Shining a Light on *Promotores de Salud* during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Every day Latinos have contributed to this country’s history and prosperity, and today, they are contributing significantly to the U.S. economic growth. In the next 20 years, 70% of new homeowners\(^1\) will be Hispanic,* supported by higher employment rates as well as increased entrepreneurship and earning and spending power as compared to the overall population.\(^2\)

However, while Latinos† have become a critical foundation for the U.S. economy, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed that they face many striking inequities in their daily lives.

**COVID-19 and Disparities**

According to CDC health equity data, as of March 21, 2022, 25% of COVID-19 cases in the United States are found among Latinos (second only to Whites at 53.5%), and Latinos face a 17.3% share of COVID-19 deaths.\(^3\) Hispanic children are 2.5 times more likely to have witnessed first-hand the loss of at least one caregiver due to COVID-19 as compared to Whites.\(^4\) These figures speak volumes about the sheer scale of suffering our communities are experiencing.

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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. Our materials may also refer to this population as “Latinx” to represent the diversity of gender identities and expressions that are present in the community.

\(^†\) The U.S. Hispanic population is growing more rapidly than other ethnic groups—50.7 million in 2010 to 62.1 million today—comprising 18.7% of the population.
The pandemic has exacerbated longstanding disparities in food security

Food insecurity impacts 40 million Americans, and Hispanic families are disproportionately affected.*

According to U.S. Census data, nearly 16% of Latino households reported food insufficiency in October 2021 compared to only around 6% of non-Hispanic white households.\(^5\) For Latino children, one in four (compared to one in eight white children) experience not having access to healthy food on a consistent basis, which can impact their growth and development.

In UnidosUS’s survey, 44% of Latino parents received some form of food assistance during the pandemic (including food banks, schools, churches, SNAP, or food stamps), and nearly 80% reported that this assistance helped a great deal.\(^6\) But there are millions of Latinos eligible for SNAP who do not participate in the program.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is a vital resource for families that find themselves in tough times and experiencing food insecurity. Latinos face multiple barriers when attempting to access and enroll in federal nutrition programs, including eligibility restrictions, limited access to bilingual and bicultural staff in application centers, inadequate outreach and dissemination of information that leads to misconceptions about the program, and limited access to technology. Health centers and community-based organizations (CBOs) across the country are addressing these barriers head-on, utilizing culturally relevant models (community health workers) and reducing the gaps of food insecurity.

* Food insecurity refers to a lack of financial resources to purchase needed healthy foods at the household level and the lack of access to enough food for an active healthy life. People who are food-insecure struggle with many issues stemming from poverty and often have to decide whether to pay for rent, electricity, medication, or food.
A cultural relevant model to combat food insecurity

Since 2013, UnidosUS has made significant headway in addressing food insecurity in Latino communities across the nation through Comprando Rico y Sano (Buying Healthy and Flavorful Foods) led by community health workers (promotores de salud). Comprando Rico y Sano (CRS) is a national program, funded by the Walmart Foundation, which seeks to address food insecurity through culturally relevant nutrition education and enrollment assistance in SNAP and other federal nutrition programs for eligible Latino households. It is currently implemented by 25 CBOs across the country. In the last grant year (2020-2022), the combined efforts of UnidosUS and subgrantees resulted in training for 157 promotores de salud, SNAP enrollment assistance for 11,475 households benefiting 26,629 Latinos, and distribution of over 3.6 million pounds of food. Additionally, 95,846 Latinos were reached with nutrition education via remote platforms and face-to-face. Lastly, an approximate 4.6 million Latinos were reached with program messages, including availability of enrollment assistance in SNAP and other federal nutrition programs as well as services via news and social media.

CRS embodies the spirit of educating, connecting and empowering, this is what has made our program successful.

——Stephanie Lemus
From Clínica Msr. Oscar A. Romero, a CRS subgrantee in Los Angeles, CA

CRS is our foundation in everything we do, started with a nutrition aspect and really built our program from there, we worked with our volunteers and seniors and senior centers, expanded to SNAP enrollment, Medicare, Medicaid and COVID vaccinations and strengthened ourselves with partners in San Antonio. Could not have done it without CRS.

——Crystal Requejo
From Mexican American Unity Council, a CRS subgrantee in San Antonio, TX

CBOs are strategically located in densely populated cities, rural areas, and migrant farmworker communities. They provide an important safety net to Latinos and immigrant populations who otherwise would not have access to health and social services. Promotores, recruited by CBOs, conduct extensive outreach and provide access to health and social services as well as health education to help safeguard the health and well-being of the Latino community.

* UnidosUS has also worked tirelessly on advocacy and policy efforts to eliminate or reduce barriers for all people to have easy access to affordable and quality health care (i.e., Medicaid) and expand access to SNAP and other federal nutrition programs. We ensure that an equitable and just lens is integrated into all policies and procedures and invest in the development of culturally and linguistically appropriate health promotion programs. Funds from the Walmart Foundation are not used to support advocacy/policy work.
As a trusted messenger of the community, we are able to provide services in an effective and positive manner, not just providing a box of food, but also providing referrals to health providers and information on enrollment of SNAP, Medicaid, Medicare, and affordable housing.

