contaminated. We reiterate for the folks who do have contaminated wells, qualifying community members can actually receive free bottled water deliveries.

That can already be a big incentive, and then if you do have a contaminated well, you could qualify for other programs that could support a free filter or helping pay for a filter. Maybe not totally free, but they can help cover part of the cost and some other incentives. So, asking them what their concerns are, finding out if there is anything that could come back to them, and then also just reiterating, like, we're not going to be sharing. Like, I'm not going to go and be like, "Hey, this person over here." I'm not going to share that with other folks. This is information that I want to keep personal, private with them.

Then also reminding them of the perks of engaging in at least emergency and interim resources, and also the perks of doing long-term solutions. If they want to get a filter for their whole house, if they want to pursue a larger community-scale project. It's a very complicated thing and very valid for sure.

Audience Member: Thank you so much for your time. I know a point of tension across California's utility landscape in general is the role of private investment and management, and how, while people lose access to services such as electricity and water, these investors are still making really high rates of return. I know the scope of your work is different, but I'm curious how your interactions with private companies have been and if there is a role that they play, if it's positive or negative, or what you see the future would be like?

Miguel: Yeah, that's a really good question. West Goshen, which I mentioned in the slides, they connected to the Cal Water water system, which is a private entity. It's also the water system that oversees Visalia. Engaging with them as a private water company versus a public water system that's managed by either a special district or a city council is really different.

In some ways, there were some perks. When you're dealing with a private entity, some of that bureaucratic tape gets sidelined. It goes a lot faster. We were actually able to talk with engineers from Cal Water's company very easily and work with them very quickly. When we had questions, they would respond very quickly. They would send us the blueprints for West Goshen. They actually sent out the blueprints so our technical team and us could go out to the community and be like, "Hey, this is where the small lateral line is, which is the small pipe that delivers water from the main line to your house, this is where it's going to go. This is where it's going to get connected." So they know where there's going to be digging done on their property.

Another cool thing about Cal Water, too, like a perk, is they actually do offer a slight discount for communities or for households that are low income, which public water systems do not, oftentimes, and are not required to do yet.

Those are some of the cooler things with private entities. You can get some results a lot faster and smoother, and they could be more engaging in some ways.

On the downside, with West Goshen, as construction finished and they got connected, these folks had a water bill for the first time, some of them for the first time in their lives. So a lot of the support that we provided, and that we are still providing with them is, how do you pay this new water bill? Where can you do it? For some folks, especially like older folks—can they go pay it in person? Also, if they notice like a drip or the meter's acting weird, who do they call? So, providing all this information now that they have a water company to rely on for their water.

And, as anybody who's ever tried to get a hold of a company, when you call, it's almost always a machine that answers, like, "Hi," like, "Leave your name, message." And a lot of these community members, it's, it's your drinking water. If there's an issue with the meter, you're going to get billed a lot for water you didn't use.

So that's one of the biggest hassles, that there's no way for them to clearly advocate for a better way. Whereas with a public water system, for as much bureaucratic and other barriers that we have to come across, at least they can go to the city council, or they can go to the water board, and they can go complain directly to the people in charge and ask and advocate for whatever it is that they need in the communities. If their system is failing, then advocating for a faster timeline under solutions, advocating for more transparency on what's being done, advocating for if they're trying to raise the water rate by a lot, advocating against that, right?

So that's kind of like the perks, like ups and downs of whether it's a private entity or a public entity that's doing, at least for water.

Audience Member: I was really excited to see that you have the California Human Right to Water and also the [Sustainable Groundwater Management Act] (SGMA) on your slides as positive impacts on communities like this. And I was specifically wondering about SGMA, because it sort of has a bad reputation, I think, at least at the law school in the classes that I've taken. And I just was wondering what benefits specifically are you excited about from that act for the people that you work with?

Miguel: Yeah. SGMA is very complicated, and I will say it's not doing enough. But one of the things that we were really excited about in it is that SGMA created groundwater sustainability agencies, all of which have to create a groundwater sustainability plan. I'm sure you guys all know about that.

But in these plans, they are required to not only talk about water quantity, so like subsidence and running out of water, they're also required to talk about water quality, which is a huge part of the work that we do. Because not only do we want to make sure that community members have running water in their homes, but we want to make sure it's safe, that it's drinkable.

And one community member I think about is when I first met him, he actually had a dry well, and he was being supported by Self-Help Enterprises. He was able to qualify for assistance for a new well, so he finally had drinking water again, or running water in his house. They did the well test, and it was high with 1,2,3-TCP and nitrates. So this family went from not having any water to having water that they couldn't use or even take hot showers with. That's specifically 1,2,3-TCP. Luckily, they also were able to get a filter provided for their home.

But with [Groundwater Sustainability Agencies] (GSAs) and [Groundwater Sustainability Plans] (GSPs), one of the things that we're really excited about is just really pushing them. And here's the thing, we've been a part of a lot of advocacy around GSAs getting put on probation because they weren't doing enough. In Porterville, that's the Tule sub-basin, and specifically the Eastern Tule GSA, and these GSAs keep splitting up and trying to do things their own way.

But one of the things that we're really looking for is GSAs and that we're pushing for. So we haven't gotten it there yet. The reason we like SGMA is just that there is finally a base of something that we can push towards, or at least push off from. And a lot of what we're advocating for is making sure GSAs are also helping fund long-term solutions and making sure that they're more transparent with the community members that they oversee.

One common issue we see is a domestic well owner is getting charged a fee that they shouldn't be getting charged for their groundwater usage. And so, supporting community members with meeting, helping them get to their office for their specific GSA, and getting that clarified so they're not paying this bill.

