

Emotional Support in Times of COVID-19: A Latinx Community Initiative

Dear Editor:

Even though Latinx individuals are only 6% of the state’s population, they comprise 20% of the COVID-19 cases in the state as of September 10, 2020.¹ COVID-19 has affected not only the health and finances of Latinx communities, but also their mental health. Latinx individuals were already facing longstanding inequities in their capacity to access mental health services,² and COVID-19 created additional barriers. To address immediate needs, the Latino Health Council (LHC) of Dane County, in conjunction with several agencies from the Latino Consortium for Action, set up a comprehensive initiative to support the Latinx community.

This initiative has been deployed by a team of 20 volunteers who have dedicated over 500 hours to the creation of educational materials and have performed emotional support phone calls with community members. Overall, over 25 videos have been locally produced by well-known and respected mental health experts, who use culturally and linguistic appropriate messages that are relevant to the community to promote coping behaviors, reduce anxiety, and support resilience.³ These videos have been seen over 1,500 times.

To provide brief emotional and social support for Spanish speaking individuals, a very strict and step-by-step protocol was put in place to assure that individuals understood that the phone calls

were for emotional support and were not intended to serve as therapy services. Volunteers are qualified mental health providers and/or community members trained for this purpose. Additionally, as older adults were most likely to be isolated from other family members, a peer-to-peer support was established for them to facilitate connections and sharing of available resources. Over 400 individuals have been served through these initiatives.

Furthermore, the Latino Health Council is planning to start providing emotional support and referral to individuals diagnosed with COVID-19 and also to provide guidance and emotional support to parents and guardians who are dealing with new challenges, such as keeping children and teenagers engaged in virtual learning.

As the chronicity of this crisis extends, it is important for health care providers to recognize present barriers for health care and, also, the implications that isolation, unemployment, and illnesses are having in our community. As new programs or strategies develop, it is important to include organizations currently serving Latinx individuals in the design process to assure that clients will receive culturally and linguistically appropriate services and that the programs are sustainable over time.

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