

# Evaluating the Effectiveness of Community Forums

Bay Area Breast Cancer and Environment Research Center  
Community Outreach and Translation Core (COTC)

## Biomonitoring

"Biomonitoring is an assessment of the internal dose by measuring the parent chemical (or it's metabolite or reaction product) in human blood, urine, breast milk, saliva, adipose tissue or other tissues."  
Dr. Larry Needham: "Scientific and Laboratory Issues"

Although biomonitoring is considered a powerful tool for closing the gaps in current environmental exposure data, it is still an emerging science. The Center for Disease Control's recent effort at biomonitoring has produced reference ranges for a number of chemicals, but there is still little known about how to interpret the meaning of these statistics when applied to research or public health. The uncertainties associated with biomonitoring, combined with a growing public interest in its use, highlight the need to develop *early* and *effective* communication models that facilitate an interactive exchange of information and concerns on this topic among community members, breast cancer advocates, laboratory technologists, researchers, medical ethicists, public health professionals and health care providers.

## Introduction

Community forums are widely used as models for translating research and technical information, for communicating risk and facilitating an interactive exchange among public health professionals, researchers and community members. This project sought to evaluate the effectiveness of community forums as an early and effective communication model for sharing information on Biomonitoring.

"Critical Issues in Biomonitoring: A Community Forum" was held October 9, 2004 at the UCSF Mission Bay Campus in San Francisco. Nearly one hundred speakers and participants representing a wide variety of important perspectives on biomonitoring, breast cancer research, environmental tracking, environmental contaminants and toxics, community-based, participatory research, environmental justice issues and environmental and breast cancer advocacy attended.

The forum consisted of three plenary sessions on *Biomonitoring*, *Scientific and Laboratory Issues* and *Community Research Ethics in Environmental Public Health*, and two panels focused on *Methods, Benefits and Challenges in Public Health and in Research* and *Engaging Communities in Biomonitoring Research and Advocacy Efforts* were held.

Following plenary and panel discussions attendees participated in small group discussions convened by facilitators who recorded all the participant's comments and recommendations. The small group discussions focused on the following questions:

- ◆ How can we best incorporate the concept of uncertainty when communicating risk?
- ◆ How can we best address the issues associated with the use of breast milk as a biospecimen for biomonitoring studies?
- ◆ What are the specific benefits and challenges of incorporating biomonitoring into research settings and/or into public health surveillance programs?
- ◆ How can we design community biomonitoring surveillance and research studies that reflect and incorporate the principles of community-based participatory research?

At the end of the day, the recommendations from each small group discussion were presented back to forum

## Evaluation Process

This poster describes the evaluation process and reports on the extent to which attendee were satisfied with the forum as model for:

