

Deciphering the gaps, Health Officer, Latinx providers talk COVID disparities

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In an effort to address persistent disparities in COVID-19's impacts on the local Latinx community, Humboldt County Public Health Officer Ian Hoffman recently met with LatinoNet, a network of service providers like Open Door Community Health Clinics, Paso a Paso, Promotores, the Humboldt County Office of Education and Public Health that are dedicated to advocating for a healthier Latinx community in Humboldt County.

The meeting, Hoffman's first public discussion with the providers, focused on what can be done to address the disparities — which exist both in COVID-19 case rates and vaccination efforts and mirror statewide and national trends — in the county's Latinx population.

In July, Humboldt County's COVID-19 dashboard highlighted the disproportionate COVID-19 case rates in the local Latinx and Hispanic communities, noting they accounted for 22 percent of COVID-19 cases while

only making up 12 percent of the population. The disparity has only grown since and as of April 9, Humboldt County Latinx residents made up 25 percent of positive COVID-19 cases to date.

County vaccine data, meanwhile, has seen a similar trend, with Latinx county residents falling behind on receiving their COVID-19 shots. According to the Public Health dashboard, only about 10 percent of Humboldt's Latinx and Hispanic population are fully vaccinated, compared to 19 percent of the general population.

"We know that there is a disproportionate effect of COVID-19 in this community and that's why, from our standpoint in Public Health, and also personally, as a physician taking care of this community for a long time, it's important that we address this," Hoffman said.

Lara Weiss, a Public Health deputy branch director who also attended Friday's meeting, said LatinoNet invited Hoffman to speak with the group and offer an update on the pandemic and Public Health's efforts to provide equitable vaccine clinics. But Hoffman said the meeting was also an opportunity for him to hear from the providers about what barriers and gaps in care and outreach they were seeing.

Hoffman began his presentation talking about his background working with different Latinx communities in Santa Rosa and the Bay Area with organizations like La Clinica de la Raza in Oakland and Kaiser Permanente in San Francisco. He said he learned to give culturally sensitive care to members of the Latinx, Spanish-speaking community, which he said would transfer into a better understanding of how Public Health approaches culturally competent health policies.

Hoffman talked about Public Health's rollout of COVID-19 vaccine clinics, acknowledging the signup process has been confusing at times, with a shortfall of vaccine doses, exceedingly high demand and eligibility limitations. But Hoffman said Public Health's goal is to ensure vaccine equitability among those in the Latinx community and guarantee that any Latinx resident seeking a COVID-19 vaccine feels comfortable and confident before, during and after their appointment.

"We've taken some steps at Public Health to make sure that when a Spanish-speaking person needs a vaccine, that they feel comfortable and confident that their needs will be met and, most importantly, [provide] Spanish-language information," Hoffman said.

Public Health is working on a few new interventions, including sponsoring California Department of Public Health's "Let's Get to ImmUnity" integrated media campaign with both English and Spanish ads on local news channel 3, as well as planned mass vaccination events in more rural areas of the county with the help from Open Door.

And now that eligibility is open to all residents age 16 and older, Hoffman emphasized the importance of organizations serving the Latinx community helping to spread information on the vaccine rollout and the switch to the state's My Turn website (www.myturn.ca.gov). But the message Hoffman kept repeating was that the county's Joint Information Center (441-5000) is standing by and ready to take any questions, including those in Spanish, about the vaccine and vaccination clinics.

During the meeting, however, it became clear there may be a disconnect between county Public Health and service providers looking to direct clients and patients to accurate information about COVID-19 and vaccines in Spanish.

“I continue to hear that there’s not clear and correct information in Spanish that people know where to access,” LatinoNet board member Michelle Postman said, alluding to a survey by Jorge Matias, another LatinoNet board member, that found most Spanish-speaking local residents didn’t know where to go for accurate COVID-19 information. “I feel like we try and we don’t think that we’re doing that but we don’t know where the gap is, and I also know that Public Health is really stretched, there’s only so much we can do, and so I’m just curious if there’s one thing, one magical thing that can happen. Would it be like showcasing Latin[x] leaders in the community on commercials like, ‘Hey I’ve got my shot and this is working,’ or would it be to have a website? What would be the magical thing that you might spend time on to make things better if we had the capacity?”

