

# COVID-19 Response Program

## San Diego, CA



From August 2020 to June 2022, Global Communities' COVID-19 Response Program addressed health equity issues across San Diego County by offering contact tracing and providing vaccine education and outreach services. The programmatic approach specialized in building a community-based workforce, community trust and data-driven technology to provide bespoke COVID-19 prevention services to hard-to-reach and hard-to-vaccinate populations. The program contact traced 6,880 people over nine months in coordination with the San Diego County Health and Human Services Agency and helped coordinate over 175 vaccine-related activities reaching more than 4,000 people across North and North Central San Diego. Overall, the COVID-19 Response Program was funded by five different contracts through various partnerships: San Diego County HHS (3 contracts in total), the San Diego Foundation and the San Diego Wellness Collaborative. Multiple extensions allowed for growth and continuity of work over the course of two years.

**Hard-to-reach populations** are those that face supply-side barriers to vaccination due to geography by distance or terrain, transient or nomadic movement, healthcare provider discrimination, lack of healthcare provider recommendations, inadequate vaccination systems, war and conflict, home births or other home-bound mobility limitations or legal restrictions.

**Hard-to-vaccinate populations** are those that are reachable but difficult to vaccinate because of demand-side barriers such as mistrust, religious beliefs, lack of awareness, poverty or low socioeconomic status, lack of time or gender-based discrimination.

### Background

COVID-19 impacted vulnerable communities disproportionately, exposing discrepancies in health equity across the United States. In San Diego County, for example, 44.3% of all cases<sup>1</sup> and 43.8% of deaths<sup>2</sup> due to COVID-19 were among Hispanics or Latinos, even though only 30.1%<sup>3</sup> of the population identifies as Hispanic or Latino. The County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency (HHS) identified outreach coming from insider community members to improve COVID-19 prevention among hard-to-reach and hard-to-vaccinate populations and engaged Global Communities as a trusted local partner to lead these efforts, first in contact tracing and then vaccine education and outreach.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/hhsa/programs/phs/Epidemiology/COVID-19%20Race%20and%20Ethnicity%20Summary.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/hhsa/programs/phs/Epidemiology/COVID-19%20Deaths%20by%20Demographics.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/sandiegocitycalifornia/PST045221>

## Our approach

Global Communities met the unique needs of San Diegans during the COVID-19 pandemic by partnering with the County of San Diego HHS to provide culturally adapted information about COVID-19 to the heart of hard-to-reach communities. Starting in August 2020, Global Communities' team of dedicated contact tracers delivered information about how to appropriately quarantine or isolate for people who were close contacts of confirmed COVID-19 cases.

By taking a whole-person approach, our staff linked clients to additional resources they needed in order to stay home such as housing assistance, mental health benefits and COVID-19 education. In May 2021, with the FDA approval of the COVID-19 vaccine, the program transitioned to providing vaccine education and outreach across Central and North Central San Diego to people not accessing vaccine services through mainstream channels.

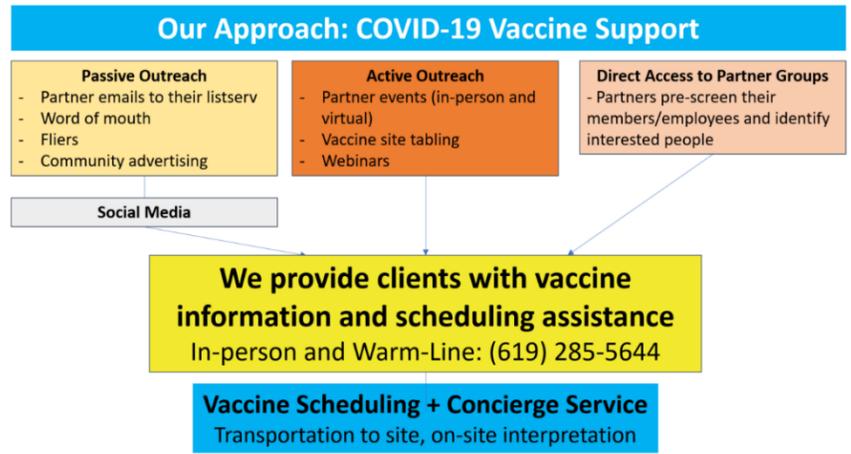
Our unique approach was characterized by the following pillars:

- **Building a community-based workforce:**

Global Communities hired members of the community who understood the reality of the people we served. Staff could communicate with clients in their preferred languages, and our team spoke 14 languages besides English (Spanish; Tagalog; Ilokan; Vietnamese; Cantonese; Mandarin; Arabic; Chaldean; Kurdish/Assyrian; Farsi/Dari, Pashto; and Somali). Our staff were familiar with the challenges faced by different communities and could tailor public health messaging to overcome the barriers particular to individual hard-to-reach populations. This staffing approach differed from the traditional community health worker model by hiring community members with technology, epidemiology and customer service skills that paired with our program design. Global Communities provided extensive and ongoing training of our "COVID-19 Outreach Specialists" to stay abreast of the quickly changing information environment and best meet the communities' evolving needs.