Yeah, so we're still pushing. We just see the SGMA as a way for us to get to a little more longer-term goal. We haven't reached there yet. That requires a lot more advocacy and planning, and even with what I mentioned, putting some of these basins on probation just to make sure that they're stepping up and actually delivering on some of the promises.

I know for farmers—I support small farmers for sure, and I think they've been unfairly penalized in a lot of these regulations, honestly—but in terms of drinking water, just making sure that they're not only prioritizing water quantity, but also water quality and access to long-term solutions.

Nell: And I might just add too that the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act, there's a lot of issues with it, but it was passed in 2014 during the midst of a major statewide drought. And honestly, the year or two before, nobody would've thought they could pass legislation that would require any kind of state-level mandate for groundwater sustainability efforts.

And so, I think a lot of organizations, including Community Water Center, were involved in drafting the language, and I think it's very much a compromise where it kind of has the state in kind of an oversight mode, and then local entities are supposed to do most of the work.

But I just wanted to mention that there's lots wrong with it, but it's better than having nothing like that. So that's where I come out with that. But yeah, any more questions?

Camille Pannu: One of the things I think is so remarkable about Community Water Center is that it really turbocharged what was happening on the ground. So, I remember the world before Community Water Center when it was a small project with only three staff, which is crazy to think now.

I was so glad you mentioned AGUA. So, for folks who don't know, AGUA predates Community Water Center in its age as an association, but it brought the CV-SALTS litigation, which is the litigation that kind of set the standard on anti-degradation in the San Joaquin Valley. They're the lead plaintiff on that.

The other thing I think is really fascinating, so Community Water Center with what was then, I think, California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA) and California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation, and what has now become Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability, because it spread off as its own nonprofit, worked collectively to pass the Human Right to Water. And I remember when it passed, everyone was like, "Well, there's no private right of action, so it doesn't have any meaning." And one of the things I think is so fascinating is that Community Water Center, from the grassroots, has passed over thirty bills and programs that implement the human right to water and sanitation in the state, which is just tremendous. I don't think anyone could say that the human right to water is an empty promise in California, which is what kind of the conventional wisdom was when it was first passed.

So with that speech, I was going to say, you talked a little bit about what legislative advocacy looks like when you're moving people across states to testify. One of the things I was hoping you could maybe give us some insight into, Miguel, is the role that AGUA and community groups played in actually crafting the language of the bills. A lot of the, like the SAFER program, for example, was written by AGUA. The original Human Right to Water was written by AGUA. Most of the equity provisions of SGMA are written by AGUA with Community Water Center and like legal assistance and whatnot.

I think one of the things that's so cool about Community Water Center is the fact that the community organizing team, with support from lawyers—but really the community organizing team—was able to take community ideas, like the Mandatory Consolidation Authority. All of these come from essentially the communities served by Community Water Center.

Could you talk a little bit about how folks source those ideas from the community and then the work that the community organizers do and the lawyers in translating that into actual bill language that then kind of moves in Sacramento?

Miguel: Yeah. First of all, thank you for hyping up Community Water Center there. Yeah, the AGUA coalition is such a powerful coalition to work with. I've got to support them a lot. I'm not officially one of the AGUA

facilitators, but I've been able to support and connect with a lot of these community members and leaders on a lot of things.

When it comes to sourcing these ideas from the ground, first, oftentimes we're meeting as a team, like as Community Water Center between staff. I'm sharing with policy staff, like, "Hey, this is what I've been seeing. Is there already something that can already support this? Is there something already in the books that can help with this?" And if not, then we start to kind of just brainstorm, like what could this look like, this and that. And then as we start providing, kind of getting these ideas, we're like, "Okay, well now we know there's something that we can work on from here. Let's bring in some community members."

AGUA was, I feel like, kind of our first go-to because they're leaders. They have the most experience of not only like experiencing issues with their drinking water, but also advocating and championing ideas. So these folks, as I mentioned, a lot of them have become like mentors to me and teachers because they're experts.

I remember my first time in Sacramento. They took over the room. I was just there to watch, honestly, just because, man, they were so powerful, and they knew they were there for a job, and they were going to get it done. But once we kind of have these ideas, we're like, "Okay, let's bring in some community members."

If it's the AGUA coalition, we'll often ask for an action team is what we call it. So we'll say a groundwater action team or a drought action team, and we'll bring in these community members from AGUA who are more interested in participating, because it is a big coalition. They'll come in for a separate meeting, and we'll have a more in-depth discussion, oftentimes led by our policy team, since they are the experts in the policy.

When it comes to community members who are not part of the AGUA coalition, so like in Porterville, the areas I'm working at, there's no AGUA member in those specific areas. There is an AGUA member in the city of Porterville who has supported us a lot and helped inform a lot of what we're doing right now. We'll also bring them out, whether that means like bringing them into our office in Visalia or hosting a little *plática*, like, "Hey, this thing is happening right now. We want to see if it meets your needs. Do you think if we were to pass or propose something like this, would it actually help you?"

So a lot of it is just like, first, what are the organizers seeing on the ground? What are we hearing? What are we having trouble with? Like, if a community member's asking us for support but we can't, or we just don't know of a pathway to support them, we share that with our policy team, we start brainstorming, and then we bring in community members to give more specific details on that, and then we start talking about language and wording.

Then, of course, Community Water Center does not do any of this alone. Leadership Counsel, CRLA, a lot of amazing nonprofits and community groups are key to making sure that we're doing this the right way.

And then especially once it comes time to advocate, making sure that the folks who were in those meetings and sharing their stories, that they're also advocating, because that bill is for them. Like, they're the ones who wanted this to happen. They're the ones who need this to happen. We want to make sure they're up there too with us.