

# El Paso promotoras provide COVID-19, vaccine information to underserved and vulnerable populations



By 7:30 a.m., cars were lined up around Horizon City's Holy Spirit Church even though its food distribution site wouldn't open for another 30 minutes. Virginia Marin and Martha Montellano took advantage of the wait to hand out flyers, face masks and mini sanitizer bottles.

Marin and Montellano have been *promotoras de la salud*, or community health workers, in El Paso County for more than six years. They educate under-served communities about the health programs the county provides.

When the pandemic started, Marin and Montellano shifted their focus to telling people how to protect themselves and their families from COVID-19.

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“Our work is to tell people that the pandemic is real, it is here in our community, that there have been a lot of deaths and to remind them to keep wearing a mask,” Montellano said.



*Promotora* Virginia Dorantes explains to Gloria Alonso where to call for assistance for transportation to medical appointments. (Maria Ramos Pacheco/El Paso Matters)

Now *promotoras* are educating people about El Paso’s vaccine rollout, how to register for the vaccine and debunking misinformation.

Victorino Jimenez often visits Holy Spirit’s food bank distribution site and last week the *promotoras* explained how he could register for a vaccine.

"They told me where to call and I did. Now I just have to be patient and wait for my turn," Jimenez said.

"Most of the people we speak to are elderly folks. Their main concern with vaccines is not knowing how to register and that they don't usually drive; they rely on family to move around," Marin said. "We inform them that [Project Amistad](#) offers free transportation for medical appointments, which includes going to get the vaccine shot."

One challenge that *promotoras* have encountered is that people do not want to get vaccinated, fearing they will need to disclose their immigration status.

"A lot of people tell us that they do not want to go and get vaccinated because the city will have their information, and they fear that this would have an impact on their immigration status," Marin said. "But we tell them not to be afraid, that the vaccine is for everyone, is free, and no one will ask anything related to citizenship."



*Promotora* Laura Mendoza believes older adults are the ones who benefit most from this program since they are the ones with more questions about the virus and vaccine. (Maria Ramos Pacheco/El Paso Matters)

*Promotoras* bridge the communication gap between community members and health care providers, said Louis Brown, an associate professor at UTHHealth School of Public Health in El Paso.

“The cultural and linguistic diversity found in El Paso complicates efforts to effectively share information about COVID-19 and vaccines. *Promotoras* are able to share scientifically accurate messages that resonate with our most vulnerable residents and address concerns one-on-one,” Brown said. “With information constantly being updated, we’ve had to work extra hard to keep

our answers and media up to date in English and Spanish."

COVID-19 has taken the lives of a disproportionate amount of Latinos in El Paso and across Texas. Though Hispanics make up 40% of the statewide population, they account for 52% of COVID-19 deaths, according to the Texas Department of State Health Services.

In El Paso, Hispanics are 83% of the county's population and comprise 90% of COVID-19 deaths, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.



*Promotora* Martha Montellano gives facemasks to people waiting in line at Holy Spirit Church's food distribution site. (Maria Ramos Pacheco/El Paso Matters)

Paso del Norte Health Foundation, Texas A&M University Colonias Program, the University of Texas at El Paso, Alianza and the Community Action Agency

of Southern New Mexico are coordinating 145 *promotoras* who are doing COVID-19 outreach in El Paso and Hudspeth counties, Ciudad Juárez and parts of southern New Mexico, said Michael Kelly, vice president of programs at El Paso Del Norte Health Foundation.

At [El Pasoans Fighting Hunger Food Bank](#)'s Plaza Circle location, four *promotoras* gave out flyers with information about where to call to register for the vaccines and told people about the different programs that the city offers in case they need rental or food assistance. Rocio Rey estimates she and her colleagues speak to an average 300 people per day there.

Though Rey has been a *promotora* for more than six years, she was afraid to perform her job at the beginning of the pandemic.

"I am still a little bit scared of going out to the streets, but people need to know the programs that the city offers, and well, we have to be very careful. Fortunately, none of us have tested positive," Rey said.

The common challenge for *promotoras* is to debunk misinformation, especially from older residents.

"People are afraid of the vaccine. Older people say things like, 'oh this is fake, it is a study, and they want to try it with older people first, it is too soon for the vaccine to be out' — these are comments that we hear very often," *promotora* Maria Chacon said. "We explain to them that the vaccine went through a process and that it is safe to get the shot."

Government mistrust among immigrants is another barrier to vaccine access, *promotora* Virginia Dorantes said.

"I want to make sure that people do not get fake information. I tell people to register for the vaccine, but then they tell me things like, 'no, I am not going

to do it because when I try, the government closed the website or they do not even pick up the phone,'" Dorantes said. "So they think that we are lying about it, and that's when we explain to them that there is a process and that we all need to have patience."



If promotoras run out of flyers, they tell people to take photos of the information with their phone. (María Ramos Pacheco/El Paso Matters)

People need accurate information about the vaccine's risk and benefits so they can make an informed decision about their health, Brown said.

"Such information is often less available to Latinos and Latino immigrants. Which is why *promotoras* are so important in bridging that gap, providing people with the information they need to make a good decision." Brown said.

*Interviews with the promotoras de la salud were conducted in Spanish and translated to English.*

*Cover photo: María Chacon and Rocio Rey talk to people about the*

*importance of getting vaccinated against COVID-19. (Maria Ramos Pacheco/El Paso Matters)*

*Correction: An earlier version of this story incorrectly described food distribution at Holy Spirit Church. It serves as a mobile distribution site for the El Pasoans Fighting Hunger Food Bank.*