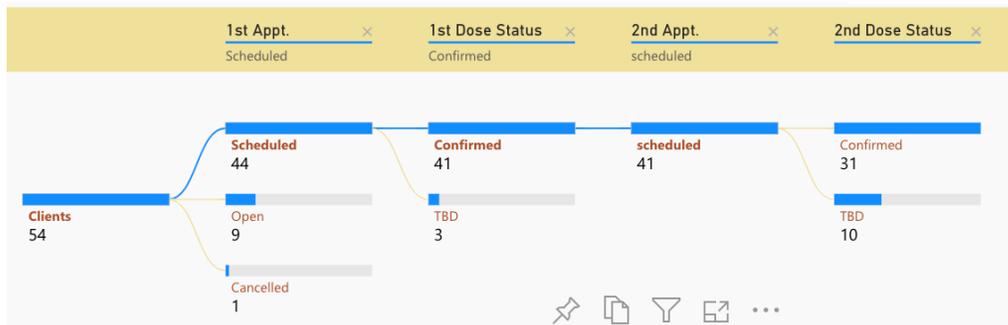
- **Building community trust:**

Global Communities' highly trained COVID-19 Outreach Specialists worked at the ground level to build the trust of individual communities by meeting people where they were. They did this by developing partnerships with community hubs such as mosques, community centers, schools and local businesses to provide COVID-19 information where people gather. These partnerships helped us bring COVID-19 information and services to people at places and times that worked for them, as compared to County-provided services that were not easily accessible to hard-to-reach communities. Our staff built relationships with community members who initially expressed mistrust of public health authorities and services by providing 1:1 counseling and finding solutions that helped them overcome their unique concerns. This was a particularly successful way we fought COVID-19 misinformation and vaccine hesitancy among hard-to-vaccinate populations.



- **Building data and technology platforms to inform our approach:**

Global Communities created state-of-the-art technology systems for targeted program activities and reach. For contact tracing, we tailored Dimagi’s CommCare software to support monitoring individualized contract tracing to ensure a tailored, personalized client experience while preventing the continued spread of COVID-19. Similarly, our vaccine team developed an automated CommCare system to support clients in their vaccine journey to ensure they completed the full regimen and received boosters, if needed, to ensure they were fully protected. By using these platforms, our team experienced increased efficiency and accuracy of our work that was critical for the timely delivery of COVID-19 prevention and containment services.



## Evidence of our success

### Contact Tracing

Global Communities’ COVID-19 contact tracing program in San Diego County re-imagined typical contact tracing practices by implementing technological solutions, in-house language services and a holistic approach to supporting families in quarantining or isolating during the peak of the pandemic.

- Our program *developed a unique system for monitoring clients* using CommCare that allowed us to follow clients throughout their quarantine or isolation periods on any given day and provide tailored support care.
- We traced 6,880 COVID-19 contacts from September 2020 to May 2021, successfully reaching approximately 70% of assigned contacts to provide them with important health information.
  - Of those successfully reached, we were able to talk with 97.8% within 24 hours from when we received their information from the County of San Diego.
- With authority given to us by the County of San Diego and based on the information we received through phone interviews, from November 2020 to May 2021 we placed over 2,789 people in quarantine and 685 people in isolation.

“We called an older woman in her 80s who was living with both of her sons, one of whom has a disability. She was a contact, and one of her sons was the case. They were really struggling. The mom was telling me how lonely she feels. She was worried about her sons and also about getting sick herself, considering her age. When I spoke to her son, he did not have health insurance. He wanted to get tested, but at the same time, he did not want to leave home. He didn’t want to potentially expose others. We found the closest testing locations for him and gave him all the information he needed. We explained it was a drive-thru and that it was quick, so he didn’t need to worry about exposing other people. He was so appreciative. ... It was as if the family was sinking and not knowing what to do, and they were waiting for someone else to come and show them that they are not alone.”

