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## Honoring Our Community Heroes

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Honoring Our Community Heroes

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### **Abstract**

The financially disenfranchised population of Santa Cruz County constantly face the challenges of being taken advantage of by employers when it comes to being allotted the appropriate wages, illegal evictions, as well as discrimination and health care access. California Rural Legal Assistance is a non-profit legal aid agency that provides the citizens of Santa Cruz County with legal aid and court representation at no cost. Currently, CRLA is facing a visibility dilemma with some contributing factors being citizens don't know about them or are too scared to attend because of their legal status, not enough donors or discretionary funding and minimal collaborative partnership with other agencies. Consequences of such a downturn could lead to the closure of the agency leading to a decline in free legal aid services, a loss of jobs and clients having a harder time accessing resources because of their limitations. Honoring Our Community Heroes was designed to increase awareness of CRLA free legal assistance to the community to those who require it, by gathering together in honor of those community heroes who have committed their life in defending and educating the communities of Santa Cruz County. By doing so it demonstrates to those that are part of the community the compassion and care CRLA has in fighting for the right of all of California's residents. In order to combat such downturn it is recommended that the agency host an event into which they could further branch out into the community and the private sector as well and further add to their exposure rate amongst the community.

*Keywords:* Community, heroes, visibility, legal aid

### **Agency & Communities Served**

California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA) is a nonprofit agency that was established in 1966 in California to help represent low-income individuals and their communities who require legal assistance. CRLA's mission for the community states, "To fight for justice and individual rights alongside the most exploited communities of our society"(2019). This organization strives to help those communities in need throughout the whole state of California all the way down to the Mexican border. Currently, CRLA has 18 offices throughout the state of California that are spread out between 22 counties statewide some of those being Santa Cruz County and Monterey County. Furthermore, as stated by the California Rural Legal Assistance Financing Statements (2019), "CRLA is 70% funded by the government and the other 20% if by donors," they are primarily a nonprofit organization that depends on donations to continue operation but even so that comes with its own challenges. Even with certain regulations in place, they continue to grow as time goes on. Most recently they opened an office in Santa Cruz which is the latest addition to the fight against unattainable legal aid, increase their outreach to all in different communities affected by these issues, and continue as the guardians for attainable legal assistance.

According to the California Rural Legal Assistance Website (2019) each year they help more than 43,000 low income rural Californians with a variety of cases ranging from improving working conditions for farmworkers, labor & unemployment such as collecting unpaid wages and enforcing minimum wage and overtime laws. With the assistance of the Legal Services Corporation they have been able to complete over 1,406 cases so far in this category and as the year progresses they are hoping for many more in the future. Furthermore, CRLA also focuses on education by enforcing students' rights such as in the areas of special education with their

Individual Learning Plans, making sure a child is not being mistreated at school and as well as providing parents with counsel if they believe the child is being mistreated. Currently, CRLA has helped close 131 cases in the education division of Santa Cruz County (CRLA, 2019). The majority of CRLA work has primarily focused on housing claims. In the past year alone there have been over 2,615 cases opened and closed. The cases range from enforcing state and federal housing laws when it comes to renting out private homes, preventing illegal evictions, providing foreclosure counseling and as well as preventing predatory lending.

The CRLA office in Watsonville staffing houses a representing district attorney for the county. They help represent the office in specific cases that require legal representation in a court hearing. There are also full-time staff members that help the office on day to day operation, such as the secretary who is in charge of the management of the office and as well as filling out preliminary case files for client intakes. Then there are the community advocates, who see clients and are able to give them advice on their cases, they help organize community events for the office. Also the community advocates may go to court with the district attorney or lawyers to help represent their clients, as well as give testimony when needed.

Lastly, there are the interns, who help keep the office organized as well as help out the community advocates with client intakes when needed, write case memos as well as closing letters when necessary or calling the clients. Most importantly though the interns must seek the community advocates advice or the district attorneys before giving the clients any information to ensure that it's correct when it comes to making phone calls, sending closing letters or during the interview process as needed. With all the procedures in place and communication that is done between co-workers, it allows for a smooth transition step by step like a perfectly well-oiled

machine. This effectiveness is what has allowed CRLA to prosper for 55 years and hopefully for another 50 years to come to continue to represent the low-income population who can't afford legal aid.

