

# Mamacítas Cibernéticas seeks to close digital gaps in Sunland Park

Group serves as 'chanclas on the ground' in outreach to Hispanic women

SUNLAND PARK – On a Saturday morning, a few dozen cheerful, Spanish-speaking women began arriving at a community center in Sunland Park, a 17,400-person city tucked against the Rio Grande near where New Mexico, Texas and Mexico meet.

*"Aqui estamos, pásele,"* said Maria Chaparro to a group of them – using a familial, Spanish slang for "we're all here, come on in" – as she stood at the front patio of the center welcoming the women.

After some pastries, fruit and coffee in a conference room, about 25 of them sat in a circle of folding chairs around the room. Some with pens and notepads in hand, they began their morning task: providing insight on how best they can join the digital world of post-pandemic life.

"If you notice the demographics, it is women in their 50s, women in their 60s," said Chaparro, the lead coordinator for Mamacítas Cibernéticas – or the "cybernetic mamas" – an innovative group of women who carried out outreach in the Sunland Park area to create a report on digital literacy needs in this economically distressed area.



## **Closing the divide for Hispanic families**

The effort is an example of how local residents, particularly in Hispanic and Latino communities, can join together to bridge the digital gaps in a culturally relevant way. Community involvement is expected to play a significant role in making strides toward digital equity nationwide – and its absence could mean communities fail to gain traction at a time when there's unprecedented funding available for projects.

Concerned that Hispanic families – particularly older, Hispanic women – are vulnerable to being left behind by the internet-based lifestyle created by the pandemic, Mamacitas Cibernéticas is lobbying local, state and federal lawmakers to fund computer training programs for older, low-income Spanish speakers in this region.

“This is a population that does not have the same digital literacy skills as

other groups, like their grandchildren or maybe their sons and daughters," said Chaparro. "We saw the (digital) divide during COVID, and we want this community to be ready and to be proactive about using resources," she said.

As the basis of the surveying effort were word-of-mouth invitations; focus groups held in welcoming settings with breakfast foods and coffee; and incentives in the form of gift cards to compensate residents for their participation. Organizers were fluent in Spanish and conducted focus groups in that language – often preferred in Sunland Park.

## Overcoming neglect

The needs-assessment report, at a cost of \$15,730, was funded through the city of Sunland Park, which used a grant from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) to ascertain the digital literacy needs in this economically distressed area. Mamacitas Cibernéticas recently submitted to the city of Sunland Park, and the group hopes it will lead to additional support to provide internet and technical training for this region.

"We are trying to get funds to reach populations here that need digital literacy skills because technology is advancing so fast and if the community doesn't keep up, they will suffer," said Chaparro, who holds a Master's degree in public health from Columbia University. "We want to see what their true digital needs are so that we can create educational activities for them."

A big challenge, she said, is that this region has historically been neglected by the state.

"The southern part of Doña Ana County, south of Las Cruces, is one of the most in-need areas in all of the state," Chaparro said. "We have a lot of stereotypes against us. We are a border community, there's anti-immigration circumstances against us, and the people that live here, *hablamos Español*," she said, emphasizing that the Spanish and Mexican history of the region entitle its people to speak Spanish which, she noted, often throws up

boundaries with people in other parts of the state.

“When we go to other parts of New Mexico, especially Albuquerque and Santa Fe, when we start to speak in our own language, they look at us *con estas caras* (with disdainful expressions),” she said.

Continued Chaparro in Spanish: “But you know what? We’re New Mexico.”

## **Personal relationships key to outreach**

A county-by-county analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data by the Southern New Mexico Journalism Collaborative showed that 12.7% of Southern New Mexico residents are immigrants, compared with 7.8% in Northern New Mexico. The analysis also found that the southern 13 county governments received a total of \$117.1 million in federal ARPA funds, while the more populous northern counties received \$289.57 million.

Nearly 30 percent of Sunland Park residents live in poverty and most – about 85 percent, according to the U.S. Census – do not speak English. While government records indicate that most of their homes have a broadband internet subscription, the reality is that the digital divide brought on by COVID-19 more strongly affects immigrant households, a key population along the United States-Mexico border.

(<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/digital-divide-hits-us-immigrant-households-during-covid-19>)

Recruiting participants for government-related programs is not an easy task in Spanish-speaking immigrant communities with limited internet abilities. But Mamacítas Cibernéticas relied on personal relationships – “not Facebook, no way,” said Chaparro – as well as an extra incentive: A \$25 gift card for Walmart for those who attended, another strategy at reaching the moms of the area.

Mamacítas Cibernéticas, composed of a group of about 10 community

members with inroads into the Southern New Mexico Hispanic region, have been deliberate in following a strategy that appeals to Spanish-speaking, older women. In addition to the Walmart gift cards, they distributed bilingual flyers targeting Hispanic community gathering spots, spoke at school events, and conducted direct phone calls to reach their key target of Hispanic moms.

"It is critical to reach the mothers," said Luce Rubio, communication coordinator for Doña Ana County, who was involved early in the effort to help the group organize. "She's the one. She decides which church you go to, which school you go to. Yes both parents guide you, but normally it is the mom's decision. She keeps the family together, she figures out what they wear, where they should go to get help, and from who," she said. "She is the judge of character. She knows where to go and where not to go, for her to feel empowered and for her to determine the direction where the family needs to go. She is critical for the success of the community, to connect the available resources."

