

Community Voices Collected by Community Health Workers during COVID-19

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UTAH DEPARTMENT OF
HEALTH

Office of Health Disparities

Introduction

When emergency situations arise, vulnerable communities are often uniquely impacted. COVID-19 is no exception. In Utah, the pandemic disproportionately burdened vulnerable communities, particularly racial and ethnic minority groups¹

Assistance with basic needs including food, housing, and utilities were common concerns for community members during this crisis. Many community members relied on community health workers for support during the height of the pandemic and continue to rely on that support.

Storytelling has historically served as a way to explore the vulnerabilities in the fabric of our societies, and how the lived experiences of community members were affected by these gaps. Stories serve as a historical archive, so in the future we can take what we learned from the pandemic and leverage it for better outcomes by centering communities.

¹ Lewis NM, Friedrichs M, Wagstaff S, et al. Disparities in COVID-19 Incidence, Hospitalizations, and Testing, by Area-Level Deprivation — Utah, March 3–July 9, 2020. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 2020;69:1369–1373. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6938a4>

In Utah, the Utah Department of Health (UDOH) Office of Health Disparities (OHD) along with countless partners mobilized a collaborative of community health workers from 16 community-based organizations and 12 local health departments to support their communities throughout each wave of the pandemic. The COVID Community Partnership (CCP) Project more formally mobilized community health workers in COVID-19 response.

For the CCP Project, community health workers were asked to submit and share stories every other month throughout the project. These stories were meant to bring the voices of communities who were hit hardest by COVID-19 to light.

Stories were collected from community health workers five times throughout the project. Community health workers also shared stories in an open form. More than 100 stories were shared by community health workers between July 2020 and April 2021.

Stories were analyzed thematically through multiple readings, with three central themes surfacing:

- Peoples' lives are complicated, so their needs are complex.
- The pandemic and peoples' livelihoods are interconnected.
- As vaccination efforts continue, hope grows.

These lived experiences showcase the complexity of peoples' lives, from access to food and rental assistance, to more current barriers of

vaccine distribution. They illuminate the role and work of community health workers as they navigate multiple systems. Ultimately, they demonstrate that health is more than going to a clinic or having access to healthcare. Rather, health encompasses the basic necessities each person needs including food, education, access to the internet, financial stability, a safe home, in addition to access to healthcare. Health is a collective of all aspects of a person's life, and is impacted by a lack in each domain.

A collection of these carefully curated stories is included below. These stories vary in experiences of individuals, communities, cultures, languages, and time periods shared. Stories from different communities have various themes, and showcases experiences of different communities.

As you read, you might consider some of the themes and questions outlined below. They may help you gain a new perspective by delving deeper into each story. This can help you truly understand each experience shared and find deeper meaning in each story.

Navigating Resources: Complexities of Peoples' Needs

People's needs are incredibly complex. These stories highlight how a COVID-19 positive diagnosis impacts multiple facets of an individual's life. As you read, consider how access to resources affects community members who face challenges and systemic barriers.

- How did the pandemic exacerbate the circumstances of vulnerable communities?
- How is access to one resource connected with the ability to access other resources?
- What nuances of family dynamics are impacted by daily life with COVID-19?

Interconnectedness: The Pandemic and Peoples' Livelihoods

As the pandemic worsened, effects on communities festered. During the holidays, typically a time of celebration, many individuals and families were instead quarantined and isolated due to the virus.

Families' worries about access to food, paying rent, and making car payments, overshadowed resting and healing. As you read, consider how feelings of hope changed to feelings of exhaustion, and the types of roles support and resources played.

- How are peoples' livelihoods interconnected with the pandemic?

- What can we learn from experiences of community members?
- How can we use the lessons to better our future?

Growing Hope: Vaccination Efforts

With vaccination efforts, hope began to grow as community health workers continued to support communities.

- How do national narratives of vaccine hesitancy differ from what community health workers shared?
- What different barriers are present in vaccination uptake among vulnerable communities?
- What is the link between vaccination efforts and resource needs among vulnerable communities?

The following stories are shared with permission directly from community health workers' experiences with participants, and are unedited to maintain authenticity of their lived realities.


“The participant contracted COVID-19. A couple weeks after he recovered from COVID-19, he began to have heart issues. He had to have emergency heart surgery. He was given unemployment but then had to give it back as he received a letter stating that due to his inability to work, he did not qualify. The participant had an eviction notice placed on his door for the month of December. We were able to obtain rental assistance and food for him during this month and are in the process of helping him find affordable housing.”