Postman’s comments led to a discussion about the best way to get information to the Spanish-speaking Latinx community, prompting Hoffman to stress that the JIC is dedicated to putting out a clear, conscious message in English and Spanish.

“All of the materials on [the JIC website, social media pages] have been vetted by Spanish speakers,” he said. “They’re scientifically accurate. They try to meet the cultural sensitivity that we talked about, as well. I would say that if we’re going to put anything out there, that’s the central message.”

Hoffman urged the groups at the meeting to use the resources on the Humboldt Health alert website and promoted by the Joint Information Center and push them out to the Spanish-speaking community. And if there’s one phone number the groups get to their clients in the coming weeks, he said it should be the JIC’s: 441-5000.

In an email sent to the *Journal*, Matias, in his capacity as a LatinoNet board member, said his survey found most Latinx and Hispanic residents didn’t feel they had clear and correct information in Spanish about who can and can’t obtain the COVID-19 vaccine and that they felt they didn’t have a specified place to call to find more information in their language. Many, Matias said, didn’t feel had enough information about how effective vaccines are.

Many people, Matias added, are afraid of costs, side effects and needing more medical interventions due to possible side effects, while others worry they aren’t eligible to receive the vaccine because of their documentation status. But Hoffman confirmed during the meeting that the only documentation those seeking a vaccine will need is any type of form with a name that matches the name on the appointment or a parental consent form for those 16 and 17 years old.

These, Hoffman added, are the types of questions that could be answered by the JIC.

The county JIC has been actively translating information into Spanish, including uploading social media posts in Spanish, but it seems they have yet to amplify those messages to community providers and advocacy

groups in an effort to get that information to community members who may not follow county social media accounts or can't navigate the county's website.

Matias also told the *Journal* that there's a lot of information that spreads through social media that confuses Latinx and Hispanic residents, including misinformation and conspiracy theories, which was addressed during the meeting between LatinoNet and Hoffman.

If Public Health hears of any misinformation or any disinformation spreading throughout the community, Hoffman said it would address it and correct it immediately. But he also cautioned there's a balance between correcting and amplifying.

Hoffman then asked attendees about the types of misinformation they were hearing and someone mentioned a conspiracy theory about the COVID-19 vaccine causing future fertility issues.

"That's one of the biggest pieces of misinformation that's got a stronghold in a lot of communities," Hoffman said. "There's absolutely no evidence that this vaccine has any effect on fertility."

Nationwide, there have been reports of vaccine hesitancy in communities of color because of historical acts of genocide in healthcare settings, which was also mentioned by attendee Maria Ortega.

"I feel like all of these organizations and clinics and community organizations have a responsibility to be sensitive about that (fertility) issue and not dismiss anybody, because they're valid concerns, especially historically and worldwide there's been actual efforts to change communities of color and their population impacts," Ortega said. "Just be mindful about where they're coming from."

Hoffman agreed with Ortega about being mindful and understanding of where those concerns take root, noting the importance of recognizing the impact of historical events and communities' lived experiences in providing culturally sensitive care.

"These are difficult things to navigate exactly, and I think if those are the barriers that we're really seeing out there, they need to be addressed, obviously," Hoffman said. "But I'm not sure at this point exactly what all the barriers are ... My hope is that, mostly, that gap is because of eligibility and lack of vaccine and that, as we open it up more broadly like we are doing right now, and we have that language ability ... that we get those messages out there."

The reasons for the gaps in vaccine administration and infection rates may become more clear as the county moves into the expanded phase of its vaccination rollout but, presently, Hoffman urged providers and their clients and patients to look to the JIC for Spanish-language information about the COVID-19 virus and vaccines.

"Thank you so much for inviting me and talking with me," Hoffman said in Spanish, wrapping up the meeting. "I hope that we can do this again soon."

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