



# COMMUNITY RELATIONS ISSUES RELATED TO RESIDENTIAL SITE INVES- TIGATIONS AND CLEANUPS

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## ABSTRACT

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Communication with and involvement of the public are critical aspects of any environmental investigation or cleanup. Experience at two of the highest profile residential remediation sites in Denver, Colo., demonstrated that community relations issues are even more important, and challenging, when the investigation and cleanup occur at residential properties. Community issues at sites involving remediation in homes and yards are different than those at a removed plant site or manufacturing facility. Community opinion and emotions can influence regulators' decisions on remediation, monitoring, and long-term site use. The invasive nature of these cleanups requires access to be arranged with each property owner. Homeowners have more of a personal investment and say in the cleanup activities at their homes or yards. As a result, extensive communications, sensitivity, and flexibility are critical elements to establishing and maintaining a positive relationship with the homeowner.

In working on these sites, Sigler Communication, Inc., a communications/community relations consulting firm, and EnviroGroup, Ltd., an environmental consulting firm, worked together to ensure that they gathered feedback from the community and initiated ongoing and timely communications with all target audiences. The paper will cover specific strategies used to work with the communities at each of these sites.

**Key words:** *community relations, public involvement, communications*

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## INTRODUCTION

Communication with and involvement of the public are critical aspects of any environmental investigation or cleanup. Community relations issues are even more challenging when the investigation and cleanup occur at residential properties. Environmental engineering firms are often charged with working with community leaders, residents, and news media. The focus of this paper is on the community relations programs implemented at two of the highest profile residential remediation sites in Denver, Colo. The paper will describe how Sigler Communication, Inc., a communications/community relations consulting firm, and EnviroGroup Limited, an environmental consulting firm, worked closely together to develop

strategies that would gain community cooperation for the remediation projects. Coordination and synergy between the technical team and the communications team played a critical role in a company's relationship with the community. Following is a brief overview of the two sites.

## METALS CONTAMINATION IN RESIDENTIAL YARDS

The Asarco Globe Plant is located in northeast Denver. The plant began operating in 1886, refining gold, silver, lead, copper, and cadmium from ores mined along the front range and central Rocky Mountains. The Globe Plant is operating today on a much smaller scale, manufacturing high purity metals. The plant is surrounded by neighborhoods that were formed around it and other former smelter operations.

The current community make up is mostly Hispanic and lower income residents.

Elevated metals concentrations were found in the near-surface soils at residential properties in these surrounding neighborhoods. Over the past two decades, Asarco has been conducting soil sampling and remediation of residential properties in the neighborhoods surrounding the plant. Since 1993, over 500 homes have been remediated by excavating and replacing the top 12 inches of exposed soils and revegetating the surfaces.

Each homeowner had been asked to sign an access agreement allowing Asarco to collect samples of the dirt in his or her yard. Each homeowner had been notified of the sample results; some homeowners were notified that the metals concentrations exceeded the state of Colorado's action levels and that they'd be contacted in the future to schedule remediation. Asarco's remediation contractor contacted these homeowners again, sometimes as long as four years later. It was not uncommon to find that the home had changed hands between sampling and remediation. The homeowner was asked to sign another access agreement, this time allowing Asarco to conduct the remediation. The contractor reviewed the remediation plan with the homeowner during a property walkthrough and asked the homeowner if there were any particular concerns about the project.

#### **VOLATILE ORGANIC COMPOUNDS IN COMMUNITY GROUNDWATER**

The former Redfield Rifle Scopes manufacturing facility is located in a middle class

neighborhood in south Denver. In 1957, a manufacturing facility was built within the existing Cook Park neighborhood. A few different companies occupied it for the first 10 years. Then, from 1967 until 1998, Redfield Rifle Scopes used the facility to manufacture optical scopes for rifles and binoculars. In 1994, as part of a property transaction environmental investigation, solvents were identified in the groundwater at the plant. In the years to follow, 1,1-dichloroethene vapors were detected in nearby homes. Redfield Rifle Scopes went out of business in 1998; the property's owner, Brown Group Retail, has taken the lead on environmental investigations and cleanup activities. Since 1998, over 160 homes have been tested. Vapor mitigation systems are operating in 60 of these homes. Air testing continues quarterly.

