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STAY CONNECTED L.A: A MODEL PROGRAM WHERE THE ARTS MEETS PUBLIC HEALTH TO COMBAT COVID-19 AMONG LATINO/LATINX POPULATIONS

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 exacerbated inequalities among Latinos/Latinx populations. The arts and public health community deployed a culturally and language specific campaign to encourage vaccinations and mitigation behaviors. Using varied artistic expressions (murals, outdoor-media, social-media, theater), focus groups, town hall meetings, and a Community Action Board, we delivered COVID-19 messaging. Trained promotores de salud linked clients to social and mental health resources. Pre/post campaign beliefs and behaviors were documented. We provided 848 community vaccination consultations, 558 follow-up appointments, and vaccinated 1,235 high-risk individuals. Data (n=124) revealed two-dose vaccination rates were higher among our sample (93%) compared to the Los Angeles County Latino population (65%). Promotoras clients also had higher vaccination rates than the county Latino population (81% vs 65% respectively). Individuals felt less isolated and exhibited less stress and better sleeping behaviors. Latino artists, public health specialists and community residents effectively combated COVID-19.

KEYWORDS

Art, Public health, COVID-19, Community-based-participatory Research and Multimedia campaign.

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INTRODUCTION

In September of 2022, President Biden declared the COVID-19 pandemic was over. Over 46% of Americans say they have returned to pre-pandemic lives. Yet still millions of Americans, especially those over 65, continue to calculate their risk of catching the virus. Although many activities in the arts world have gone back to pre-pandemic

participation levels, other areas remain with little gains. Some communities were particularly hit hard during the pandemic, and concerns may linger among some segments of the population. The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted Latino/Latinx communities in the United States and Los Angeles in particular. Public awareness about a pandemic began in March of 2020 when California, the U.S., and multiple countries shut down as the World Health Organization declared a worldwide pandemic. This crisis created an unprecedented increase in the burden of disease, hospitalizations, and deaths among Latino populations who were already suffering from health inequalities compared to Non-Hispanic Whites¹. The shut-down happened at a time when we needed to be most connected to those we loved, to our circles of family, friends and co-workers, resulting in these already vulnerable communities being more isolated than ever. Los Angeles county data in 2021 illustrated large disparities: Latinos represented 49% of the 10.5 million people in Los Angeles County, but 64% of the COVID-19 cases and 53% of the deaths^{2,3}. Health inequities were exacerbated by lack of employment, large food insecurities, lack of technical access, inadequate electronic equipment, fear of the virus, myths and misinformation on vaccines, inability to work from home, use of public transportation to and from work, and mistrust of sources of information⁴. Primary COVID-related concerns in this population and among public health advocates focused on difficulties with prevention behaviors (staying home, wearing masks, washing hands, staying six feet apart), challenging employment settings, hesitancy about vaccines, and difficulties getting them^{4,5}. Individuals, families, and entire communities were receiving voluminous amounts of information coming from many different sources such as Facebook, acquaintances, and public health experts on TV with changing information as the pandemic evolved⁶. Divided emotions and socio-determinants of health^{7,8} and political affiliation took center stage and were shaping who got the vaccine, who completed all needed main doses, who got boosters, or followed stay at home and mask orders,

who got sick, who was hospitalized, who died and who did not.