### **Problem Description**

The current CRLA office in Watsonville is facing a limit in its visibility to the public. Currently, the majority of clients come through recommendations by other agencies or to those who have had past experiences with CRLA. This has become a dilemma for CRLA services because they are not being used to their full potential. The agency can risk losing their funding, which in turn will cause them to no longer be able to keep its doors open which would cost all those in the office their jobs. Unfortunately, those that will also suffer would be the community and the thousands of low-income Californians depending on their help in Santa Cruz County. Furthermore, those citizens that are dependent on the life line of no-cost legal aid will not be able to get the necessary assistance they may need without having to pay for the astronomical legal counsel fees. And in such will likely have to be left out to fend for themselves in a dog eat dog world without proper legal representation.

### **Contributing Factors**

It has come to light that there are significant contributing factors to the limited exposure CRLA has been having in the community. Those contributing factors that have been identified can be broken down as follows: the agency's inability to support undocumented community members, lack of donors and discretionary funding and lastly lack of collaborative partnerships with other agencies. These three factors seem to be the key stepping stones to the possible decline in new incoming clients.

In regards to the lack of community participation, it is caused by the agency's regulation of not being able to help non-U.S. citizens. This has become a major drawback in CRLA's abilities to help, as it severely limits the number of people they can assist in the community because of their legal status. Unfortunately, since this organization is backed through the Legal Service Corporation (LSC) it states, "No representation of non-U.S. citizens unless specifically allowed by the statute or regulation." (p.2). The reason CRLA cannot serve non-citizens is because 70% of their funding comes from the government, and if they were to serve non-citizens they would risk losing their funding. This is a major drawback to CRLA because according to DATAUSA (2017) in Watsonville 26.8% of the population are not US Citizens, therefore, they are not able to be helped by the organization. The real percentage may actually be much higher, as it can be difficult to know the full extent of the undocumented population. In a town where there are many undocumented citizens asking for help, the organization is stuck in the middle between a rock and a hard place. Unfortunately because of the clauses of the LSC it severely limits CRLA's ability to achieve their goal and help low-income Californians have a voice to defend themselves.

There also comes the dilemma of funding; CRLA is backed by the Legal Services Corporation, which provides the organization with around 70% of its funding. With the LSC providing a majority of its income it leaves the organization at LSC's mercy to continue operations and follow the guidelines set upon by them, which has both its negatives and positives. Currently approximately 20% of the income comes from contributions/donations, which is the funding that often has the most flexibility (CRLA, 2019). With a limited amount of funds, it puts up barriers in regards to the improvement of the offices as well as employing more

staff or simply trying to offer more services to their clients to further branch out. If there were to be more donors for the organization that could combat the 20% they are currently receiving then there could be a possibility to be more flexible to hire more staff, conduct events to further their outreach and as well as increase services available without also having to conform to the stringent guidelines in place.

Lastly, there is a lack of collaborative partnerships with other agencies. Being in collaboration with other local agencies not only gets the organization's name out there but also holds the potential to gain more clients. In addition, this could allow for extension of their services and collaboration with other partnered agencies. Currently, CRLA is partnered with a couple of organizations in California such as the Community Action Board, U.S. Department of Housing, David & Lucielle Packard Foundation, U.C. Santa Cruz, the California Endowment and La Manzanita Family Resource Center (CRLA, 2019). While these partnerships provide important sources of funding, as well as client referrals, exposure is still limited. There is a need to increase CRLA's visibility and partnerships with other local agencies in order to better support the community. There is nothing more detrimental to a nonprofit agency than limited exposure.

### **Consequences**

If the CRLA office in Watsonville does not continue to increase its visibility and outreach in the community of Watsonville it could end up causing the agency considerable harm. The consequences of limited visibility in a community that is dependent on low-income legal services could be detrimental to the community. There are three scenarios that have been identified as consequences of lack of visibility and recognition, the first would be agency closure. Such closure will lead to a decrease in affordable legal aid for low-income community members, loss



of jobs for the staff working there and lastly. Lastly clients who depend on free non profit legal aid will now have a harder time accessing legal resources or referral services.