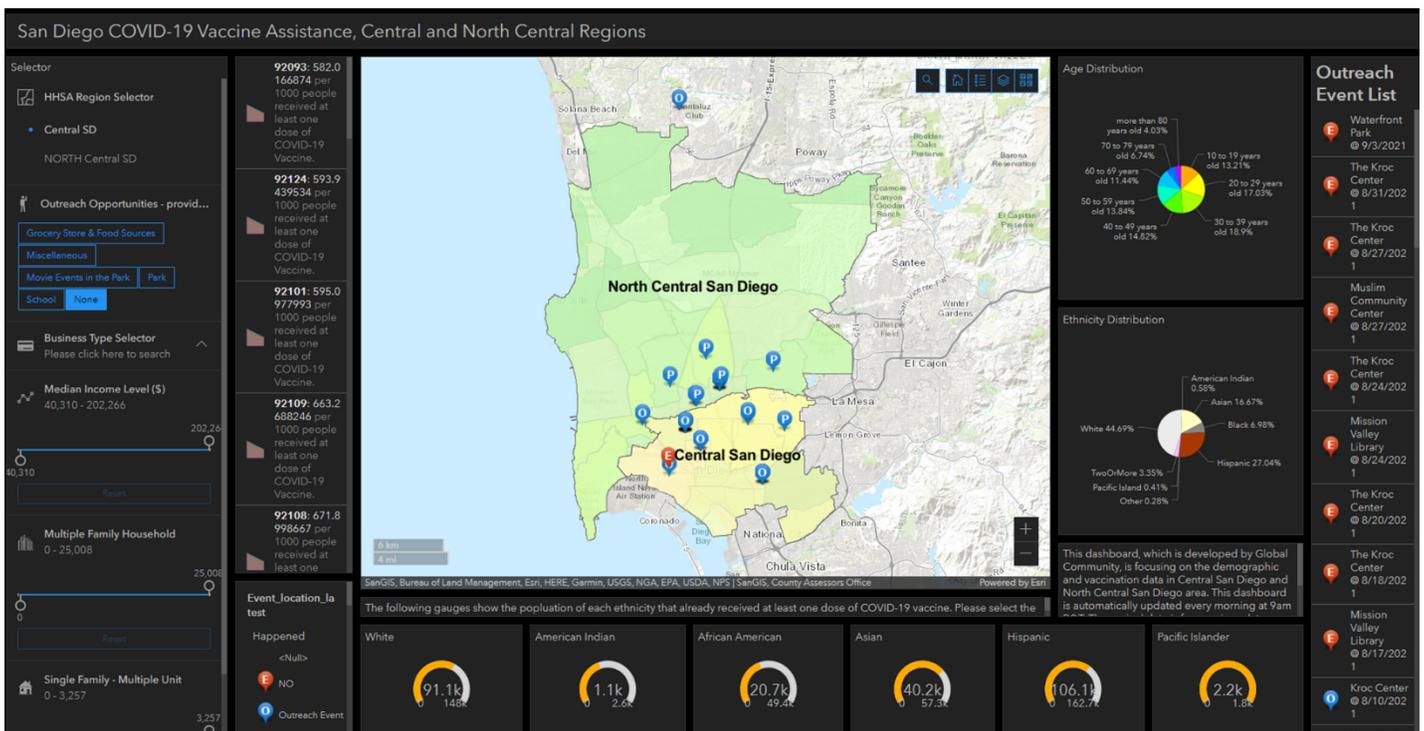
*Arwa, COVID-19 Outreach Specialist*

- We *built trust with the community* by helping households navigate how to best quarantine or isolate given their individual situations, and assisted people with getting support from employers to not work when exposed to or sick with COVID-19.
- *We operated during expanded hours to reach clients at times convenient for them.* Our staff worked 7 days a week—including holidays—and made calls from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. on weekdays and 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on weekends to reach people as soon as possible to prevent the spread of COVID-19.
  - Over the course of the program, we made 34,588 phone calls, averaging 82 calls a day.
  - 5,123 calls (14.8%) were made from 5–8 p.m., after the County and other organizations had stopped working.
- Our team was assigned contacts speaking languages for which the County did not have capacity, and staff adapted translations of information to meet the specific needs of Arabic, Tagalog and Vietnamese-speaking communities in particular.

### Vaccine Education and Outreach

From May 2021 through June 2022, Global Communities’ COVID-19 vaccine education and outreach efforts focused on reaching people who were not accessing vaccine resources due to both supply-related barriers such as appointment deficits or vaccine stock-outs, and also demand-related barriers including mistrust, misinformation or socioeconomic factors. Through partnership with the County, we increased vaccination among these hard-to-reach and hard-to-vaccinate populations, with our outcomes measured in relationships built over volume of vaccinations.

- The program *developed strong relationships with local partners* across San Diego. Our sustained in-person efforts allowed us to meet people where they gather and build their trust. We built relationships with community gatekeepers and with their collaboration organized over 175 outreach and 32 vaccine events to reach more than 4,000 people and increase vaccination in these otherwise hard-to-reach communities across two regions in San Diego.



