



# Community-Driven Strategies to Reduce Food Insecurity and Hunger among Latinos<sup>\*†</sup>

## At A Glance

- Food insecurity disproportionately impacts Latino families
- SNAP participation is critical to reducing food insecurity
- Community health workers at community-based organizations play a significant role in responding to the needs of local communities and putting into action culturally relevant approaches to reduce food insecurity.

## Background

All children and families should have the opportunity to lead a long, healthy, and productive life. However, too many Americans lack critical building blocks for good health, including consistent access to affordable, nutritious food. In 2016, food insecurity affected 15.6 million U.S. households (12.3%), with 18.5% of Latino‡ families being disproportionately impacted.<sup>1</sup> In fact, nearly 1 in 5 (20%) Latino

adults were food insecure, compared to just 1 in 10 (9.5%) white non-Hispanics and 1 in 8 (13%) Americans overall.<sup>2</sup> The rate for Latino children was even more pronounced, with 1 in 4 (24%) living in a food-insecure household as compared to 1 in 8 (13%) white non-Hispanic children.<sup>3</sup> This meant that food-insecure Latino households did not have enough money, or other resources, needed during the year to purchase affordable, nutritious food for their children, and other family members.

\* This brief is authored by Alejandra Gepp, Associate Director, who works in health at UnidosUS. The author thanks —UnidosUS staff who contributed to the completion of this brief. Rita Carreón, Deputy Vice President, Health, —provided substantive oversight and guidance in writing this brief. Elizabeth Carrillo, Program Manager, provided editorial input.

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‡ The terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race. Unless otherwise noted, estimates in this document do not include the 3.7 million residents of Puerto Rico. Comparison data for non-Hispanic Whites and non-Hispanic Blacks are identified “Whites” and “Blacks.”

## Food Insecurity and Impact on Health

Food insecurity can have long-lasting health consequences. Adults who experience food insecurity are at an increased risk of developing chronic conditions and diseases (obesity, diabetes, heart disease), and are more likely to need medical treatment and hospital readmissions. For children who have limited access to nutritious food, their growth and development may be at risk.<sup>4</sup> It is well documented that Latinos are at greater risk, compared to other groups, of developing diet-related illnesses, like being overweight, becoming obese, or suffering from diabetes making healthy food options even more important.<sup>5</sup>

Latinos/Hispanics represent almost 18% (58 million) of the nation's total population, and are expected to reach 24% by 2065, making them the fastest-growing ethnic minority in the U.S.<sup>6</sup> Comprising 17% of the U.S. labor force, Latinos contribute significantly to the U.S. economy and constitute an important part of the American workforce today and will be even more significant in the future.<sup>7</sup> Given that Hispanic families experience some of the highest rates of food insecurity in the country, this problem is not only a substantive threat to the health and well-being of Latino children and families but also to the future success of our country.<sup>8</sup>

### Social Factors and Food Insecurity

While poverty is a major root cause of food insecurity, research shows that other social factors prevalent in this country put people at higher risk.<sup>9</sup> Some of these factors include unemployment, low wages, adults with children, and households located in rural areas.<sup>10</sup> In most cases, food-insecure households are impacted by the social determinants of health, defined as the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age. Individuals and families may not have the necessary conditions and opportunities to fully thrive if they live in communities with insufficient access to jobs, inadequate and unsafe transportation for commuting, or earn minuscule wages that are not enough to feed the entire family. These circumstances are shaped by the distribution of money, power and resources throughout communities.

Latinos work hard to attain upward mobility and often have two or three jobs; yet, they experience some of the highest rates of poverty and unemployment in the country making them particularly vulnerable to experiencing food insecurity leading to poor health.<sup>11</sup> This is due in part to systemic and structural barriers that stall their advancement and prevent Latinos from achieving long-term financial gains and stability. Latinos' incomes and net worth are much lower than non-Hispanic Whites, making them more susceptible to experience poverty. Furthermore, Latino households with children are more likely to have incomes below the federal poverty threshold than other groups; median income for Hispanic households (\$47,675) is significantly lower than that of their white non-Hispanic counterparts (\$65,041).