We produced a multimedia art meets public health campaign which was community-based and participatory with stakeholder engagement. The campaign consisted of digital, social media, outdoor, and community performances to inform and encourage COVID-19 mitigation behaviors and vaccinations among Latinos/x in the eastside of Los Angeles. The campaign took place from September 2020 to September 2021 at a cost of \$250,000 with funding from the W. M. Keck Foundation to the University of Southern California (USC). The overall objective of the campaign was to counter misinformation, encourage mask wearing, social distance, hand washing and vaccinations. Support from trained *promotores de salud* (lay Community Health Workers: CHWs) helped connect individuals to vaccinations, and provide social resources, referrals to health and mental health services, to food, and housing support. We worked with CBPR principles, engaging academic and community scientists and the arts community to build on the tradition of cultural artistic expressions in the Latino/x community and provide social resources to the community. We trained *promotores de salud* (CHWs) as community vaccine navigators (CVNs), building upon their experiences and knowledge to integrate new knowledge on COVID-19 for mutual benefit of both partners. In addition, the CVNs received training in mental health strategies, resources, and referrals and suicide prevention information, so they could be well equipped to connect individuals with mental health needs to the available expert professional organizations. We disseminated to all partners our findings. They in turn provided continuous feedback that was utilized to make program modifications. We disseminated any new knowledge gained and promoted co-learning in regular monthly meetings in an empowering process to attend to the social inequalities.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

A community based participatory research model (CBPR Model)

We utilized Israel's^{9,10} participatory methods that challenged the conventional approach to traditional research by empowering the community to act. This participatory work focused on development of a multifaceted-multimedia arts meets public health campaign that engaged the local arts community, youth groups, and public health and mental health experts. One of the major principles was mutual learning and joint decision making between project members and community advisors. It began by identifying current data on COVID-19 in the Latino/x community in the east side of Los Angeles, using the USC Understanding Coronavirus in America Survey⁴ and Los Angeles County public health data² and sharing on a regular basis information and evolving data with community representatives and key opinion leaders who had a strong history of engagement on public and social health issues in the community. From this initial work, a community advisory action board composed of community stakeholders shared purpose emerged, and the Stay Connected Los Angeles (SCLA)¹¹ campaign was conceptualized and developed.

Community Advisory Action Board (CAAB)

A community advisory action board (CAAB) was formed and convened monthly for one year to guide the project. Different from regular community advisory boards, this action board not only provided advice, but also made programmatic decisions. Its members acted as agents of change for the project and where the project's voice in the community. This group actively influenced the direction and decision-making of the program and made modifications to ensure we were responsive to community needs. Their role was strengthened with monthly updates by our team using current and reliable data on the changing pandemic. The CAAB would carry the torch on COVID-19 related messaging and support the implementation of multiple art-based strategies that would deliver public health messages. They in turn were informed by community residents who provided their opinions through town hall meetings and focus groups. The CAAB was composed of 15

organizations and individuals representing the Latino community on the Eastside of Los Angeles. The CAAB, with ideas initially generated by our community artists, helped the project develop our primary campaign sentiment and message, agreed upon by consensus, i.e., "*Preserve Life: Vaccinate for yourself, for your family and your community*". The presentations at monthly meetings of up-to-date scientific information on COVID-19's evolving situation, by geographic area, was based on the CBPR Model principles of mutual learning and joint decision making. It allowed all parties to be equally informed, via a trusted source about the latest findings that impacted the local communities, while we learned from each other about the implications of the data in the communities engaged in the project. CAAB members were paid for their participation and were joined periodically by the ten community artists selected to develop COVID-related projects in east Los Angeles for direction and decision-making.

Art meets public health campaign strategies

Science and art are both methods of research and investigation. Both art and science reach the minds of individuals, providing evolving ideas, tests theories, and bring together expressions of life in unique and creative ways. By merging these two ways of inquiry and expression, we envisioned a transformative process that would generate urgently needed community change. Much of the academic-public health driven side of the work in SCLA was carried out by a team of five key academic investigators with expertise in public health and/or mental health, three staff and four students, in consultation with the CAAB and eleven community artists. A request for proposals sought messaging that would have multi-generational appeal, reflect community cultural values, and upbeat messaging about COVID precautions, which were the themes agreed upon by the community. Local artists and organizations submitted ideas on COVID messaging and their chosen artistic medium for message delivery. Proposals were summarized and submitted to the staff and CAAB for feedback, and final decisions on 10 "winning entries" were made by the CAAB. Focus groups of community residents and town hall meetings of interested community

representatives were convened in English and Spanish to review the winning proposals and offer suggestions for the project team and artists.