"This individual got tested back in July at the [Hartland] Partnership Center. They found out about their test result and it ended up being positive. They wanted to be in a quarantine shelter just so they can self isolate on their own and not have their mother worry about them or having to take care or have their mother's husband worry about them as well... Because they were already dealing with how to control the symptoms of the virus, they didn't want another thing to worry about. Dealing with the virus in their body was emotionally taxing as it is. Because we had just learned about Salt Lake County's isolation shelter, I immediately connected them to the resource. With the stress they were under, I made sure to reassure them that it is going to be okay and that I will find them a place away from their family to isolate in. In the same night that I contacted the participant, I was able to connect them to the intake nurse. They immediately packed and drove to the site and [were] given instructions. I followed up the next day to see how the intake process went and they shared that it went well. They shared that the isolation center was super friendly and they love the team. They provided food and pretty much everything. The participant was very thankful for the resource we provided.”


“My client needed someone to talk to as well as food assistance. My client was going through some tough times during COVID, she couldn't work due to her catching the virus and her work didn't pay for the days she was being isolated, luckily she was able to pay rent but food was something she was worried about. I helped her with those resources [and] then we stayed on the phone talking about how hard these times are and she was able to express all her concerns and you could tell that she had felt relieved from it.”

“He tested positive for Covid before he needed to start his [chemotherapy] for cancer. He was unable to pay rent and other bills. He also needs some help with medical bills for his cancer treatment. I was able to apply for discretionary funds so he can pay some of his bills and he can continue with his cancer treatment. He has been able to receive help for his treatment and he has [been] able to isolate and he did not have to worry about paying his bills and he could just focus on his cancer treatment.”


“Multi family that were tested positive. They all had to isolate and quarantine for 14 days. They were stressing how they would get food and the wages that would be lost during the 14 days to pay for their mortgage and bills. We were able to send the Covid 19 box through [the] Utah food bank. We connected and AUCH provided assistance with their mortgage. Rotary club was able to assist with \$250 for their utilities. They were very grateful and relieved that they were able to just focus on getting rest and focus on getting better.”




“The participant contracted COVID-19 in November at her place of employment. The employers were not taking the necessary precautions and were aware that people had tested positive but did not inform the employees. She was not paid while in isolation and lost her job. She contracted COVID-19 in the workplace, received no payment, lost her job, and was behind on her rent. I submitted a 211 application for her rent and she returned to her former place of employment. The application was accepted and her rent for the month of December was paid. She just started working again.”



“Their family got COVID all at different times so the participant had to quarantine for longer than two weeks for the times when a new family member got sick. The participant couldn’t work from home based on her work. [The participant] didn’t get paid and got behind on bills, rent, and car payment. I contacted the participant and offered help. The participant had previously sought help with [an organization] before I contacted them, but was required to go to the office to fill out an application even though they were exposed to their family with COVID and had developed symptoms. They [were] told she would get help, but never did. I referred them to [a resource] since their landlord refused to participate in the help from [an organization] for landlords to get rental assistance for tenants. [This resource] was the only option left with funding. We applied to [it] but are still waiting to hear back. The participant has been waiting for the help, but is behind on payments. It has been over a month.”



“The participant had tested positive for Covid-19 and was already struggling financially. They had their first eviction notice prior to their positive result. Participant had let landlord know that they had tested positive and were in a situation where they could not pay rent on time. The landlord served her with documents to send her to court even after giving him the CDC bill that protects them from eviction. The participant was facing eviction with no solution since her landlord was not cooperating. I helped them fill out the CDC bill for her landlord and begin the process of the rental assistance application. Once the landlord denied it, I got into contact with lawyers who help for free. and we contacted the rental assistance program to request a rush due to their situation. Also, a lawyer was able to reach out to them. After the lawyers reached out to them, they found out they were overcharging them rent and had misspelled their name on the documents. The lawyers spoke to him and the rental assistance program kicked in. Their family and them were no longer in eviction status.”



“The participant was homeless. Client is a meth user. Being empathetic and non judgemental. Client stated he was homeless, he was shaking so much that he was having trouble answering questions. He needed help in all areas of questions. I felt empathy for him and he came to be tested no matter his condition.”

This story was submitted in Spanish, the English translation follows on the next page.

“Los inmigrantes decidimos hace mucho tiempo hacer grandes sacrificios, quizás el más doloroso ha sido siempre despedir a nuestros seres amados a la distancia, o saber que esa historia puede ser nuestra, ha sido así por años, salir de Estados Unidos es lo de menos, pero para muchos volver significa arriesgar la propia vida, con COVID-19 el estatus migratorio tampoco importa, hoy el riesgo de viajar nos coloca a todos en el mismo lugar.

