




MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor and Council Members

FROM: Adrienne Sturrup, Acting Director 

DATE: June 11, 2020

SUBJECT: Addressing COVID-19 disparities in priority populations - Austin Public Health

During Tuesday's Council Work Session, staff provided updates to Mayor and Council on COVID-19 data highlighting the challenges and effects of COVID-19 surrounding priority populations. As reported, the data suggests the number of people who have contracted the disease is the highest in the Latin X community.

Staff has been evaluating ways to address the disproportionate impact COVID-19 is having on our communities of color and developed a strategic plan (attached) to address the disparities in the Latin X community.

In addition to the education, testing and outreach efforts by Austin Public Health, City staff is planning a series of community conversations. The first conversation is planned for **Saturday, June 13, 2020 at 10am**. The conversation will focus on how Latinx communities are being impacted by COVID-19 and will engage the community on identifying actionable solutions.

If you have any questions, or if I can provide additional information, please contact me at (512) 972-5167 or via email at Adrienne.Sturrup@austintexasgov.

Cc: Spencer Cronk, City Manager
Nuria Rivera-Vandermyde, Deputy City Manager
Chris Shorter, Assistant City Manager

Addressing COVID-19 Disparities in Priority Populations

Purpose

The purpose of this planning document is to provide a holistic road map to address COVID-19 disparities in priority populations.

Challenge

Based on current COVID-19 data, Hispanic/Latinx and Black/ African American individuals and communities are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 and are more likely to die from the infection. According to United States census data, the Travis County population is composed of:

- 34% Hispanic/Latinx
- 8% African American
- 4% Asian-Americans

As of May 31, 2020, 56% of reported COVID-19 cases in Travis County identified as Hispanic. Data shared by Austin area hospitals noted that 53% of patients hospitalized with COVID-19 identified as Hispanic. In the last two weeks, Hispanic/Latinx individuals have comprised over 70% of new hospitalizations. Tragically, 37% of those who died of COVID-19 were Hispanic and 13% were Black.

Overview of Current COVID-19 Response

The COVID-19 response for Austin/Travis County has been guided under unified command of both the City and County. The response is multifaceted and has evolved since the initial *Stay Home, Work Safe* orders were put in place on March 21, 2020. The response includes a Social Services Branch made up of multiple taskforces that advise and support operations to ensure that the needs of the most vulnerable and highest risk populations are addressed. Additionally, the emergency response organizational structure includes an equity officer as part of the Incident Command Staff. The overall response provides the following services to the community:

- Testing and coordination of testing across the health care system, including testing in high-risk settings such as known clusters where three or more positive cases have been identified
- Tracking spread of COVID-19 through case investigation and contact tracing
- Support to individuals that have tested positive for COVID-19 or have had a high-risk exposure
- Tracking of hospital capacity
- Food distribution
- Support to childcare centers for essential workers
- Support to nursing homes and long-term care facilities
- Protective lodging for individuals experiencing homelessness to reduce their risk of COVID-19 exposure
- Lodging for individuals that need to self-isolate but cannot effectively self-isolate at home
- Support to priority populations to meet specific needs such as language access, transportation, access to social services such as Women Infant and Children programs, distribution of care packages that include food, hygiene, and protective supplies, and COVID-19 information.
- Outreach to the faith-based community.
- Coordinated media messaging that is culturally and linguistically appropriate

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Identifying Priority Populations

The following strategies will be necessary to ensure we address the disparities within our priority populations and address chronic disease challenges in the Eastern Crescent of Travis County.

These are broad and diverse populations and strategies. It is necessary to consider that a one size fits all strategy will not effectively meet population needs.