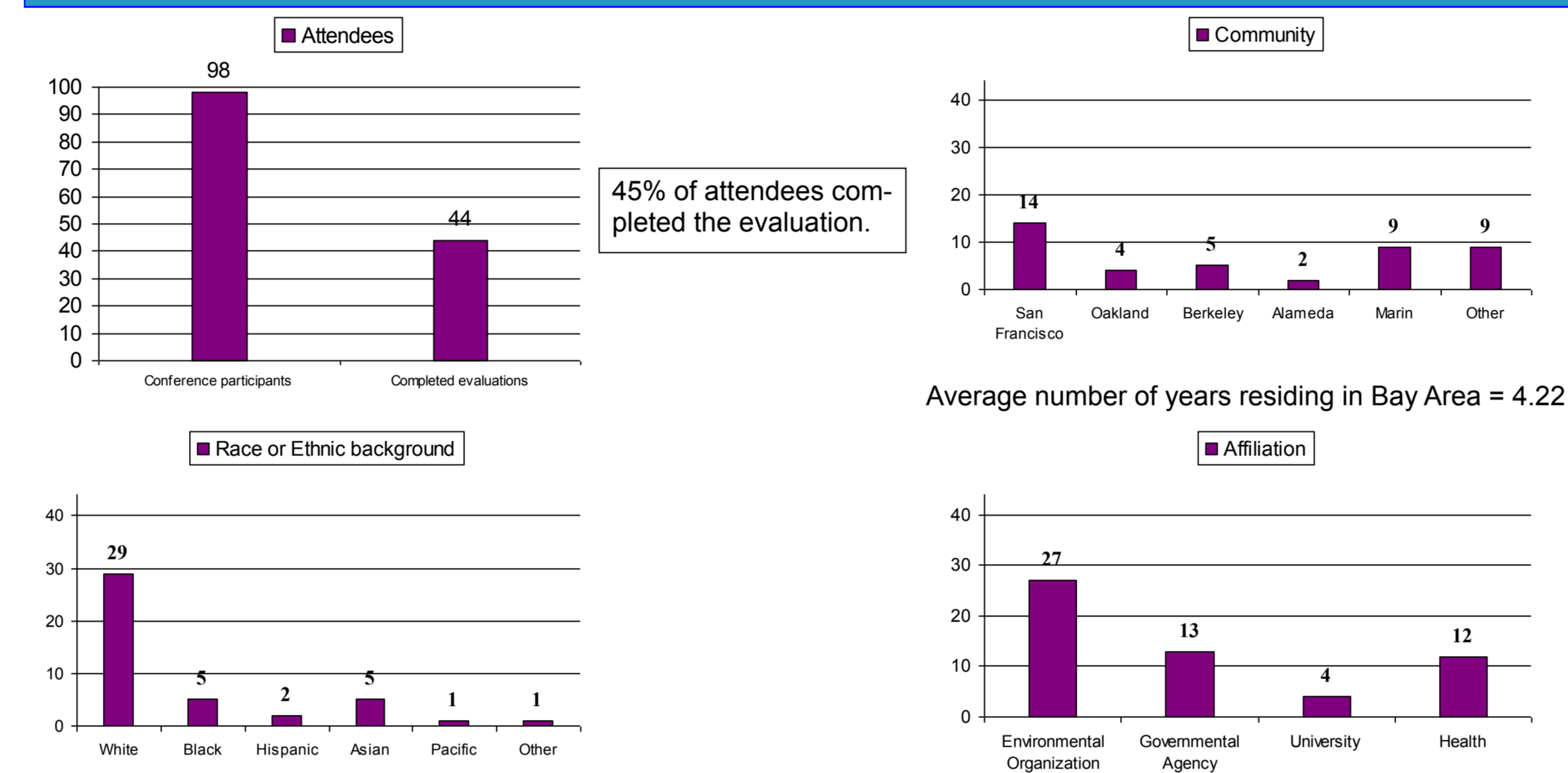
- ◆ informing community members about individual and group risks and benefits of participating in biomonitoring studies.
- ◆ educating a broad audience of attendees about the current state of the science of biomonitoring.
- ◆ engaging in informed and shared decision-making activities with individuals representing diverse perspectives, experiences and expertise.
- ◆ involving community members in setting priorities for future biomonitoring studies.
- ◆ identifying partnerships interested in collaborating on community-based, participatory research studies using biomonitoring.
- ◆ disseminating information from the community forum, including results of assessments and evaluation, to relevant stakeholders.