COVID-19 nos ha puesto frente a la pérdida de nuestros seres amados mucho antes de lo que tantos pensamos, el hijo que por años ha llevado en alto el nombre y el amor y el ejemplo de sus padres motivando a las generaciones de jóvenes deportistas aquí en Utah, un gran atleta, un padre amoroso, un esposo enamorado, un apasionado por el fútbol como se le llama en América Latina, que con las fuerzas de un campeón, dispuesto a los retos, a reinventarse el, a su equipo y su estrategia, hoy sufre una de las más duras derrotas, haber perdido a su mamá por un virus que no discrimina. Las videollamadas nos han permitido estar ahí, junto a tumbas, entre sollozos, aunque sea solo un instante, a veces diciendo el último adiós, muchas más veces tratando de encontrar resignación pues la última vez que se les vio con vida a esos amados nuestros fue al dejarlos en la sala de emergencias. Y como nos tocó hoy a él y a mi, llorar juntos al teléfono, pensando en algunas de las dulces anécdotas de nuestra infancia en la Ciudad de México.

Elevamos nuestro ruego por las tantas y tantas historias que se han contado en medio de esta pandemia, un día se contará de lo que vivimos, de los que dejaron esta vida en circunstancias que hoy no logramos entender, donde ni los avances, la modernidad, la ciencia, la pobreza o la riqueza alcanzaron para vencer a algo tan diminuto, pero donde ojalá nos regalemos la dicha de amar y celebrar la vida a cada instante, porque comprendemos que tenerla es un don.”

"We immigrants decided a long time ago to make great sacrifices, perhaps the most painful has always been to say goodbye to our loved ones from a distance, or to know that this story can be ours, it has been like that for years, leaving the United States is the least of it, but for many to return means risking their own lives, with COVID-19 the immigration status does not matter either, today the risk of traveling puts us all in the same place.


COVID-19 has put us in front of the loss of our loved ones much sooner than many of us thought, the son who for years has carried high the name and love and example of his parents motivating generations of young athletes here in Utah, a great athlete, a loving father, a loving husband, a passionate fan of soccer, as it is called in Latin America, who with the strength of a champion, ready for challenges, to reinvent himself, his team and his strategy, today suffers one of the hardest defeats, having lost his mother to a virus that does not discriminate. Video calls have allowed us to be there, next to graves, between sobs, even if only for a moment, sometimes saying the last goodbye, many times trying to find resignation because the last time we saw our loved ones alive was when we left them in the emergency room. And as it was his and my turn today, crying together on the phone, thinking of some of the sweet anecdotes of our childhood in Mexico City.

We raise our prayer for the many and many stories that have been told in the midst of this pandemic, one day it will be told of what we lived, of those who left this life in circumstances that today we do not understand, where neither progress, innovation, science, poverty or wealth were enough to overcome something so tiny, but where hopefully we give ourselves the joy of loving and celebrating life at every moment, because we understand that having it is a gift."


“Participant did not have a legal status in the country. Had COVID-19, and did not have a job or money to pay for rent or bills and was scared to ask for help because of their immigration status. Was referred to us through a Social Worker who explained to participant that some help would not impact their immigration status or affect negatively. Participant was very ill and did not want to go to the hospital but fortunately got better. Participant was referred to food assistance while in isolation and was able to find assistance for rent to pay for for the room that was rented. Very ill due to COVID-19. Referred to rental assistance, for bills and food. Participant is doing much better and slowly catching up to their bills.”

“Participant is a refugee and works in manufacturing. Both she and her child tested positive for Covid 19 in June and she was unable to work. She did not have food in the home and was unable to pay her rent for the month of July. Her job did not provide sick leave or Covid pay. [Organization] delivered food supplies, hygiene supplies and masks to the family. They were also referred to a partner agency for rental assistance and to the Utah Food Bank for additional food support. The client was able to self-isolate as required and not lose her housing or experience food insecurity. She is now back at work and doing fine.”


“Family wasn't able to work due to contracting Covid. They didn't have money for diapers and formula. Our organization was able to use grant funds to deliver formula and diapers directly to the family. They received the items and sent a message of gratitude for the help.”



“The participant had been laid off and them unemployed due to COVID-19. This lead to them losing housing and going to a shelter. His vehicle registration had also expired and he was limited in looking for employment having to walk. It was very cold outside as well. We were able to connect him to a resource that paid his car registration. We were able to connect him to a resource that paid his car registration. The next week he reached back out to let us know that he had landed another job that started the following week, and couldn’t have done it without a car and our help. It was less than \$150 dollars but meant a world of difference to him.”



“Participant had her vaccine at her work place but she needed to register her parents and other members of her community for a vaccine clinic. Participant didn't know how to sign up for [the] clinic, and was worried that many members of her community [had] [issues] of access to [the] internet and computer, and not being able to read and write. CHW helped connect the participant with vaccine information resources and CRIC staff and volunteers who are partnering with BRHD and holding a clinic on the 4/27. Participant is able to [sign] up 4 family members and 2 neighbors to a clinic, and continues to actively involve in LHD's and CBO's outreach program and hoping to [sign] up around 30 people from her community. This is an extraordinary success story of finding a potential [refugee] community leader for a large number of unrepresented refugee [communities] in our jurisdiction.”