—Crystal Requejo  
From Mexican American Unity Council, San Antonio, TX

Under CRS, promotores deliver interactive and participatory educational sessions called charlas (“chats”) that instill healthy shopping, cooking, and eating habits among Latinos, as well as provide information and enrollment assistance into SNAP for eligible families. Promotores have been essential in demystifying misconceptions about SNAP, and they are sensitive to the feelings of fear or shame community members sometimes have in applying for the program.

The crucial role of promotores de salud during the COVID-19 pandemic

As peers, advisors, and educators, promotores de salud are knowledgeable and resourceful about the local public health and social services available to community members to ensure that care is accessible and affordable and to promote health and behavior change. Their intimate familiarity with the communities they serve and keen awareness of the cultural characteristics affecting the way their neighbors think about health provides the promotor inside knowledge of how best to educate, inform, and share health messages and information.

Promotores are uniquely positioned to respond in times of high need and provide critical services to communities disproportionately impacted by public health threats including COVID-19. They are on the front lines responding to challenges and crises and putting strategies (i.e., building capacity and leveraging resources) into action that meet the needs of their communities.

So when you bring something that is based on the Community, based on their needs, based on their culture, it’s something that will be fruitful and will continue to grow and so we’ve been able to grow our program because we are meeting the needs of the community.

—Rocio “Rosy” Bailey  
From Hispanic Services Council, a CRS subgrantee in Tampa, FL

During the pandemic, promotores de salud have provided much-needed COVID-19 education and outreach in Latino communities, particularly in areas with disparities in food insecurity and/or vaccination rates. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, promotores have become more vital than ever in serving as an access point to health services, assisting, for example, with contact tracing efforts, distributing masks, sanitizers and other protective gear to farmworkers, distributing
and delivering food, enrolling individuals and families in SNAP and other federal nutrition programs and services, connecting community members to food pantries, and combating misinformation via in-person and digital outlets such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook groups.  

“**We had to be very adaptable, we had to reinvent ourselves. Our hours of operations is say nine to five but realistically it was 24 hours. Crisis hit and we had to respond and what promotora would not stop to help someone else?**”

—**Cynthia Kaser**  
From [La Maestra Community Health Centers](https://www.lamaestra.org), a CRS subgrantee from San Diego, CA

Due to social distancing guidelines and the limited hours of operation and staff for many health, social, and human services, _promotores_ had to reinvent themselves by quickly adapting their outreach methods to digital and remote venues. For example, the need arose for _promotores_ to assist community members with an online SNAP application process that had its own share of challenges, especially for the older Hispanic population.

“**Everything went kind of virtual, so everything went online, all applications, all assistance with online. And our community did not have access to that, so we went ahead and did one-on-one appointment, so we never closed our doors.**”

—**Crystal Requejo**  
From [Mexican American Unity Council](https://www.mauc.org), San Antonio, TX

While many _promotores_ feel their role in the community is a gift and a vocation, they too have suffered the impact of COVID-19. Multiple COVID-19 exposure scares, losing family members to the virus, and becoming sick with the virus resulted in their own experiences with depression, anxiety, and stress. Not only did they face the challenges of balancing their own family and work responsibilities, but they also carried the overwhelming burdens of their community. Despite the challenging times, CBOs and _promotores de salud_ have remained steadfast in their commitment to serve individuals and families in times of high need and stress. They have worked tirelessly for long hours, yet they have maintained flexible and summoned collective strength and support from one another and from their community. As part of a UnidosUS institution-wide _Esperanza Hope for All_ campaign aimed to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on Latinos, UnidosUS has been responsive to CBOs and their staff’s needs and has offered support through funding, tailored technical assistance, and educational resources to help CBOs and _promotores de salud_ respond to challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, including its impact on mental health. For example, as part of CRS, UnidosUS facilitated a [three-part session](https://www.unidosus.org/es/our-work/crsg/health/crisis/) on tools and strategies to deal with unhealed trauma, stress, and uncertainty during times of crisis so that they would be able to take care of themselves and continue to help others.
Conclusion

While CRS has been an asset to communities served by the grant for the last eight years, thanks to the generous funding of the Walmart Foundation, during this pandemic its impact has been felt in a deeper, more meaningful way due to the high rates of food insecurity among Latinos. Since its onset, promotores de salud have been the cornerstone of CRS. When the pandemic struck in March 2020, the program was well-positioned to respond to the public health emergency and utilize the talent and expertise of promotores de salud to reduce the impact of COVID-19 on food-insecure Latino children and families and improve food access and well-being. Our combined efforts have resulted in meeting critical needs of individuals and families (i.e., distributing food, delivering meals to the sick or homebound, providing enrollment assistance in federal nutrition programs, connecting people with services, and finding innovative ways to deliver bilingual nutrition education). As state and federal agencies continue to update their guidelines, and as we as a country begin to move in the ‘right’ direction (i.e., declines in COVID-19 related hospitalizations and deaths) due to increased access to vaccines and testing, much work remains in building equitable systems that address the social and economic gaps impacted by a pandemic that continues to hold true in several communities. These factors include food inflation and overall threats to food systems (i.e., climate change, labor shortages, and infrastructure problems) that make it difficult for low-income communities to access healthy foods. With this landscape, UnidosUS envisions CRS, with its promotor model, standing firm to mitigate continuing challenges and using its power and presence in local communities to increase food access for food-insecure households through food distribution and delivery and referrals to food pantries and health care services.
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Endnotes


