

LC 13 - Su Casa Hispanic Center

1. What was the mission of your community partner and how did COVID impact execution of that work? How did COVID impact your service-learning experience as a student?

Su Casa Hispanic Center serves to provide tools to promote self-sufficiency among the poor and vulnerable of Cincinnati's immigrant population. Their mission is to be a place where clients who come to the US looking to better their lives and the lives of their families can find community among other members of their culture while gaining strategies to maintain health and success in their new city. Su Casa achieves this mission through programs and services according to the needs of the community in a way that engages clients, empowers them to minister to themselves, and establishes a culture of empathy towards immigrants in their chosen home of Cincinnati.

The COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted Su Casa's ability to serve as a gathering space for members of the Latinx community due to social distancing requirements. Common themes discovered among clients of Su Casa included feelings of isolation from family and friends, which were amplified by the inability to attend Su Casa events and utilize resources to seek interpersonal connections. Also, the services and classes that Su Casa regularly offers to its clients were either put on hold or moved to a virtual platform during the pandemic, limiting access to these crucial tools. This exacerbated the gap between access to resources because not all clients have access to reliable technology.

Furthermore, in a community where accessing safe, affordable, bilingual, and adequate health care is already made difficult by a host of factors, COVID reduced the access to in-person care for this population in a way that Su Casa found difficult to combat. Language barriers, concerns surrounding documentation status, unreliable transportation, and numerous other factors are existing obstacles to appropriate health care for their clients. Reduced available medical resources and fear to seek medical attention during the pandemic decreased that access even further. This fact is made more disconcerting given that a high proportion of Su Casa's clients were essential workers with high rates of exposure to the virus.

One particular need voiced by Su Casa was the increased need for access to mental health services for Latinx immigrants in a time when they were sought more than ever. Isolation, misinformation, and the dearth of bilingual resources have made the pandemic a particularly trying time for members of this population, worsening the mental health of adults and children alike. Specific stressors surrounding the health of loved ones, the political climate, stigma, and job insecurity have created a need for mental health resources and education that is not being met by our community at large.

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As students seeking to be of service to Su Casa and their clients, we found difficulty entering into their community because of the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. We had to learn to meet the requests of the organization through virtual methods with which no party was fully comfortable. The majority of us also missed the opportunity to spend time at Su Casa engaging with clients which would have been the best way to fully understand their needs and perspective.

2. How did COVID impact the community and clients served by your community partners?

Key Findings-

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1aOQDWjLN7CAqTTWqYnodxbcdi4EExQK3Lh1I708bKhM/edit?usp=sharing>

The Hispanic/Latino community was heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. We were able to initially have a conversation with Su Casa's staff on the impacts of COVID that they've seen from their clients. Su Casa's staff mentioned clients' struggles with mental health, insufficient funds for rent and living expenses, frequent exposure as frontline workers, insufficient employment, language barriers, access to health-related resources, and racism. Specifically, Su Casa emphasized the impact on undocumented individuals. Individuals without documentation were uniquely impacted by the pandemic by inadequate access to health resources and other resources, such as stimulus checks, that could have helped them through the pandemic.

Many members of the community work on the frontline, in the service industry. This type of employment puts them at increased risk for contracting COVID because they do not have the luxury of being able to work from home. Additionally, we have heard anecdotes of employers in this industry threatening to fire employees for taking the necessary time off to isolate/quarantine. Often, undocumented members of this community, live paycheck-to-paycheck, were prevented from receiving government financial assistance, therefore, many undocumented community members continued to risk exposure to COVID by working. The anxiety and fear of contracting the virus at work and infecting vulnerable children and elderly family members at home adversely affected the mental well-being of many in the Hispanic/Latinx community.

There were also barriers to receiving health care during the pandemic in the Hispanic/Latino community. Many were wary of receiving health-care services due to their undocumented status. There is also an additional language barrier in that there is a lack of vaccination sites that offer information in Spanish. Limited health literacy and health insurance coverage in this community is frequent and severely decreases access to health services. Our partners at Su Casa also added that a lack of

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awareness of resources, a complicated health system, and a lack of accessible transportation were also points that they made when documenting some of the barriers that community members faced when trying to access care.