The Art Projects

Ten grants ranging between \$3000 to \$30,000 were awarded to the artists and non-governmental community organizations for development of their creative products and intervention strategies. The final projects were diverse in their media and engagement approaches. Each art project was paired with one of the academic investigators and a student for regular communications. The artists were also encouraged to join the CAAB meetings on a quarterly basis. This facilitated regular feedback on the art projects and cross communication between faculty, staff, students, CAAB members and artists. The projects included: Honey and Smoke who took over our website and managed social media; named “Educate to Eradicate” a six weeks workshop on the multi-faceted aspects of spoken word and performance using poetry as tools for education and empowerment;. Live art exhibitions were held in the community by youth in the Boys and Girls Club of the West San Gabriel Valley and the Eastside. A virtual art gallery of artworks was displayed during our Digital Arts Festival online for Stay Connected Los Angeles. Plaza De La Raza¹¹ created virtual plays which premiered on YouTube and are also available online at our SCLA Digital arts festival “website. “One Step at a Time” was a community project that utilized Place and Space concepts to revitalize the University Hills Heidelman Stairway (187 steps).The artist worked with local community members to refurbish the stairway and included imagery of COVID-19 resiliency; a multi-session workshop on the fundamentals of playwriting in the time of COVID was produced to empower community members to have a voice to create a healing outlet, dispelling misinformation; posters and/or GIFs for use on social media sites reflecting mask wearing and encouraging preventive behaviors; The East Los Angeles Community Youth Center, Weingart East Los Angeles YMCA Boys and Girls Club, encouraged youth artists to produce posters for other youth on preventive behaviors. Two murals for

use in outdoor media through the east Los Angeles communities.

Primary Theme

The primary message agreed upon by consensus for the campaign was “Preserve Life” It was created by the East L.A. artist, Paul Botello, who developed two culturally grounded and language specific murals supporting this message. These images (Figures No.1 and No.2) were reproduced in outdoor media, prominently displayed as murals on billboards, lamp-post banners, and bus benches in Boyle Heights, El Sereno and Lincoln Heights areas of Los Angeles. One of the images depicts a Latino multigenerational family with varied vulnerability and mixed vaccination status, and another image included a Latino nurse giving out vaccinations to a varied group including a mother and child, an elderly person, a person with physical disabilities and an essential worker. Figure No.1: Stay Connected LA Murals by Paul Botello with the message “Preserve Life: Get Vaccinated”. We created derivatives of the chosen artwork that were then displayed via our social media messaging to reach over 400 community organizations and promotional items (key chains, blankets, postcards, stickers, posters) that were sent by mail to community partners for distribution.

Social media

Social media messaging in response to the changing pandemic was developed and delivered almost daily via SCLA accounts on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. We developed a SCLA website for the project (<https://www.stayconnectedla.com/>) and drove people to our website via social media, and messages sent to our more than 300 partner organizations and the USC community website. Social media posts promoted SCLA’s artists’ (Aaron Gonzalez and Agnes Premkumar) work, along with updated COVID-19 vaccine information and resources both in English and Spanish. We posted COVID-19 vaccine locations in the East area of Los Angeles, COVID-19 vaccine eligibility and ways to get a COVID-19 test. Messages from the campaign were produced in short segments for social media use, including 30 seconds postings, short videos, and visuals. A series of lighthearted GIFs were posted

on GIPHY, a popular platform for GIFs around the world, which depicted Latinos/x of all ages wearing a mask. This showcased notable locations in East Los Angeles. Another person developed GIFs and educational flyers in English and Spanish to encourage individuals to wash their hands, stay six feet apart, and to get the COVID-19 vaccine. These were posted on the USC and SCLA websites.