- Populations of color, African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Latinx, Native American
- Immigrants or undocumented residents
- Elderly residents
- Individuals experiencing homelessness
- Individuals and families living in poverty
- Individuals and families that are uninsured and underinsured
- Individuals and families that are food insecure
- Individuals and families with low social and economic status

Some circumstances may compound the harm caused to individuals or communities impacted by COVID-19 and must be understood and addressed specifically. These may include:

- Higher incidence of chronic diseases and conditions that increase health risks of COVID-19 (diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, obesity, smoking or other condition that compromises the immune system)
- Systemic racism leading to increased allostatic load and chronic stress
- Institutional racism within the medical field
- Limited English language proficiency
- Limited or no access to childcare
- Stigma related to false belief that COVID-19 is the fault of one country or ethnicity
- Immigration status and increased fear of deportation (if utilizing testing services) may also impact reporting of contacts
- Concerns of losing wages (if tested and taking time off from work when testing positive and requiring isolation or quarantine) may also impact reporting of contacts
- Limited capacity to social distance
 - Multiple families/individuals living in the same household
 - Intergenerational families living in the same household
 - Transportation limited to only one vehicle for multiple family members
 - Possible unwillingness to use services such as Isolation Facility due to concerns of family separation
 - Work in an industry with limited social distancing or infection control measures. For example, construction, food service, healthcare, childcare, factory, etc.
- Family members may be traveling to and from other communities for work opportunities such as migrant workers.

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TESTING STRATEGY

Testing for Austin/Travis County is a community-wide effort. The COVID-19 Testing Group was created to oversee all COA testing efforts and ensure a collaborative approach among all other testing entities with a focus on priority populations. It is the goal of COA to provide support to those already existing entities, and through continuous evaluation, fill the testing gaps in the community.

The COVID-19 Testing Group overarching goals are (1) Develop and facilitate an equitable and holistic approach to COVID-19 testing that supports all residents in Austin/ Travis County, and (2) Collect COVID-19 testing data from all community healthcare providers to comprehensively address disease incidence with a focused response in affected communities and areas. Specific objectives, strategies, and tactics can be found in the City of Austin/Travis County COVID-19 Testing Group Strategy, <http://www.austintexas.gov/covid19>

The City of Austin/Travis County COVID-19 Testing Group Strategy is a living document and will be amended as needed based on continuous evaluation of data-based information as it emerges. It is intended to be flexible to rapidly respond to emerging community needs, mitigate the spread of COVID-19, and reduce the impact on high-risk populations.

The following tactics will be utilized to continue to provide and increase testing in the community:

- Mobile Testing
 - Pop-up testing for identified populations
 - Pop-up testing for identified clusters
 - Home testing
- Facility Testing
- Static Testing
 - Community-Wide Testing (St. Johns testing site)
 - First Responder/ Critical Infrastructure Testing (Pleasant Valley testing site)
- Testing enrollment assistance via the APH COVID-19 medical hotline

Immediate testing recommendations for Latinx population:

1. Set up pop-up testing in recommended areas in Austin/Travis County based on high positivity rates, low testing availability, and feedback for location selection from the Latinx community and the Equity officer
2. Create and maintain a map of testing locations, costs, and other relevant information to ensure testing is accessible and available to the Latinx community
3. Engage with community members and Latinx leaders in the community to continue to identify strategies to overcome barriers to testing
4. Ensure testing is available to the Latinx community through the provision of testing enrollment assistance services via phone and the online portal in Spanish
5. Offer testing to the Latinx community in a way they feel welcomed by ensuring Spanish-speaking staff members are available at the test sites, and through collaboration of established and respected Latinx community organizations and leadership
6. Advertise testing locations targeted to the Latinx community in Spanish through radio, social media, and other forms of media.

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COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

This section includes a few tactics that can be implemented. The communication strategy will be developed in partnership with communities that are most affected by COVID19. The City of Austin and Austin Public Health acknowledges that organized groups have reached out to offer input and support and we welcome their feedback and involvement. Additionally, we acknowledge that many different organizations are doing a lot of work to help the community and we want to work collaboratively with the community to improve coordination and support of our collective goal to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and improve the health outcomes of Austinites, especially communities of color.