“A senior citizen in my community was interested in getting his COVID-19 vaccine, but unable to register. Although interested in getting a COVID-19 vaccine, my client was unable to look up information about how to register or register for the vaccine due to not having a working computer. Knowing that I worked as a CHW for our county health department, he reached out to me to see if I would be able to help him get a vaccine. After consulting with my supervisor, I was able to schedule an appointment on his behalf. I worked with the client to get all of the necessary information for registration, scheduled a time for his vaccine and took a printed copy of his appointment confirmation to him so he could present it at the vaccine clinic. He also needed follow up help to change his second dose appointment when he ended up having a conflict with his original appointment. I was able to help this client with his need in getting his COVID-19 vaccine. He had a friend in the same position as himself and passed my information along to him and I was able to help him also. Several people who have had problems trying to schedule their vaccine appointments have reached out to me for help and I have been able to get them scheduled.”

A Community Health Worker Shares Their Experience of the Pandemic:

“2020 El año que

Un año que ha tomado tantos nombres y que a la vez nos ha cumplido que habría que ajustar la visión una y otra vez, hasta poder encontrar claridad.

Y se ha hecho claro que algo tan pequeñito, con todo y que suceda al otro lado del mundo, nos involucra a toda la humanidad, ojalá que nos estemos permitiendo hacer esa pausa, que COVID-19 nos aclare lo que es realmente importante, que necesitamos aprender a vivir primeramente con nosotros mismos, con nuestras sombras y nuestros dolores hasta ser capaces de convertirlos en nuestra fuerza y nuestro motor. Pues con pesar muchos descubrimos que la vida es mucho más bella de lo que imaginamos y que vivir es un don que puede terminar en un instante.

¿Qué nombre quisieras regalarle a este 2020? Ha sido este el año más terrible, el más difícil de la vida, no dudo que para muchos ha sido así, pero ¿Qué tal si ha sido el año de la oportunidad de descubrirnos a nosotros mismos? De haber encontrado talentos, capacidad de recuperarnos del miedo, del desconocimiento, un año que nos ha invitado a conocer cómo cuidarnos más, cada uno y a nuestros seres amados!. A pesar de lo vivido, y por duro que parezca, como voluntaria comunitaria espero que para ti, esta sea una oportunidad de contemplación y de elevar nuestro nivel de conciencia, si importas! importamos todos, nuestros actos, nuestras palabras, y queremos escuchar de ti, de lo que te duele y de lo que te alegra, los voluntarios comunitarios ponemos nuestro corazón para las personas que requieren un apoyo, un recurso una pequeña luz.”

English translation:

"2020 The year that...

A year that has taken so many names and at the same time has served its purpose that we would have to adjust our vision again and again, until we find clarity.

And it has become clear that something so small, despite the fact that it happens on the other side of the world, involves all of humanity, hopefully we are allowing ourselves to pause, that COVID-19 clarifies to us what is really important, that we need to learn to live first with ourselves, with our shadows and our pains until we are able to turn them into our strength and our engine. For with regret many of us discover that life is much more beautiful than we imagined and that living is a gift that can end in an instant.

What name would you like to give to 2020? This has been the most terrible year, the most difficult year of life. I have no doubt that for many it has been so, but what if it has been the year of the opportunity to discover ourselves? Of having found talents, the ability to recover from fear, from ignorance, a year that has invited us to know how to take better care of ourselves and our loved ones! Despite what we have experienced, and as hard as it may seem, as a community volunteer I hope that for you, this is an opportunity to contemplate and raise our level of awareness, you matter! We all matter, our actions, our words, and we want to hear from you, what hurts you and what makes you happy, as community volunteers we put our hearts for people who need support, a resource, a little light."

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Primary Authors

Ban Naes (UDOH Office of Health Disparities)

Brittney Okada, MPH, CHES (UDOH Office of Health Disparities)

Contributors

Dulce Díez, MPH, MCHES (UDOH Office of Health Disparities)

Christine Espinel (UDOH Office of Health Disparities)

Jill Christian, MPH, CHES (UDOH Office of Health Disparities)

Allison Cowdell, MSW, MPH, CPH (UDOH Office of Health Disparities)

Wenwen Tian, MPH (UDOH Office of Health Disparities)

Matt Huntington, MPH (UDOH Office of Health Disparities)

Charla Haley (UDOH Office of Public Information and Marketing)

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Utah Department of Health

Office of Health Disparities

disparities@utah.gov

www.health.utah.gov/disparities

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