If the agency were to close, it would lead to a decrease of legal aid in the community. Legal aid is one of the most expensive services any person could ask for. For instance meeting with a lawyer can reach the astronomical price of \$400 per hour. Depending on the number of hours on one meeting could be almost half of the average paycheck a person received. Unfortunately, in the Watsonville location, the average income for a resident there is \$51,548 per year (DATAUSA, 2017). With such a limited income a year those residents are barely making enough to pay for food and shelter, if there were to be an unexpected reason where legal services were to be required, they would not be able to afford it and they would just have to suffer the consequences and have to further endure more debt on an extremely limited budget.

If CRLA were not there to help them, then countless people would be left to fend for themselves and continue to fight for their rights alone without the support that this agency has been helping them fight alongside with them. These citizens will no longer have the ability to have lawyer referral services, help finding different solutions as well as free legal counsel and representation in court and lastly the most important thing lost would be the courage and willingness of those people to come forward and report wrongdoings that CRLA has strived for to help get rid of such as unfair wages, illegal eviction, etc. With the loss of an important pillar in the community, those corrupt people in housing and employment will continue to get away with their wrongdoings, the community would be left to fend for themselves putting an end to over 50 years of change and assistance for the greater good.

The most detrimental downfall of closure would severely affect those who are employed by CRLA. The reason for that would be because they would no longer have a place of employment, their income would suffer until they could find another placement, and at a critical time like the present finding, a job would be hard and very time-consuming to find. As mentioned by DATAUSA (2017), with a \$51,548 income per person losing one’s job can drastically affect a person's way of life, making housing payments would become harder, billing would possibly be backed up and if any medical bills would possibly not be paid and sent to collections. The closure of any agency will have a ripple effect that will be felt far and wide and depending on the extent of their outreach but it will always hurt the most to those who had a direct connection with the agency.

**Problem Model**

<b>Contributing Factors</b>	<b>Problem</b>	<b>Consequences</b>
Agency is unable to support the undocumented community	CRLA has limited agency visibility	Limited legal aid available for low-income residents
Lack of donors and discretionary funding		Loss of jobs
Minimal collaborative partnerships		

**Capstone Project Description and Justification**

**Capstone Project & Project Purpose**

In order to address the issues of client outreach and agency visibility, CRLA hosted the first “Honoring Our Community Heroes” awards, which was designed to engage the public and

state and local representatives in the visibility of CRLA, as well as other collaborating agencies such as the Community Action Board (CAB). By incorporating the community, they will know that there is an agency that has their best interest at heart and will represent them in their time of need when no other legal agency will. CRLA provides the community with a sense of care that helps tie a community together, while also demonstrating to those taking advantage of people in a lower income bracket that there is a big brother looking out for them that is always willing to fight back.

Furthermore, this event's purpose was to help the CRLA office in Watsonville and other organizations such as CAB come together in collaboration to not only extend their reach but to also use each other's resources to better themselves. According to President of Ventureneer Geri Stengle, a digital media and market research company mentions that, "the contributions between both organizations allow for cost savings, enhanced programs, more efficient outreach, an expanse of proposition values and lastly increased leadership skills" (2013). The vast benefits of a collaboration between both offices would not only allow for cost savings but it would make the outreach portion of the organization more efficient since there will be more people involved in the process such as composing a donor list, sending out flyers and coordinating with different organizations to collaborate for the preparation of the event.

### **Project Justification**

Non-profit organizations can no longer sustain themselves on their own. Over the past couple of years, it has become harder and harder for a nonprofit agency to keep going either because of a lack of collaboration or a lack of exposure to gain new clients, as well as a diminishing number of volunteers to keep the organization alive. That's why there was a need for

an event between nonprofits and the collaborating agencies involved with them on a daily basis in order to demonstrate the strong allegiance towards each other and their community. Such an event can prove beneficial, the reason being it may bring in a new set of strategies or ideas that can further raise a nonprofits awareness to the public whether it being a social gathering or an award ceremony or a combination of both is a major power move that can be vital for agency exposure. For instance, Art Taylor, President and CEO of West Give Alliance states, “Collaboration with other types of social good entities has the potential to greatly aid the ability of nonprofits to effectively and sustainably fulfill their role” (2017). By allowing collaboration it allows for the building of trust that can be demonstrated by those that are selected to take on new projects, those who are selected will be keen on achieving good results for the organization and will be willing to fight to the end to keep the organization alive and well.