### SNAP Participation: Critical to Reducing Food Insecurity

The United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—considered the “cornerstone of the nation's nutrition safety net”<sup>12</sup>—is a vital program that enables over 40 million Americans, including 10 million low-income and hardworking Latinos, to put food on the table when times are tough or wages are too low to make ends meet.<sup>13</sup> SNAP participation is associated with better overall health outcomes for food-insecure Latino households. SNAP also stimulates national economic growth, as every dollar spent on the program yields \$1.80 of positive economic activity due to increased consumer spending in supermarkets and grocery stores across the nation.<sup>14</sup>

But, according to the USDA more than four million Latinos who are eligible for SNAP do not participate in the program. Latinos face multiple barriers in accessing SNAP, including eligibility restrictions, limited access to bilingual and bicultural staff in application centers, inadequate outreach and dissemination of accurate information that leads to misconceptions about the program, and in some communities, the lack of reliable public or private transportation. As the Latino population continues to grow, there is an urgent need to reach households facing hunger in a culturally-competent and

linguistically-appropriate manner in order to establish greater access to healthier foods, preventive health care and resources about healthier lifestyles. The future success of our country depends on building healthier and more equitable communities capable of meeting evolving challenges. A strong Latino community means a stronger America.

## The Role of Community-Based Organizations

Community-based organizations (CBOs) have played a crucial role in addressing food insecurity and building healthy and resilient communities. CBOs are on the front lines responding to challenges and putting strategies (i.e., building capacity and leveraging resources) into action that meet the needs of their communities. They have the capacity to work with local government entities and influence systems to improve access and the quality of vital services provided to constituents, like advocating for access to preventive care, medical treatment, and healthier lifestyle choices in their communities.

CBOs are highly effective in disseminating information to Latino communities and bringing about substantial change for the following reasons:

- They are locally based and work closely with low-income and working-class individuals and families, as well as with low-literacy, and limited-English-proficient Hispanics.
- CBOs fill the gaps between the resources available through national and local government agencies and the communities in need.
- They are familiar with the concerns and policy issues that affect their community members and respond with innovative solutions that maximize available resources and mobilize community health leaders to become local agents of change.
- Many CBOs house *promotores de salud* (community health workers) programs and provide training on educating Latinos about health issues in a culturally-competent and linguistically-appropriate manner. *Promotores de salud* are a valuable bridge to the Latino community because:

- o They often live in the community where they work, speak the language and understand the health behaviors common among residents.
- o Are trusted by community members, share cultural values (i.e., *respeto* [respect], familism, personalism, etc.) with those they serve, understand the language and have a commitment to social justice.<sup>15</sup>

### **Promotores de Salud: Building Trust for Healthier Communities**

The *promotores de salud* concept revolves around training individuals from local communities, usually volunteers, to become knowledgeable about a health promotion or disease prevention topic that is a priority to the community (based on factors such as high prevalence of a disease or health-related concern). *Promotores de salud* also become skilled in delivering health information to their fellow community members. Often, the *promotores de salud* function as “navigators,” whereby, once they deliver the health information, they assist their community in navigating the system to obtain additional health information or access health services.

*Promotores* may also serve as community representatives becoming actively involved in leading local health advocacy efforts and leveraging resources to help sustain programs in their communities. *Promotores de salud* are housed in Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs or community health centers), CBOs, or other community settings that directly serve Latinos across the country. Most notably, the effectiveness of *promotores de salud* is rooted in their ability to establish close relationships with individuals. By cultivating meaningful relationships, *promotores de salud* build community trust which establishes a foundation for effective community engagement. These efforts lead to healthier communities with more equitable access to health care and improved food choices.<sup>16</sup>

Recognizing the importance of *promotores de salud* and the need for health literacy in vulnerable communities, UnidosUS has created easily readable health educational materials and messages using clear, plain language to effectively communicate

Key indicators of the *Comprando Rico y Sano* program's success include:

25,636



Eligible Latinos enrolled in SNAP.

73,602



Latinos received face-to-face nutrition education and SNAP information.

≈2.5 million



Latinos were reached with nutrition and SNAP enrollment messages via traditional news and social media.

with diverse populations, especially low-income and working-class individuals and families who are at higher risk for food insecurity and chronic disease. It is essential to disseminate culturally and linguistically appropriate messages to communities, and approach different populations with cultural 'humility.' This strategy has been successfully employed in a program, implemented by UnidosUS, called *Comprando Rico y Sano* (Buying Healthy and Flavorful Foods). *Comprando Rico y Sano* demonstrates how local efforts, leadership, and creative solutions, can combat food insecurity and hunger.