## Evaluation Process Continued

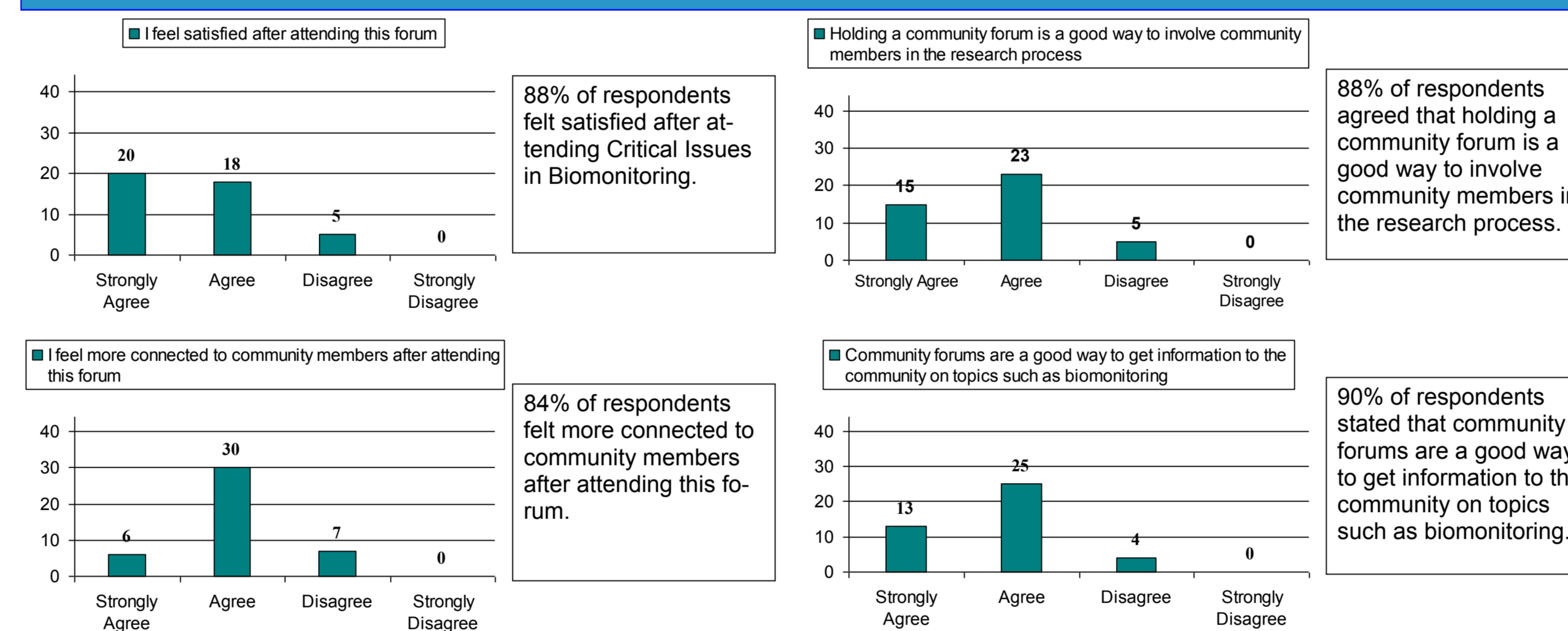
The evaluation component was developed in consultation with Dr. Robert Lee, Survey Research Center, UC Berkeley and Dr. Katherine McComas, Department of Communication, Cornell University.

Following the conference, participants and speakers were asked to complete an evaluation form to assess to what extent personal goals were met, questions were answered, information was exchanged, mutually respectful relationships were formed and communication channels were created through participation in this process. A selection of the evaluation results are highlighted in the following graphs.