The reason for an event such as “Honoring Our Community Heroes” is important because it allows for new prospective donors to come in and see what this agency is about and can influence donors to approve of the cause CRLA is fighting for. Ideally such an event may lead to donations and the attainment of more resources. For instance, fundraising and outreach is of vital importance to any agency because it allows for innovation to take place, increase services that can be provided, higher more staff members and most importantly maintain its sustainability and appearance amongst the community. According to Alexandra Hanken, a philanthropist from SalesForce,

The most obvious being increased organizational capacity, and sustainability. By having access to a pool of unrestricted funds, nonprofits are able to make more significant capital

investments without needing to see an immediate return, giving them the kind of runway that we've long understood is healthy for startups and private-sector companies. (2018)

With the ability to obtain donors and receive a donation from those that believe in CRLA's cause not only does it give the organization a sense of pride and glee. But it shows that there are people that really do believe in their mission but it will also allow for the forming of new connections in the community that can prove vastly beneficial for CRLA future and hopefully leads to another fifty years in operation fighting for what they believe in.

### **Project Implementation**

In the early process of implementing the event for CRLA a gala was considered. However, due to the size and limited resources available for such an event, it would be scaled down into a smaller and more intimate affair and not have it be so imposing. Therefore the "Honoring Our Community Heroes" backyard cookout was developed and implemented which was a smaller scale version of the gala. In order to implement the event, there were multiple steps that had to be followed to actually allow for the project to turn into a reality.

The first step that was required to take place was to have a meeting between the CRLA members in Watsonville and their corporate office to select a date they can both agree with, the date that ended up being selected for the event was March 5, 2020. Furthermore, in that meeting those team members selected a recipient to receive an award on behalf of CRLA for dedicating their life and time defending the community. Once the community hero was selected the process of selecting the design of the glass trophy was started and the approval process with CRLA's central office.

The next major milestone was being provided a donor list, which was used to invite guests that were of great importance to the agency. Some of those VIP guest included the Democratic National Committee, the Mayor Of Watsonville, Congressman's Jimmy and Leon Panetta, Mike Meuter Director of Litigation for CRLA, Senator Bill Monning, Assemblyman Mark Stone & Robert Rivas, Supervisor Greg Caput and lastly City Council Member Aurelio Gonzalez.

Additionally, the venue that was selected that would be in a prime location for the Honoring Our Community Heroes event was the CRLA office. This location was chosen because it would bring the attendees of the event to the heart of CRLA, where all the work takes place. With the selection of the venue completed the invitations were finally able to be sent out via EVite, which is an online invitation service that allows for invitations to be sent out to a big portion of guests without the need of spending money on paper invitations. Furthermore, with the selection of the recipients to receive the award completed, then the process of going to Salinas Valley Trophy and asking if they were willing to donate the crystal trophy for the award recipient followed. With the agreement from Salinas Valley Trophy to provide the requested design and engraving then the process of moving forward with the event was able to continue. Furthermore Artistic HangUps a custom framing shop in Salinas was contacted and asked if they were able to donate the framing for the proclamations and certificates for the award recipients, the request was instantly approved for the awards which was of great encouragement to us all seeing how some companies were instantly interested to partake in the event. The second step that followed was obtaining food. Donation vouchers were composed describing the type of event it was and donations were being requested as well as what items were to be donated if

possible. Primarily the donations that were requested were finger food, as well as some drinks for those who were in attendance at the event. In order to receive such donations, multiple request letters were sent out to over 3 Costco locations in Monterey Bay and Santa Cruz Counties. Donation request letters were also sent out to other vendors such as Smart & Final, Marinelli's Ciders and Walmart. Many donation forms were sent out in order to cover multiple bases just in case no one responded or denied the request. In addition out of all the request forms that were sent out all three Costco locations donated over \$75.00 worth of gift cards, Marinellies was able to donate four boxes of sparkling cider costing around \$150.00, Salinas Valley Trophies and Artistic HangUps both donated the trophies and framing for the awards and lastly the tacos as the main entree were donated by JC Ruiz Trucking at a total of \$500.00. In appreciation of these companies and shops who were able to contribute to the event, they received a thank you during the event as well as a tax-deductible sheet for their donation as well as information in regards to the services that are provided by CRLA.