A digital arts festival on COVID-10 mitigation

All materials were gathered and organized into a website developed by Honey and Smoke, our creative advertising agency. During August 2021, a digital arts festival took place on our SCLA website (<https://www.stayconnectedla.com/>) which drew viewers to the various campaign materials, and elements. Information about the project, its community-based participatory nature, the data that drove decision making, implications for policy and the various art forms appear on this site.

Community Vaccine Navigators (CVNs)

We worked with *promotores de salud* that we trained as CVNs to reach particularly vulnerable high-risk populations (seniors and families) with education and social resources support, health, and mental health referrals and who facilitated vaccinations. We worked with *promotores de salud* (community members who were already trained as lay community health workers), to become Community Vaccine Navigators (CVNs) with special training related to COVID-19 education, resources delivery and follow up during the pandemic, and understanding of mental health stressors and resources.

Training

The preparation of community health workers involved a 4-day four-hour-per-day training to prepare them as *Community Vaccine Navigators (CVN)*. The training was patterned after and delivered by the Clinical Translation Institute (CTSI) and Stay Connected staff, in partnership with our sister program at USC, Vaccinate L.A. It included the latest information on COVID, including risks, and prevalence by neighborhood, mental health issues, social isolation, frequently asked questions, and how to do self-care in a stressful environment. It was delivered mainly by highly trained promoter as

de salud with experience in COVID. Trainees also viewed a 6-minute film on COVID for Latinos/Latinx developed by our Vaccinate LA sister program (*Of Reasons and Rumors*), created by Latino filmmakers, and produced by faculty and students at the USC School of Cinematic Arts and the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. In addition, participants received copies in Spanish of a *fotonovela* on COVID created by the School of Pharmacy via Vaccinate L.A.¹². CVN's also participated in a one day training session on misinformation presented by our partner agency National Alliance for Latino Elected Officials, where we learned about health literacy, how to identify and address misinformation, and how to better handle frequently asked questions on COVID and vaccinations from the community. They received a manual with community resources and current programs, including mental health programs, and other bilingual programs they could refer clients to. Through the training, the CVN's trained, tested for, and subsequently obtained Internal Review Board certificates on Human Subjects and received a certificate of participation in the training.

Six Weeks Social and Mental Health Resources Support Program

The training prepared the CVN's to deliver a six-week social resources and mental health support intervention for vulnerable clients. The program was composed of weekly one-hour interactive social connectedness sessions in which CVN's linked vulnerable individuals (elderly, immunocompromised) to needed resources (food access, financial relief, job opportunities, mental health resources, crisis intervention, suicide prevention services, tutoring for grandchildren, access to technology and equipment, access to vaccinations), and checked in on them regarding any issues they were having or needs. They made referrals to social services and mental health agencies, and answered questions dealing with misconceptions, fears about the safety, effectiveness, availability, and other concerns about the vaccine. Weekly records forms were completed by CVNs and turned in to program staff who entered the data into a qualitative database for future analyses. Notes were taken of any issues

of concern and were discussed and acted upon every week. Sessions were in Spanish, as most of the participants all spoke Spanish.

METHODS

Qualitative methods

We conducted town hall meetings, focus groups with community residents and listened well to our CAAB. For recruitment into the focus group and townhall participation, we sent out flyers to our community networks and a cadre of 400 community-based organizations with whom we had previously participated in joint programs. Focus groups and town hall meetings lasted approximately 1.5 hours and were conducted for both English and Spanish-speaking individuals via Zoom, led by a bilingual member of our team. A focus group guide was developed and approved by our University IRB. We asked individuals to complete an anchoring survey with general demographic information to anchor the focus group responses. Town hall participants were asked to provide their opinions on elements being considered for the campaign (messaging and materials) as well as their perceptions about community needs related to COVID.