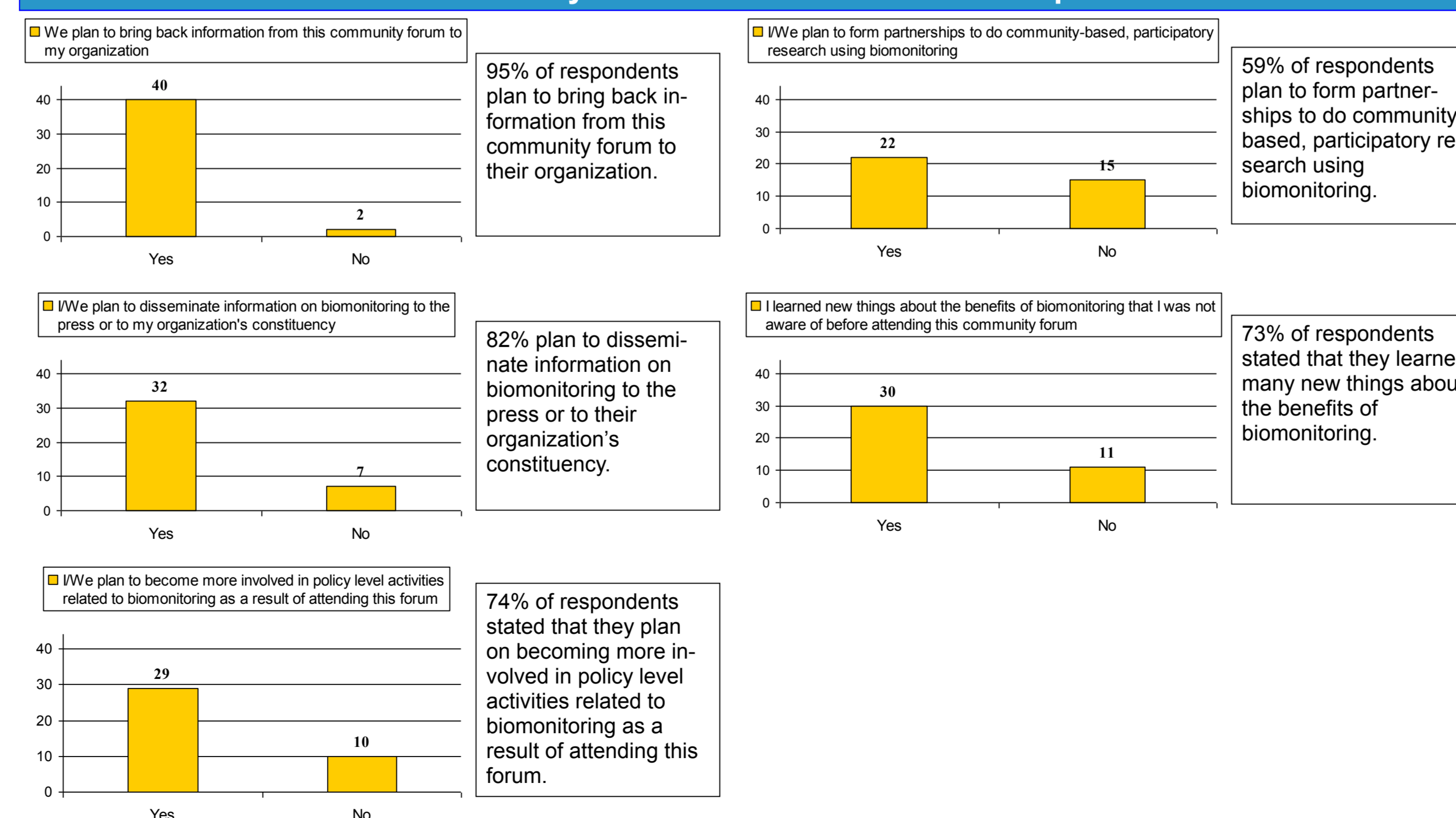
## Demographics of Attendees



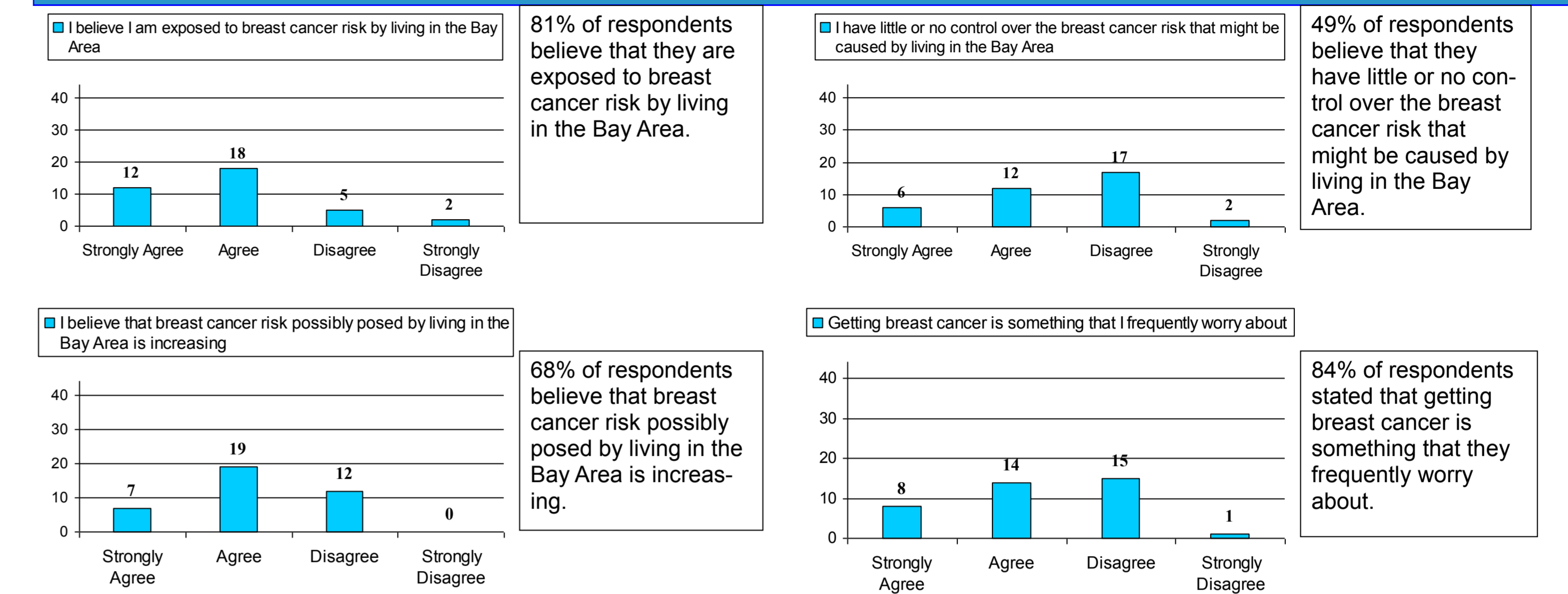
## Attendee Satisfaction



## Plans for Community Dissemination and Partnership Formation



## Perceived Risk of Breast Cancer



## Limitations

Although the overwhelming majority of participants evaluated the forum as very successful, the following are a few things that if a Biomonitoring conference was done again, the planners would advocate for doing differently:

- ◆ The number of people speaking on panels reduced to allow for more dialogue between the speakers and the participants/speakers.
- ◆ Although community participant was evident, there could have been more community involvement by having longer question and answer dialogue.
- ◆ Poor attendance in the afternoon sessions was likely a result of the forum being held on a beautiful weekend day.
- ◆ Limited representation of breast cancer survivors, community members who were not stakeholders and diverse community members.
- ◆ Attendees were a select group of community members and therefore results can not be generalized to the larger population.
- ◆ Limited follow-up regarding community dissemination by attendees.

## Conclusions

The community forum provided an opportunity to develop products that will serve as a resource on biomonitoring. As an outcome of the community forum, two forum-related products were developed, a DVD and a written summary of the proceedings that are now available for interested organizations, researchers, public health professionals and community members to increase their understanding and knowledge of issues associated with biomonitoring.

This project also sought to evaluate the effectiveness of "community forums" as an early and effective communication model for translating research and technical information, for communicating risk and facilitating an interactive exchange among public health professionals, researchers and community members. The positive results of the evaluation component demonstrate that this aim was successfully achieved.

## Forum Sponsorship and Funding

Sponsored by:  
**Marin Breast Cancer Watch:** A non-profit organization dedicated to finding the causes of breast cancer through community participation in the research process.

Co-Sponsored by:  
**The Marin County Department of Health and Human Services:** The mission of the Marin County Department of Health and Human Services is to promote and protect the health, well being, self-sufficiency and safety of all people of Marin. The Department of Health and Human Services provides a full range of public health and human services programs for the citizens of Marin County.

**The Bay Area Breast Cancer and Environment Research Center:** One of four research centers created by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) and the National Cancer Institute (NCI) to investigate potential environmental factors that could lead to breast cancer.



**The California Environment Health Tracking Program:** The goal of the CEHTP is to develop a comprehensive plan for a standards-based, coordinated, and integrated system, at the state level, that enables public health actions through linkage, monitoring, reporting, and communication of health effects and environmental hazards and exposure data.

**Forum Sponsorship**  
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