On the day of the event information about what CRLA does was presented to attendees of the event, a special thank you was also given to those that donated their time and effort as well as those companies and shops that helped make this event possible. After the speeches given by the dignitaries, senators, city council and CRLA staff as well as myself concluded, the awards were presented to the community hero and partnering organizations that have stood out and helped make CRLA the successful nonprofit legal aid agency that it is today. With the successful presentation of the speeches and awards concluded all those in attendance were mingling and enjoying their time talking to each other and forming new connections alongside a delicious entree of authentic tacos. On the completion of the event in order to find out how successful it

was, the total attendance of the event and the extent of how many high ranking officials were able to attend themselves along with their constituents were compared alongside the original EVite. A detailed implementation plan and timeline can be seen in the Scope of Work in Appendix A

### **Assessment Plan/ Expected Outcomes**

After the conclusion of the event, the way the effectiveness was calculated and measured was in two different ways. The first was comparing the number of people attending with the EVite list originally sent out. This was able to be confirmed by checking the people who confirmed coming to the event as well as taking into consideration those who declined the offer. Furthermore, those of the general public that attended because of the event notifications sent out were asked how they heard of the event, unfortunately only 5 of the public sector were able to attend possibly because of conflicting work hours. In addition in order to deem this event successful, there should be more than 30 people in attendance, and also at least 3 city council members or one senator.

### **Project Results**

On the completion of the “Honoring Our Community Heroes” when it came time to assess the turn out of the event, it came to a surprise that 50 guest had planned to attend according to the EVite website used to send out the electronic invitations and to surprise of CRLA there was a total attendance of 43 of the 50 guest who planned to attend. The high attendance rate that was able to be achieved was due to the fact that multiple invites and event preview/ reminders were constantly being sent out to remind guests about the upcoming event.

Furthermore, another possible reason for the increased interest in the event was because recently there has not been an event designed to honor a person of the community that has



dedicated their life to defending the community of Watsonville together with CRLA. By implementing such an event it was able to draw the attention of those politicians and the community members to CRLA and demonstrate what it is that CRLA fights for.

In regards to the expected outcome, it had been thought that only around 20 people would attend the event at its maximum point, but were pleasantly surprised to see over 40 guests in attendance. Also amazingly it was expected that the honoree would receive a proclamation from congressman Jimmy Panetta, but it was not expected that the honoree would be receiving 3 additional ones from the City Council Of Watsonville and CRLA.

In the end the actual ending results of the event completely surpassed the expected outcomes. There was a bigger turn out than expected, both collaborating agencies where their (CAB) to accept their awards and reflect on their partnership with CRLA. The Mayor Of Watsonville, Congressman's Jimmy and Leon Panetta, Mike Meuter Director of Litigation for CRLA, Senator Bill Monning, Assemblyman Mark Stone & Robert Rivas, Supervisor Greg Caput and lastly City Council Member Aurelio Gonzalez attended and presented the Honoree, Steve Kociol, with their proclamation. The first ever Honoring Our Community Heroes event truly proved that it was a complete success and further put California Rural Legal Assistance on the map of the community as well as the collaborating senators, city council members and congressmen.

### **Conclusion & Recommendations**

The number of attendees that participated in the event demonstrated not only to CRLA, but to the community and partnering agencies that there is truly a want and a fighting need for CRLA to continue their work fighting for justice. The endless campaign to fight for the

communities is cemented into Honoring Our Communities Heros in order to increase the number of clients that are coming in for legal services as well as the amount of interns applying for positions. This desire to increase the number of clients and interns coming into the agency was backed up by those in attendance in the event. For instance Senator Bill Monning, Assemblyman Mark Stone and Robert Rivas all mentioned that CRLA is a staple in the communities fabric and they were thoroughly honored and pleased they are a part of CRLA fight for non profit legal aid to provide justice for all.

One recommendation for CRLA would be the continuation of Honoring Our Community Heroes. If such events were able to continue it would reach out to a new generation of students at local colleges and universities to show them that CRLA is designed to help all those in need of legal assistance. It would also be reaching out to a newer set of possible collaborators that will not only inform a new generation of their rights and liberties, but it will also breathe new life into CRLA and allow it to continue into the future. With the possibility of more attorneys who want to donate their time for the greater good, there is the opportunity to increase the number of clients served, as well as have extra personnel to develop and set up outreach programsR. There are hopes that “Honoring Our Community Heroes” will continue to thrive and grow from its infancy implementation to the gala event that was originally envisioned for all to enjoy and benefit from.