By bringing residents together, including older generations, and creating serious dialogue around a social challenge like the digital divide, organizers appear to be tapping into and elevating values that are esteemed in Hispanic and Latino communities. Indeed, at least some researchers see a tie between strong social support networks among Hispanics and Latinos and comparatively positive health outcomes that seem counterintuitive in light of other racial and economic disparities they face.

"As a group, Hispanics and Latinos tend to have cultural values that really emphasize those social ties – collectivism, the importance of family, the importance of interpersonal harmony and, critically, the importance of including older generations in the acute social fabric," said University of Arizona researcher John Ruiz in a [2021 article from the university](#).

## **Resident: Internet abilities divide generations**

Mamacítas Cibernéticas is not a formal nonprofit and relies upon the El Paso Community Foundation as its fiscal agent. Its primary mission is outreach – “the *chanclas* (flip-flops) on the ground,” Chaparro explained.

“We are specialized in community input because we are from the community. We have spent years working with the community,” she said.

The group’s goal was to reach about 40 people through two focus groups, and they were able to bring together 35, all women with one man, and “the majority over 50 years of age and of Mexican descent,” Chaparro said.

During one of the focus groups, Sunland Park resident Sara Rangel expressed one of her concerns about the increasingly digitized society.

“The young people are having a different experience from the older ones,” she said. “The internet is creating a great separation between generations.”

But if the older generations learn the internet, Rangel said, that means communication between the younger and the older residents through texts, emails, social media “can be used for us to get together again.”

“There are people who know the internet, and those who don't. And the ones that don't, they're being left behind,” said Rangel. “I like the program to bring the internet instruction to older people because often we don't know the first thing to do. We don't know email, we don't know how to fill out applications, or to get access for medical appointments. And with the pandemic, everything is changing. You pay your bills online, you access your bank online. If you don't know the internet, it makes it hard to maneuver yourself through the world. Everything is moving in a way that we can't reach. It's beyond us.”

## **Residents ask for internet classes**

Focus group attendee Maria Guadalupe Padilla of Sunland Park said “we need a lot of programs.”

"That's the only way we will learn," she said. "So hopefully they will provide some classes."

Her friend, Maria Villanueva, agreed and added with a laugh: "When you are older nothing sticks, but we are willing to learn it."

Rosa Pena, another focus group member, recounted an experience she had at a doctor's visit.

"They said 'go ahead and sign in on this tablet.'" she said. "And I looked at it, I didn't even know what to do. And I'm not the only one who doesn't know. All of the older ones who have to go to the doctor, we don't know."

Pena added that her children sometimes forget the difficulties older people face when attempting to use the internet.

"I have four children, and one asked me how it is possible that I don't know the internet, and I say, 'Hey, you learn those things in school but me, I went to school in Juárez long ago. We need to motivate ourselves and learn it. It will only benefit us because truly we don't know anything about it.'"

Carolina Flores, an older woman from Chaparral who attended the Sunland Park focus group, said she is alarmed at how the lack of internet knowledge "can determine where you go."

"Even restaurants," she said. "Often it is not a person who attends us, but it is a computer. If we don't know the computer, if we don't know the windows and the buttons, we are lost."

Flores said that it's important that whoever is instructing older people on the use of the internet must understand that the lessons must be simple, designed for people who are stepping with little online knowledge.

"It has to start with learning the basics," she said.

## Report could serve as blueprint

The report, organizers said, should be used as a blueprint for other Southern New Mexican Hispanic communities. Organizers hope that school districts, government bodies, and other nonprofits will use the data to apply for additional funding for culturally sensitive technical training.

A limitation of the data gathered for the Sunland Park area is that it doesn't include younger generations and it included only one man, meaning there are other perspectives not captured in the report.

Mario Juarez-Infante, city manager for Sunland Park, said from the initial needs assessment, a ground plan will be developed to reach out to different high-speed internet partners – internet service providers, state government officials and others – to discuss the required services and associated costs to help close the digital divide. Funding could come “through a number of avenues,” he said, including additional ARPA funds, capital outlay funds or monies from the federal Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.

A staffer with U.S. Senator Ben Ray Luján, D-New Mexico, recently applauded the city for supporting data collection among residents because it will be a key step to help apply for significant grant funding that will become available to help close gaps.

Eventually, Mamacítas Cibernéticas can evolve into a collection of other groups with the same concept – like Abuelitas Cibernéticas (Cibernetical Grandmas) -- “each with their own little names and identities to contribute to an overall Comunidad Cibernéticas,” Chaparro said.

After one focus group session, dozens of older women, still hyped from the discussion, gathered to collect their Walmart gift cards. “High fives all around,” said one, bringing on cheers from the others.

As Chaparro watched the cheerful crowd dissipate from the conference



room, she was visibly moved. "I was blown away, and I'm happy about what we learned," she said. "We always need the community side of it for things to shine. We need everybody to get on board with resources, with motivation, with commitments so that we can meet that goal and move forward."

*Reyes Mata III is a freelance journalist who worked with the Southern New Mexico Journalism Collaborative to cover COVID-19 and pandemic recovery from a solutions-reporting lens. For info, visit [www.southNMnews.org](http://www.southNMnews.org) or [surNMnoticias.org](http://surNMnoticias.org)*