Quantitative methods

Surveys were gathered in two phases, first, immediate post-campaign exposure and second, approximately 2 months afterward. "We recruited two samples for the post-campaign exposure assessment: a community sample who were adult residents of the eastside of LA, and a sample of the CVN clients. The CVN clients also completed the second follow up assessment". The community sample was originally intended to be recruited through our affiliated Weingart YMCA Food Distribution program. Flyers were sent out with food boxes and bags, and people were handed the flyers and invited to participate when they picked up food at the YMCA. However, due to COVID-19 precautions, this planned recruitment was disrupted. So to respond to COVID-19 restrictions, we opened the recruitment process online through social media and word of mouth, using a screener to recruit only from our target population. Using online surveys in REDCap, we collected post-campaign data from

community participants, as well as data on mitigation behaviors, knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. The second sample was a client sample of high-risk individuals working with the CVN's. The CVNs recruited these clients from their rosters at Clinicas Monsenor Oscar Romero and followed them for six weeks of weekly support sessions. Weekly qualitative reports were collected by our CVN's related to each client. Surveys were conducted online by a member of our team or a trained CVN. Individuals called an assigned phone number. After completing the survey they received an incentive for their participation in the form of a \$25 gift card per completed survey. Some surveys (due to technology use difficulties among our clients) were conducted by phone using paper and pencil and then entered electronically by staff into our REDcap database. The Redcap database was developed and tested and regularly monitored by members of our team.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Formative Research

Findings on COVID

Throughout the project, we reviewed the data once a month, from Understanding America Survey for Los Angeles County and used it to guide our messaging and information shared with our CAAB and community. Data showed at the beginning of the campaign that compared to the rest of Los Angeles, Latinos were less likely to say they would get the vaccine, less likely to believe that COVID-19 vaccine was important for their health, and less likely to believe that the COVID-19 vaccine was useful (Understanding Coronavirus in America Survey (UAS 274)⁴.

Forty-six (46) community residents via online town hall meetings provided feedback on the concepts and ideas, messaging, and imagery for the campaign. In addition, we met with 25 participants in focus groups held in English (15 participants) and Spanish (10 participants) to gather community members' opinions on the artwork concepts we received by local artists. This allowed us to streamline the type of images and information the community wanted to see in their neighborhoods.

The qualitative data revealed that many in our community thought at the beginning of the pandemic that they wouldn't qualify for the vaccine. They didn't want to give out any personal information, hence would be hesitant to sign up for the vaccine once it was available. They were concerned over immigration issues, being deported, being a public charge. Some expressed they didn't know if they would have to pay for the vaccine and were worried about their lack of health insurance and costs. In addition, qualitative data revealed they had vaccine safety and effectiveness concerns, did not trust general government sources, were receiving misinformation related to the vaccine and the virus, and were overwhelmed by the amount and different sources of information they were exposed to. They were uncertain of what sources to trust. Although there was a lack of trust of government sources overall, respondents stated that they did trust information coming from the Los Angeles mayor's office and the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health. They also trusted *promotores de salud* (community health workers), pediatricians, their own family, and people they knew to be the best sources of information.

Participants suggested targeting multigenerational audiences and the large immigrant population who had lots of questions. And to also have a focus on youth and young adults whom many thought were the ones infecting (often without knowing) the older segments of the population. They suggested positive messages focused on cultural values such as taking care of family, rather than negative scary messages. The focus groups and townhall participants suggested optimal ways to reach the focused audience. Among these they suggested social media (Instagram, Twitter, Facebook), through public engagement (theater skits, art exhibits), and to provide information via local churches and clinics as information became available. They trusted USC doctors and information. Participants also recommended use of outdoor media, including billboards, posters, and murals, and other signage.