- In particular, our team developed a strong relationship with Muslim communities through organizations such as the Afghan Community Islamic Center and Muslim Leadership Council, which allowed us to work closely with refugees and recent arrivals to the United States.
- We became a preferred partner of Champions for Health, a key vaccine provider for underserved communities, due to the trust we established in some of San Diego’s most hidden communities. Global Communities did not administer vaccines, so this partnership allowed our team to organize small, on-site events for community organizations not reached through County efforts.
- The program partnered with Meals on Wheels starting in February 2021 to ensure homebound elderly residents had access to the vaccine by assisting clients with finding and scheduling vaccine appointments and arranging transportation and support to reach vaccine sites.
- Staff provided vaccine information weekly at community centers such as local San Diego Public Libraries, Jacobs Center and Kroc Center, where a regular presence built trust with community members and allowed us to provide updated information to families as it evolved.
- When vaccine supply was limited during early 2021, we scheduled over 180 vaccine appointments for people who faced challenges navigating the County’s online system.
  - We designed an automated system in CommCare to track exactly where clients were in their vaccine journey to ensure they completed the appropriate vaccine regimen.
- Based on low vaccination rates among school-aged children eligible for the vaccine, the program *focused on outreach to parents of young children*.
  - The team conducted education activities and vaccine events in partnership with schools, timing events to coincide before the holidays and seasons when more socializing (and thus surges in COVID-19 cases) were expected.
- Our team *addressed misinformation and myths among specific communities by tailoring messaging* to the current information context and partnering with local media sources to spread time-sensitive COVID-19 vaccine messaging.
  - A social media team created the @covidfree.sd Instagram account, building 450 followers and over 130 posts that shared accurate and timely information about COVID-19 vaccines and local events in multiple languages.
    - In particular, our social media feeds crafted messaging for youth and parents of young children to increase acceptance of vaccines among children.



- The program partnered with local Univision and Televisa stations to reach Spanish-speaking audiences through a paid media campaign to encourage vaccination before the end of year holiday. This included:
  - 26 social media posts reaching 434,744 people;
  - A radio campaign running for four weeks that delivered 537,800 impressions among Hispanic adults 25+; and
  - Six live interviews with local health show and news hosts and a 30-second commercial aired during prime-time reaching 662,600 people.
- Our staff monitored a bilingual English and Spanish hotline, where we answered general questions about the vaccine, helped people make vaccine appointments at a location near them and addressed individuals' unique concerns.
- We conducted over 40 community engagement activities such as webinars, town halls and presentations at PTA meetings to increase accurate understanding of the COVID-19 vaccine in communities.
- Global Communities started a unique program partnering with local, immigrant-run small businesses which provided \$25 vouchers to local coffee shops and restaurants for people who received a vaccine through one of our partner events or services. This encouraged people to not only get vaccinated but also to support local businesses struggling after the hardships caused by prolonged shutdowns.
- We designed and implemented technology systems to make data-based decisions about where to focus/target efforts each week to reach the people most in need of vaccine education. A GIS Specialist developed a sophisticated map with real-time data that overlaid local vaccine rates, COVID-19 cases, the team's outreach efforts and key community demographics to allow the team to track needs in the areas where we were working.



## Key lessons learned

- Global Communities' whole-person approach allows us to understand the context of each client, and our staff is equipped to provide referrals and connections to other services because we know this holistic approach resulted in better outcomes. The foundation of our COVID-19 whole-person approach was listening to a person and responding accordingly to their needs. We first learned this during the unmet needs we heard from people during contact tracing and carried this into the design of our vaccine and education program. This helped us reach the most marginalized communities and prepares us for future work in San Diego and other areas.
- The diversity of our staff reflected the communities most impacted by COVID-19 and in need of information that was not reaching them through traditional channels. Global Communities was on the forefront of developing new techniques in health education and outreach in partnership with the County of San Diego that are changing the way that public health practice is carried out.
- Through the COVID-19 Response Program, we expanded the traditional community health workers model by hiring and training highly qualified outreach specialists who will lead the next generation of public health workers. Each staff member became a trusted messenger who continues to serve their community after the end of the program by using epidemiologic and behavioral health theory, technology, and strong interpersonal skills to tackle complex health issues in their own communities.

- By building strong relationships with San Diego County and local organizations, the program grew from the initial contact tracing contract with part-time staff into a robust program with a permanent team conducting activities across five different contracts. Global Communities proved the different value we add compared to local public health authorities by being more agile, community-based and technology-driven to reach communities beyond the County's sphere of influence.
  - In particular, when distrust of the government impeded vaccine uptake, our partnerships with established vaccine distributors such as Champions for Health and a sustained presence with community groups allowed us to tap into pre-existing channels that were overlooked during the high-level emergency response phases.
- Global Communities' partnership with the County increased trust among San Diego residents in the local public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and our experience helped inform San Diego County HHSA's future approach to infectious disease outbreaks.