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**Appendix A**  
**Scope of Work**

<b>Activities</b>	<b>Communication Method</b>	<b>Timeline/Deadlines</b>	<b>Supporting Staff</b>
Meeting W Giselle, Judy & Sandra pitching capstone Idea	Meeting	Sept 3, 2019	Giselle, Judy & Sandra, Juan
Conduct research of possible venues for the award presentation	Email-Phone	Sept 10, 2019	Giselle, Judy & Sandra, Juan
Follow up meeting with Giselle, Judy Sandra and corporate office (Sussana about capstone Idea	Phone Meeting	Oct 22, 2019	Giselle, Judy & Sandra, Juan
Phone meeting with Susana about capstone project with other salinas agency	Phone Meeting	Oct 25, 2019	Susana, Juan
Follow up Phone meeting with Susana discussing project	Phone Meeting	Oct 29, 2019	Susana, Juan
Confirmation with Susana if capstone has been approved per their review	Email-PDF	November 26, 2019	Giselle, Judy & Sandra, Juan
Begin Planning Process		Nov 26, 2019	Juan
Correlate with Salinas CRLA office for the award ceremony	In-Person Meeting	Dec 3, 2019	Giselle, Judy & Sandra, Juan
Begin Working on capstone invitations for the event	Email	Dec 10, 2019	Giselle, Judy & Sandra, Juan
Meeting Regarding the progression of the project as well as selecting award candidate	Phone/In Person	Dec 10th,2019	Giselle, Judy & Sandra, Juan
Coordinate with Sandra and Giselle for a venue	Meeting	Dec 10th, 2019	Giselle, Judy & Sandra, Juan
Analyza Donors List	Phone	Dec 19th, 2019	Susana , Juan
Conference Call with Phylis & Susana , had	Phone	Dec 24, 2019	Phylis & Susana, Juan

approval for project revoked			
Group meeting with CRLA staff brainstorming and re-engineering project, "Honoring Our Community Heroes" developed, parts assigned	In person	Dec 27th, 2019	Giselle, Judy, Sandra, Juan
Compose and send out requests for donation letters to Costco, Target Walmart....	Letters	January 7, 2020	Giselle, Juan
Event & Invitation sent out, collaboration with Giselle	Email	Jan 7, 2020	Giselle, Juan
EVite Website activated to keep track of the number of attendees (currently 40).	On Line	Jan 7, 2020	Giselle
Go to Valley Trophy to see if they are willing to donate awards	In-Person Conversation	Jan 24, 2020	Juan
In person check in to those who received donation letters requests. Drive to those specific locations	In Person Conversation	Feb 4th, 2020	Juan
Meeting regarding Main Entree for donation at Salinas City BBQ or La Colmena	In Person	Feb 7th, 2020	Juan
Gift Card and Donation pick up at Walmart, Costco and Marinellies.	In Person	Feb 11th, 2020	Juan
Check in with Giselle on event status	In person meeting	Feb 18th, 2020	Juan, Giselle, Judy
Conducted client intake for new clients. Check In with prospective donors for event donations	In Person, Telephone Conversation	Feb 25th , 2020	Juan, Giselle
Left out of office and went to collect donations provided by Costco, as well as pick up necessary supplies.	In Person	March 2nd, 2020	Juan

Traveled to Santa Cruz in order to pick up a proclamation from Congressman Jimmy Panetta Office.	In Person	March 3rd, 2020	Juan
Telephone meeting in regards to agenda and guidelines to be followed for the "Honoring Our Community Heroes" event.	Telephone Meeting	March 3rd, 2020	Juan, Giselle, Judy, Sandra
Capstone Project Implementation date!, Gathered all required material as well as met with speakers who would be presenting the awards to the honoree. Commenced presentation and presented awards and proclamations to honoree.	In person gathering	March 5th, 2020	Juan, Giselle, Judy, Sandra
Design and organized a donors list to provide to the CRLA corporate office for them to be able to use in the future for further events as well as being able to send out appreciation letters to those who attended.	In Person	March 10th, 2020	Juan, Giselle