Media Results

Outdoor Media

The winning images produced by Paul Botello were placed on 24 Bus benches (horizontal image), 30 billboards (horizontal image) and 44 lamp post banners (vertical image) during the campaign period. These images were displayed for 24 weeks. Impressions for Billboards total in all three areas are $977,817 \times 24 \text{ weeks} = 23,467,608$ and for the bus benches in all three areas were $1,095,305 \times 24 \text{ weeks} = 26,287,320$. A total viewing of billboards and bus benches was estimated at 49 million plus impressions during the 24 weeks period. These same images were also placed in key chains, small blankets, postcards, stickers, and posters which were distributed to community members and CAAB members at the time of the outdoor media campaign and throughout the East area of Los Angeles. Among those who saw the campaign, 56% saw it via billboards, 43% in posters, 35% via our website, 35% via social media, and 20% via bus benches, murals and lamp posts. Participants stated they felt the images "*motivated people to get vaccinated*", "*taught them the importance of vaccinations*", "*helped them focus on keeping their families safe and healthy*". They were pleased to see that the images were culturally specific, and that the colors, use of Spanish language and inclusion of essential workers and/or a multigenerational family in the images, were relevant to them and their lives. One participant stated that the key takeaway message for him was "*Que todas las personas se vacunen para El bien de todos*" (That all people get vaccinated for the good of all).

Social media

We had a strong social media presence. GIFs and individual images with messages created by Aaron Gonzales and Agnes Premkumar were posted on KSOM social media pages reaching an audience of 1.9 million viewers. Across Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, there were a total of 134 posts, 157 followers, and we reached 123,668 individuals. We partnered with the KSOM social media and posted campaign messaging leveraging this popular site which resulted in 1.9 million views of our Stay Connected Los Angeles campaign messages.

The digital arts festival

The work culminated in a digital arts festival hosted on the SCLA website, during August of 2021. The digital arts festival showcased the main winning artwork as well as all other SCLA COVID-19 related educational work produced including images of hope and expressions of the pandemic developed by youth via the Boys and Girls Club, the theater pieces, and spoken word expressions and presentations by our researchers, staff, and students. The web-based digital arts festival highlighted the various artists and their work. The art festival had a total of 6,800 page views when it launched on August 29th, 2021. The digital arts festival was open for one week, but information remains still today on the website.

Community Vaccine Navigators (promotores de salud) Training

We trained 22 promotores de salud in Los Angeles to become CVN's. Of those, six CVN's reached out to highly vulnerable community members, reaching, recruiting, and retaining individuals from the community during a 6-week social resources program. These CVN's guided 66 clients through the program.

Social Connectedness

Common themes addressed by the 66 clients included mask wearing and coping with quarantine and the pandemic. Many questions arose as the virus situation developed on vaccinations and boosters. Education and referrals were made for mental health services, as well as to sign up for Medicare and Medicaid or other health insurance they qualified for to receive health/and or mental health services, housing, and were signed up for food distribution.

Survey Results

The CVN clients (n=66) had more women and people of Mexican origin, as well as a larger number of foreign-born individuals than the community sample (n=58). They were also less educated, had lower household income, and lacked health care coverage. Overall, as expected, the CVN client sample had worse overall health at the beginning of the study than the community sample. More individuals in the community sample took risks than the CVN sample. More than half (55%) in the community sample attended events with more than

10 people (when events with < 10 were recommended) compared with the CVN client sample (35%) – a 20 percent point difference. Also, a much larger percentage (70%) of the community sample took public transportation to and from work (vs. 37%) in the CVN client sample – a 33 percent point difference. More of the CVN clients (94% than the community sample, 74%) – a 20 percent point difference - avoided large gatherings, and more among the clients (89%) than the community sample (79%) exercised social distancing -a 10 percentage point difference. In addition, more of the client sample (95%) vs the community sample (71%) stayed home when sick a 24-point difference. These data show that overall, the community sample took more risks in the past month than the client sample. After the six weeks of the CVN intervention, the client sample experienced better mental health outcomes they had at baseline. These clients didn't feel as lonely (25% vs 53%), were less dissatisfied with social relationships (43%vs 49%), had less trouble sleeping (27% vs 44%); and were more connected to resources and more engaged in a higher number of mitigation behaviors. While 65% of Latinos in the Los Angeles area had received a vaccine by the close of the project, our samples reached 95% (community sample) and 87% (CVN sample) with at least one dose of the vaccine, evidencing a 22-to-30-point difference.