### *Comprando Rico y Sano: A Model Program to Combat Food Insecurity*

*Comprando Rico y Sano* is a national program intent on reducing hunger and food insecurity by instilling healthy shopping and eating habits among Latinos through nutrition education and SNAP enrollment assistance. Developed by UnidosUS and supported by the Walmart Foundation, the program responds to the needs of predominantly Spanish-speaking Latino communities using the culturally-sensitive *promotores de salud* model.

In 2017-2018, UnidosUS worked with 24 subgrantees located in low-income rural and urban communities. Together, we interacted with a diverse Latino audience, shared best practices on combating hunger and food insecurity, and learned about emerging community needs beyond these issues.

As part of *Comprando Rico y Sano*, *promotores de salud* conduct *charlas* (small educational sessions), the use of hands-on, practice-based approaches like cooking demonstrations and grocery store tours, to educate Latinos about healthy eating, grocery shopping on a limited budget, and the importance of physical activity.

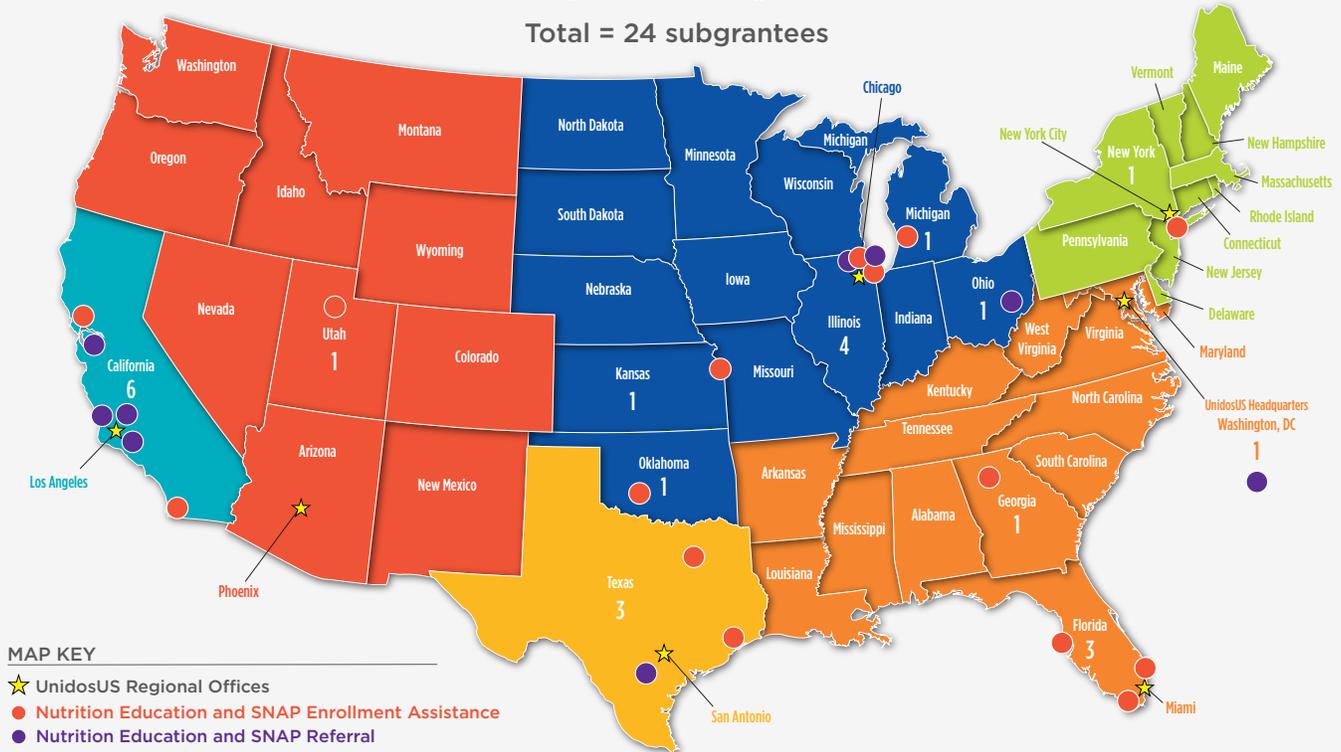
*Promotores de salud* also provide SNAP education and enrollment assistance to eligible Latinos that helps maximize their SNAP benefits. Effectively communicating with community members about SNAP requires demystifying misconceptions about the program and thoroughly reviewing the application process with them. It is vital for Latinos to clearly understand SNAP's benefits and eligibility requirements, know what documents they need to apply, and how-to follow-up, if necessary, after submitting their application.