In addition to these factors affecting the Hispanic Latino community in the United States, the COVID-19 pandemic has also deepened the stress and disparities impacting community level barriers such as mental health stigma. For instance, it is well established that social ties correlate with better physical and mental health outcomes. Social isolation - fewer close relationships, smaller social networks, and lower perceived social support - is associated with depressive symptoms. The social interactions and connections that COVID-19 has made more challenging may be related to increased coping abilities when encountering stress (such as the pandemic) and providing the individual a sense of self-worth and purpose. The pandemic has also compounded long-standing racial disparities. The Hispanic/Latino population faces: an increased risk for contracting COVID-19, decreased access to testing and treatment services, an increased risk of becoming infected due to working in service industries, and an increased likelihood of living in housing situations that make it difficult to social distance or self-isolate. Therefore, it is no surprise that a recent Pew Research report indicated that Hispanic/Latinos are more likely than the general U.S. population to see COVID-19 as a major threat to their health and finances. While this population is susceptible to adverse mental health outcomes, it is often difficult for undocumented individuals to seek mental health services. The fear of deportation, lack of healthcare access, and general stigma surrounding seeking help for mental health are just a few examples of barriers faced by this population.

3. How might students and physicians advocate for the needs of your partners and their community? What are needs that are particularly need of support at this time?

The population that Su Casa serves is one of the most vulnerable communities in the nation. The Latinx and Hispanic community of Cincinnati are especially vulnerable because many members lack legal documentation and are primarily Spanish-speaking. These intersecting identities have contributed to the marginalization of this community during COVID. Because of this marginalization, it is especially important for students and physicians to advocate on behalf of this community. The most pressing needs they are facing now during the pandemic include economic strain, access to vaccines and vaccine education, and childcare. Students and physicians can advocate for the needs of the Latinx community by ensuring that their voices are heard and that they have the necessary information/resources to make educated decisions for themselves and their families. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this issue is more pressing than ever and has exposed a number of shortcomings in the medical community's reach to some of the most vulnerable members of society.

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Despite the best efforts of the local, state, and federal organizations to promote pandemic-prevention measures such as vaccination, there still remains a significant gap to reaching the Latinx community here in Cincinnati. For example, much of the currently-available information on how to access affordable healthcare, COVID vaccine information, and childcare is only available in English. Therefore, there is a great need for Spanish-speaking individuals to help translate materials and information to Spanish. There are a number of organizations in the Cincinnati area who dedicate themselves to helping their vulnerable population such as Su Casa, Good Samaritan Free Health Center, and CrossRoads Health Center. Some of their services include helping provide healthcare services at a reduced or free rate, directing clients to mental health services, and counseling some community members on pathways to legal citizenship. In addition to being aware of the language barrier that many Latinx and Hispanic patients face, it is important for physicians to be aware that the majority of immigrants in Cincinnati are uninsured and therefore will most likely need to access financial assistance in order to pay for healthcare. In the setting of a hospital, it is particularly important that physicians are conscientious of the fact their Spanish-speaking and uninsured patients will need to talk to a social worker about applying for financial assistance and may need an interpreter to carry out the process.

Our service project last year focused on the need for mental health services in Spanish. Our colleagues at Su Casa expressed that their clients were not only bearing the financial brunt of Covid-19 with no support, but they also had very limited mental health resources during this collectively traumatic time. The existing disparities on mental health were further exacerbated by the pandemic. In order to address this, the focus of our service learning project was addressing the need for mental health resources in Spanish and giving participants the tools they need to identify when they need professional help versus when (and how) they can cope on their own. Physicians can do their part to advocate for this community and reduce mental health disparities in the Hispanic/Latinx community by being aware of the impacts that the pandemic can have on the mental health of this community as well as being aware of the mental health resources in the community directed towards the Hispanic/Latinx community.

The economic strain from the pandemic on the Hispanic/Latinx community has been large. Our partners at Su Casa shared with us that many of the population they serve has been affected by

In addition, we tried to integrate direct financial relief into our project by putting our project funding toward gift cards that we raffled off to class participants. Originally, we considered providing Kroger cards to specifically help subsidize the cost of groceries. However, we realized that some of the recipients may have other establishments they prefer to purchase food from that may sell products that they are

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more familiar with cooking from their individual cultures. Therefore, we decided to distribute Visa gift cards instead to allow them more financial freedom.