Baseline and Follow-up Surveys

Knowledge, Attitudes and Behaviors Post-Campaign Exposure

Survey data was obtained from community residents and CVN clients in the east areas of Los Angeles on barriers to health safety behaviors, knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and campaign exposure among 124 participants at baseline(66 CVN clients and 58 community residents) and 66 participants at the follow-up (66 CVN clients). We obtained data on campaign effectiveness on high-risk individuals. Survey data on the outdoor media campaign showed that most of the community (81%) saw the outdoor media campaign compared to CVN clients (33%). Exposure to the campaign was via, 56% billboards, 43% posters, 35% website, 35% social media and 14-20% bus benches, murals, lamp posts. Full

vaccination rates were higher in our samples than in LA Latino/Latinx population. Among those in the CVN client sample that had seen the SCLA campaign, 82% were vaccinated with two doses vs 74% who did not see the SCLA campaign.

Vaccinations

Through our efforts a total of 1,235 individuals were vaccinated, 848 received consultations of different types helping to answer questions and debunk misinformation. We conducted 558 phone calls or follow up calls to individuals with technology or mobile equipment issues to secure vaccinations. We examined the percent 12 years of age and older who were vaccinated with at least one dose during the active campaign period of Stay Connected L.A. We found that in Boyle Heights during March of 2021, 20% had been vaccinated. These numbers rose to 66% in June of 2021, to 78% in September of 2021, 86% in December of 2021 and 88% by March of 2022. For Lincoln Heights during this same period percent vaccinated changed from 17% in March of 2021 to 67% in June, 77% in September, 83% in Dec. 2021 to 85% by March of 2022. For El Sereno, our third focus areas, percentages of 12 or more-year-old who were vaccinated with one or more doses ranged from 20% in March of 2021, to 65% in June of 2021, to 75% in September of 2021, to 81% in December of 2021, ending with 83% in March of 2022.

Discussion

A critically important outcome of the project is that this community participatory campaign, developed by and for communities, helped empower individuals to act on behalf of their own health, and protect the health of their families and the community. Key elements attributed to the success of this program included an active Community Advisory Action Board that met on a regular basis to better understand, act, and provide guidance on next steps along the way and to remove barriers throughout an ever-changing pandemic. It was critical to have the involvement of Latino artists using different mediums of art expression with a relatively consistent message. The utilization of a multimedia approach which included digital arts, outdoor media, social media, and community-based interactions

reached multigenerational audiences in the community to encourage mitigation behaviors.

Our campaign integrated current data, insights from our CAAB and persuasive messages that were culturally relevant and could thus respond to unique needs and barriers faced by the local Latino communities. Through this program we were thus able to bridge access issues that prevented individuals in the Latino community from becoming vaccinated. For example, when it became clear that access issues such as difficulty with appointments and transportation were hindering vaccines, we could turn this data around quickly through our CVN's and online community network to improve access. We reached vulnerable populations and connected them with much needed resources such as food and health care that helped to alleviate fears and improve their mental health status. We contributed to debunking COVID misinformation, addressed vaccine safety and effectiveness concerns, and connected people to needed resources, including making mental health referrals. Importantly we achieved a higher percent vaccination rate than what was expected in the East area of Los Angeles and showed that those exposed to the campaign had a higher vaccination rate with two doses than those not exposed.