In its fifth year of implementation, data results for the 2017-2018 grant year indicate that *Comprando Rico y Sano* continues to be an effective program among communities served. Key indicators of the program's success include:

- **25,636** eligible Latinos enrolled in SNAP—surpassing the program goal of enrolling a minimum of 18,000 participants in SNAP for the grant year.
- **73,602** Latinos received face-to-face nutrition education and SNAP information.
- **≈2.5 million** Latinos were reached with nutrition and SNAP enrollment messages via traditional news and social media.

# Comprando Rico y Sano Subgrantees 2017-2018

Total = 24 subgrantees



## Nutrition Education and SNAP Enrollment Assistance (Part A)

- |   |                   |
|---|-------------------|
| 1. Brighton Park Neighborhood Council (BPNC)                    | Chicago, IL       |
| 2. CETPA  | Norcross, GA      |
| 3. Coalition of Florida Farmworkers Organizations, Inc. (COFFO) | Florida City, FL  |
| 4. Comunidades Unidas (CU)                                      | West Valley, UT   |
| 5. El Centro de Servicios Sociales, Inc.                        | Lorain County, OH |
| 6. El Centro Inc.   | Kansas City, KS   |
| 7. El Concilio  | Stockton, CA      |
| 8. Hispanic Center of Western Michigan (HCWM)                   | Grand Rapids, MI  |
| 9. Hispanic Unity of Florida, Inc. (HUF)                        | Hollywood, FL     |
| 10. Hispanic Services Council (HSC)                             | Tampa, FL         |
| 11. Latino Community Development Agency (LCDP)                  | Oklahoma City, OK |
| 12. Latino Alzheimer's and Memory Disorders Alliance (LAMDA)    | Norridge, IL      |
| 13. La Maestra Community Health Centers (LMCHC)                 | San Diego, CA     |
| 14. The Concilio  | Dallas, TX        |

## Nutrition Education and SNAP Referral (Part B)

- |  |                      |
|--|----------------------|
| 1. Alivio Medical Center   | Chicago, IL          |
| 2. American Latino Center for Research, Education & Justice (ALCREJ) | Houston, TX          |
| 3. Building Skills Partnership                                       | Los Angeles, CA      |
| 4. Clínica Monseñor Oscar A. Romero                                  | Los Angeles, CA      |
| 5. Eastmont Community Center   | East Los Angeles, CA |
| 6. Erie Neighborhood House   | Chicago, IL          |
| 7. La Clinica del Pueblo (LCDP)                                      | Washington, DC       |
| 8. Mexican American Unity Council, Inc. (MAUC)                       | San Antonio, TX      |
| 9. Mexican Coalition for the Empowerment of Youth and Families       | Bronx, NY            |
| 10. Tiburcio Vasquez Health Center, Inc. (TVHC)                      | Union City, CA       |

## Community Impact Health Challenge

In 2017-2018, UnidosUS *Comprando Rico y Sano* designed a ['Community Health Impact Challenge'](#) among its subgrantees to engage in activities that created community-driven solutions by targeting the underlying social determinants of health. These efforts continue to lead to healthier communities.

La Maestra Community Health Centers was recognized with the first Community Health Impact Challenge prize award for the implementation of a community-based exercise program (walking club) to improve residents' health. The organization made water and healthy snacks available for participants after the walk, which allowed *promotores de salud* the opportunity to raise awareness among club members about nutrition and encourage those eligible to sign up for CalFresh, California's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

The program results also suggest that *promotores de salud* successfully delivered nutrition education that improved healthy eating and shopping habits among program participants:

- **47.2%** increased their fruit intake
- **54.9%** increased their vegetable intake
- **62.9%** increased the number of healthy meals prepared at home

These results are remarkable given that, in 2017, national anti-immigrant/Latino rhetoric contributed to myths and misconceptions about SNAP eligibility. As a result, families with mixed immigration status grew fearful about applying for SNAP even though they may have been eligible. This dynamic strained service

delivery, too, potentially resulting in a negative impact on the program.

To combat the false information and resulting fears among community members, program subgrantees responded by working tirelessly for long hours and with scarce resources. Their efforts resulted in tripling their local community outreach to inform and increase awareness about constitutional rights (Know Your Rights campaign), and SNAP. This is an example of the UnidosUS Affiliate network's capacity to reach key populations with compelling messaging about ways to alleviate food insecurity in the communities they serve. It also demonstrates their efficient response time and ability to manage programmatic operations disrupted by external forces.