Each homeowner was asked to sign an access agreement allowing Brown Retail to collect samples of the air inside his or her home. For air testing, a sampling technician entered the home, interviewed the residents about recent uses of the basement and chemicals, and whether any dry cleaning was brought home over the past few days. The technician placed a small metal canister on the floor and opened the valve. She returned the next day, closed the valve and took the canister. Each homeowner and resident was notified of the sample results; some were notified that the 1,1-DCE concentrations exceed the state of Colorado's action level and that they'd be contacted in the near future to schedule installation of a vapor mitigation system; some were even asked if they'd

like to stay in a hotel until the system was up and running. Brown Retail's vapor mitigation contractor contacted these homeowners again, usually within a few days. The homeowner was asked to sign another access agreement, this time allowing Brown Retail to install a vapor mitigation system in the basement or crawl space. The contractor reviewed the system installation with the homeowner and asked if there were any particular concerns.

### **COMMUNITY RELATIONS STRATEGIES**

Community issues at sites involving remediation of yards and inside homes are different than those at a distant site far removed from a residential area. Community opinion and emotions can influence regulators' decisions on remediation, monitoring, and long-term site use. The invasive nature of these cleanups required that access be arranged with each property owner. Homeowners have more of a personal investment and say in the cleanup activities at their homes or yards. As a result, extensive communications, sensitivity, and flexibility were critical elements to establishing and maintaining a positive relationship with the homeowner. The risks of unsuccessful or insufficient outreach were project delays and missed regulatory deadlines.

In working on these sites, Sigler Communication and EnviroGroup Limited worked closely together to develop strategies that would gain community cooperation for the remediation projects. Such strategies were formulated and documented in a community relations plan as early in the process as possible, and subse-

quently refined as feedback from the community was received. One such strategy was to establish a close working relationship with regulators to ensure consistent information was being delivered to the public.

Feedback from the community was solicited through a variety of research tools including focus groups, and one-on-one meetings with residents and community leaders (both in English and Spanish when necessary). The community opinion research was used to determine concerns as well as identify the best ways to communicate. It was determined as a result of such meetings that the community was not finding value in the panel-discussion-style public meetings. Public meetings were restructured to more of an open house format.

Comprehensive, proactive communications and community outreach programs were developed at both the Asarco and Redfield sites that included the following activities:

- Distributing written materials, videos, and newsletters regularly to update homeowners on project status. Tracking real estate transactions in the neighborhood to answer homeowners' questions about real estate values.
- Hosting public information open houses that allowed the public to ask questions and learn about next steps from the technical team. Recently, an open house was scheduled for the Globe site at the local elementary school to coincide with parent/teacher conferences – there was a great turnout.

- Developing an in-community information source, staffed by a community member, that houses cleanup photos and information. Asarco purchased a small residential property in Globeville for use as an information center. Information on the Redfield site is maintained at the local library.
- Establishing a telephone hotline, updated monthly, that homeowners can call for updates on the project.
- Making technical staff available to meet one-on-one with homeowners.
- Implementing a tailored sampling and cleanup program: at the Globe site, bilingual staff members are essential; at the Redfield site, the same staff members set up appointments and made in-home visits for monitoring. Staff members

developed a personal relationship with homeowners to ease apprehension about “outsiders” in the home and gained more cooperation. Keeping a personal information notebook (e.g., pets and upcoming vacations) allowed staff members to establish a personal dialogue with the homeowners.

The major issues faced in working in residential settings are often those dealing with emotional issues. Because the work is being done in a person’s home, the technical team and community relations staff have to take extra measures to make the experience the most accommodating to the homeowner. As emotional issues arise, it is critical to remain flexible and address each situation on a case-by-case basis. Open communications and frequent dialogue with the community will aid in completing a successful remediation effort.