Information is being disseminated via reports to policy makers, papers in scientific journals as well as via community outlets. We presented the information on this project to the White House COVID-19 Community Corps and are featured in the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) Art media center. We have also disseminated information via our Coronavirus Pandemic Research Center,¹³ and to elected officials, community agencies, among others. The CVN training component has become a model for the nation. The CVN training produced by the Clinical Translation Science Institute (CTSI) with our Vaccinate Los Angeles partner and in coordination with the National Alliance for Hispanic Health, trained close to 500 community workers in 34 cities across the U.S. and resulted in close to 500,000 shots in arms (Kipke *et al*, 2022), by community workers who were out in the field following these efforts.

This program has certain limitations. It was culturally tailored to Latinos in the East area of Los

Angeles, mostly of Mexican origin. Many were immigrants and mostly Spanish speaking. Latinos in the U.S. are a very heterogeneous group. Our findings are not generalizable to other Latino communities where different types of images may resonate better such as among Central Americans or Caribbean Latinos from Cuba, Puerto Rico, or Dominican Republic. We do feel nevertheless that there is a Latino values commonality in terms of the messaging with a focus on preserving life by vaccinating for yourself, your family, and your community. The messaging for this campaign may well be generalizable to other Latino groups, but more research would be needed.

While COVID mitigating behaviors were the primary concern at the beginning of the project, the regulations regarding mask wearing and social distancing began to change as well as the availability of the vaccine. As COVID-19 evolved and the response to it with CDC orders changed, we moved from focusing on mask wearing, hand washing and staying six feet apart to delivering vaccination information, getting people vaccinated, and producing outdoor messaging on the importance of vaccinations. We stayed the course with a focus on vaccinations and continued with our messages about mask wearing among the immuno-compromised or those who had yet to be vaccinated. Our findings demonstrate that obtaining feedback from the community in a participatory process provided a rich environment to sustain the research through challenging times.

One of the lessons learned was that university, community and artistic representatives may have quite different skills, insights, agendas, and ways of working. Contractual models and understanding of resources may differ widely and require ongoing, frequent communications between the groups to assure continued support, to reduce misunderstandings and to review needs and expectations. Co-learning is a principle of CBPM that is an ongoing need in this kind of project, to build and maintain mutual trust among disparate partners. On a similar note, we thought that each artist would want to do something uniquely creative, but it is possible that all 10 projects could have been integrated more closely.

Another lesson learned is that art can touch people in ways that traditional public health messaging cannot achieve. It can break down hardened reactions to the pandemic, and speak, instead, to important community values that can protect people. We believe this model can work effectively for a variety of health issues that have generated distrust and hesitancy in the past.



Figures No.1 and No.2: Reproduced in outdoor media, prominently displayed as murals on billboards, lamp-post banners

CONCLUSION

As the pandemic ends, still many individuals have concerns regarding their levels of exposure and are also concerned about future pandemics. This sentiment is especially prevalent among the elderly. We presented here a model on the engagement of Latino artists with public health specialists and the community in developing and implementing a participatory multimedia campaign that, at a cost of \$250,000, was highly effective in increasing vaccinations to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. This campaign has implications for reducing health disparities and disease burden in Latino/Latinx communities in other areas beyond COVID-19, and of reaching Latino populations in culturally specific and language appropriate ways. The engagement of community members to inform our direction, and recruitment of artists and an active advisory group is a process that could be tapped and rapidly deployed in the event of another pandemic or other event where culturally tailored health information is urgently needed to generate behavior change. According to the CDC still in 2022 an average of 400 Covid deaths occur in the U.S. every day. As people return to a new pre-pandemic normal, we have learned important lessons. Interventions that bring the arts and scientific community together proved to be fruitful and can be sustainable interventions when planned with and for communities. Given new and old re-emerging diseases, and new predicted pandemics, this approach could be used to educate, inform, and warn the public about potential infectious diseases we may face, from Monkey pox to Polio. As we find a comfortable new post pandemic normal to each of our lives, the arts continue to document the discourse of the people and their response to scientific interventions. Art and science found new commonalities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We declare that we have no conflict of interest.

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