### Norma's Story

UnidosUS provides program subgrantees with capacity assistance (training, leadership development, technical assistance) to enhance health programs and community-driven approaches that address social issues. The technical assistance UnidosUS offers to *promotores de salud*, for example, builds self-efficacy and strengthens skills that can lead to lifelong economic and career advancement.

Norma, a *promotora* for four years with El Centro, Inc., based in Kansas City, reflected upon her personal and professional growth at the end of a training session. When she entered the program, she described herself as someone who was "shy and did not have the confidence to stand up in front of a group of people and deliver a *charla* and how "the very thought of it scared her." Yet, with time, practice, and mentorship from El Centro, combined with the training she received from UnidosUS—which included learning technical content, facilitation skills, role playing, and the sharing of best practices—Norma has gained the self-confidence to facilitate *charlas* and now "enjoys delivering them." Her experiences led to other professional development opportunities, like strengthening her computer skills, and now she is working full-time with El Centro focusing on cultivating other community leaders. Inspirational stories like Norma's are likely to be found across our Affiliate network and demonstrate the impact these programs and trainings have on our *promotores*. While many work as volunteers, others are hired by the CBOs or enter the workforce in other capacities, in great part due to the skills they acquire from *Comprando Rico y Sano*.

### Case Study: Working to Reduce Hunger in Oklahoma City

Through SNAP education and enrollment assistance, the *Comprando Rico y Sano* cohort of CBOs implementing the program contribute to reducing the impact of hunger and food insecurity among Latinos. Research shows that where people live in relation to their access to healthy food, has a significant effect on their ability to lead a healthy life. This is especially true among emerging Latino communities where people must walk long distances to the nearest grocery store, or their local SNAP office may lack bilingual and culturally-sensitive staff to effectively assist eligible Latinos. This reinforces the importance of connecting Latinos with culturally-relevant resources.

[Latino Community Development Agency \(LCDA\)](#) is a UnidosUS Affiliate CBO operating in central Oklahoma for 27 years. LCDA partners with several other organizations to conduct its work, including the implementation of *Comprando Rico y Sano*. Their efforts break down barriers to health and social services that help the Latino community in central Oklahoma thrive.

Since LCDA implemented *Comprando Rico y Sano* four years ago, it has become the “go-to” agency for assisting eligible Latinos with SNAP enrollment in Oklahoma City and the surrounding areas. An indispensable resource for the local Latino community in Oklahoma, LCDA has gained local and national recognition as a responsible, results-driven, stable organization.

Program results for the site indicate that between 2014-2018, 9,751 eligible households have enrolled in SNAP. In May 2016, the Food Research and Action Center reported that most states had lower SNAP participation, yet Oklahoma was one of 11 states with “over-the-year SNAP participation increases” despite being among the “15 worst states in reaching SNAP-eligible people.” This suggests that LCDA’s SNAP enrollment efforts may have contributed to increased SNAP participation in the state and a reduction in hunger in Oklahoma City by increasing the purchasing power and food security of eligible Latino families. This is significant because from 2012-2014, the USDA reported that an estimated 16.5% of its population was more likely to have “low or very low food security” compared to 14.3% of the overall U.S. population.

During this time, LCDA has been intentional in its **implementation strategy**, which includes:

- 1) **Having staff and *promotores de salud* that reflect the community they serve.** This includes speaking the language, knowing the culture, and providing the necessary assistance to those seeking help. These efforts have been invaluable in building community trust.
- 2) **Establishing a relationship with the local Department of Human Services (DHS).** DHS provided initial training to LCDA staff on how to complete SNAP applications online and has since provided technical assistance including site visits to verify that protocols are met, and all challenges are addressed. In turn, DHS refers Spanish speakers who need help to complete a SNAP application to LCDA. The relationship has allowed LCDA to maximize available resources by helping a greater number of people complete an online SNAP application instead of using paper forms, which can be more time-consuming to process.
- 3) **Creating a network of local key agencies that refer Spanish-speaking clients to LCDA** (i.e., Oklahoma City County Health Department, Oklahoma State Department of Health, Federally Qualified Health Centers, American Heart Association, and other local agencies). By establishing a wide network of providers, program participants located in different zip codes throughout the state receive needed services from qualified staff and local agencies that leverage limited resources to meet the needs of Spanish-speaking clients.
- 4) **Conducting outreach with other local stakeholders** (i.e., the school district, churches, food banks, and health fairs) has allowed LCDA to establish itself as a well-known presence in the community recognized for providing these essential services. School districts, for example, rely on LCDA staff to provide on-site assistance for parents to complete SNAP applications for eligible family members.
- 5) **Taking health literacy into account when developing supplementary materials** (i.e., developing handouts or brochures) that directly address facts and myths about SNAP eligibility requires effort and ability to communicate complex messages in a simple way.
- 6) **Using communication methods that resonate with the community.** Sending text messages or making phone calls to remind participants of enrollment appointments offers a more personalized approach to health education and promotion. Additionally, promoting the program, services, and SNAP enrollment assistance via the leading local Spanish-language television outlet expands program reach.
- 7) **Addressing myths and misconceptions about SNAP through careful “framing” of the program** (i.e. “assistance with putting healthy food on the table”) and being consistent in messaging has helped dispel falsehoods about SNAP enrollment.
- 8) **Scheduling nutrition education, SNAP information sessions and enrollment assistance during days and at times that members of the community are available.** This includes offering services on a consistent Saturday each month during the first year of implementation.
- 9) **Maintaining program sustainability**—given their great work, other organizations (i.e., Blue Cross Blue Shield of OK, Oklahoma Foundation, American Association of Diabetes Educators) have funded additional nutrition and wellness education programs particularly tailored to serve the Latino community.

LCDA’s success has been achieved through diligence, strategic partnerships, and cultural appropriateness. LCDA has made a significant difference in families’ lives because SNAP is a crucial safety net for Oklahoma where more than one in four children rely upon SNAP.<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

Food insecurity, a social determinant of health, has a disproportionate effect on the health, quality of life, and the ability of families to achieve optimal health and thrive. Vital programs such as SNAP allow millions of Americans, including low-income and hard-working Latino families with children, to put food on the table when times are tough, or wages are too low. SNAP participation is associated with better overall health outcomes for Latinos in food-insecure households and stimulates national economic growth due to increased consumer spending in supermarkets and grocery stores across the nation.

While Latinos face many barriers accessing SNAP, UnidosUS Affiliated and non-Affiliated CBOs play a crucial role in addressing food insecurity by providing SNAP information and enrollment assistance to those eligible. As the Latino population

continues to grow, the need to reach households facing hunger in a more holistic manner is imperative for creating equitable, healthy, and stronger communities.

UnidosUS's approach to delivering culturally- and linguistically-responsive content for health programs, such as *Comprando Rico y Sano*, contributes to building healthy and resilient communities. By leveraging community engagement and resources, and rallying leaders around the common goal to reduce hunger and food insecurity, new ways to solve this consequential and widespread issue will emerge creating a healthier future for Latino families and their children. Our nation's social and economic well-being depends on the stability, vibrancy and health of every community, and every person, particularly those who are the most vulnerable. Addressing their needs, in an equitable way, must be a priority for all of us.

### UnidosUS: Building a Culture of Health for Latinos by Expanding Where Health Happens

UnidosUS, as the nation's largest civil rights and advocacy organization working to improve the lives of Hispanic Americans, has invested five decades in increasing the opportunity and ability of Latinos to lead healthy lives no matter who they are, where they live, or how much they earn. UnidosUS's approach aims to build a culture of health—where all Latinos have equal opportunities to make choices that lead to healthier lifestyles—through the implementation of a multi-pronged strategy that includes policy development and advocacy, culturally- and linguistically-responsive content for health programs, cross-sector partnerships and collaborations with diverse stakeholders (i.e., sister organizations, national allies, and corporate partners), and communications. At the policy level, for example, UnidosUS champions proposals to protect and strengthen critical safety net programs like SNAP, that give more people the tools they need to be healthy and economically secure, including access to healthy, affordable food. At the program level, we utilize vital assets (i.e., community-based organizations) and key trusted sources (i.e., community health workers) from within the community to increase access to healthier foods and affordable meals by facilitating impactful, culturally- and linguistically-appropriate nutrition education, and SNAP education and enrollment assistance. For more information about *Comprando Rico y Sano*, visit [www.unidosus.org/issues/health/nutrition-and-wellness/comprando-rico-y-sano/](http://www.unidosus.org/issues/health/nutrition-and-wellness/comprando-rico-y-sano/).

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## Endnotes

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