Utilizing population-specific virtual focus groups, develop community-informed communication and outreach strategies and messaging. Implement updated messaging in:

- Media, television, radio, print and social media, including specific media outlets that are broadcast/print in other languages (Spanish, Asian languages)
- Outreach
 - Identify appropriate locations for population-specific outreach
 - Neighborhood level, churches other community gathering locations
 - Other trusted service delivery sites (WIC, food distribution, grocery stores, primary care clinics, churches, job sites, libraries, schools)
- Education
 - Hygiene demonstrations such as hand washing, washing clothing separate from your family
 - Tips to stay safe; ways to protect yourself
 - COVID-19 awareness (how is the disease spread an information on testing)
 - How to access resources including in-person as well as virtual platforms
- Assistance hotline

To share updated messaging, coordinate with community leaders and ambassadors such as (NOTE: this is not an all-inclusive list):

- Faith based leaders
- Neighborhood leaders
- Community organization leaders, especially those that represent zip codes with a high concentration of positive cases. Starting with Zip codes: 78741, 78745, 78752,78660. Subject to change with new data.
- Community Health Workers/Promoters
- Board and Commission members
- City staff liaisons

Coordinate messaging and outreach efforts with health care partners including Central Health, CommUnity Care and other local Federally Qualified Health Centers, and Hospital Systems.

Immediate communications recommendations for LatinX population:

1. Coordinate with the LatinX community members to partner in education and outreach.
2. Identify and introduce Ambassador Organizations
3. Initial target zip codes: 78741, 78744 and 78753
4. Currently training staff to activate the hotline

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Additional Opportunities: Health Promotion

Outreach to populations at high risk for chronic diseases and conditions is critical for self-management and prevention. Austin Public Health provides the community-based health screenings and education listed below throughout the community with specific focus in areas with higher prevalence, mostly in the Eastern Crescent.

- Blood pressure
- Blood sugar
- Cholesterol
- HIV testing
- Diabetes education
- Obesity

These efforts often identify individuals who are suffering from a chronic condition but have not yet been diagnosed. Austin Public Health provides referrals to primary care or a community resource. City staff continue to follow up with clients referred to ensure they are connected to care.

Chronic conditions such as hypertension, diabetes, tobacco use, and obesity may increase the likelihood of COVID-19 complications. As part of these on-going outreach efforts Austin Public Health will incorporate information on COVID-19 and the increased health risks for those with chronic conditions. Additionally, City of Austin will explore opportunities to alleviate barriers to care and access to medication through enhancing partnerships with CommUnity Care and other health care providers, connecting Austin Public Health outreach efforts with the EMS system, and incorporating virtual platforms such as telehealth.

LONG-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS TO CONSIDER

The COVID-19 response and recovery are expected to continue through 2021. It is important to note that prior to this pandemic, most response and recovery efforts in the Austin/Travis County community did not continue beyond a few months. Austin Public Health along with City/County Emergency Operations is launching long term planning to ensure the on-going response is community informed and reduces the impact of this disease. Therefore, the following recommendations are being provided to the City Manager:

- Utilize best practice and evidence-based resources to guide COVID-19 response for high risk populations to reduce health disparities. A resource to consider is Center for Disease Control and Prevention's Public Health Workbook to Define, Locate, and Reach Special, Vulnerable and At-risk Populations in an Emergency.
- Provide draft plan for review to Commission on Immigrant Affairs, Asian American Quality of Life Advisory Commission, Hispanic/Latino Quality of Life Resource Advisory Commission, African American Resources Advisory Commission, Joint Inclusion Committee, Human Rights Commission and the City of Austin Equity Office
- Form a COVID-19 Community Advisory Committee composed of key community advocates to provide specific insight into needs of populations of color related to COVID-19 and provide ongoing oversight to the Roadmap to Address COVID-19 Disparities in Austin/Travis County.

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- Convene population specific virtual focus groups to inform:
 - Concerns with COVID-19 exposure and risks
 - Community based COVID-19 strategies
 - Media/Communication messaging
 - Community based outreach
 - Testing plans
 - Contact tracing approach
 - Social distancing supports
 - Basic needs
 - Community-based supports