



April 16, 2022

Montgomery County Council
100 Maryland Ave
Rockville, MD 20850

Dear Montgomery County Councilmembers:

On behalf of the Latino Health Steering Committee of Montgomery County (LHSC), we would like to thank you for taking the time to meet with us and as always, appreciate your support of the Latino Health Initiative (LHI). Together we will continue to make clear and measurable contributions to improving the health and wellbeing of the County's Latino community.

Below is a summary of the more salient points covered during our individual meetings with Montgomery County councilmembers:

Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, the LHI has grappled with public health challenges by successfully implementing action plans that respond to the health and wellness needs of the Latino community in Montgomery County. Thanks to the support of the County Council and County Executive, since July 2020, the LHI and its community-based organization partners have effectively led, through the *Por Nuestra Salud y Bienestar* (PNSB) initiative, efforts to address the myriad of challenges in the Latino community brought on by COVID-19 pandemic.

The successes of PNSB are clear:

- More than 113,700 COVID-19 PCR and rapid tests conducted.
- Over 44,000 COVID-19 vaccines and booster vaccinations administered.
- Over 421,000 Latino residents reached with COVID-19 information by Community Health workers.
- Over 8 million people reached through Spanish-language traditional and social media.
- More than 36,000 case management services provided.
- More than 37,000 calls fielded, providing over 52,000 referral services through the PNSB information telephone line.
- In first year, \$1,368,656 provided in funds to Hubs and partner organizations for infrastructure needs, hiring of bilingual staff, case management, food distribution, and operational expenses.

These are just some of the facts and figures describing our success. Here are just three examples of how the LHI and the PNSB have had real impacts on the lives of individuals and families living in our county:

1. Two active health promoters supporting PNSB, Mr. Hugo Rodriguez and his wife Gladis Lopez, became infected with COVID-19 before vaccines were available. Mr. Rodriguez died on December 19, 2020. His sick wife Gladis faced economic uncertainty since Mr. Rodriguez was the main provider in the household. Fortunately, Ms. Lopez was contacted by an Identity navigator who assisted her in the process to receive the following services:
 - Rental assistance
 - Food
 - Utilities payment (e.g., electricity)
 - Psychological support through mental health workshops

In gratitude for the help that PNSB provides to the community and in honor of her husband, Mrs. Lopez continues to serve as a health promoter, participating in community outreach activities where she can share COVID-19 prevention information with the community, make referrals for testing and vaccination events as well as social services as needed.

2. As a result of participating in PNSB's mental health workshops, Ms. Ilbea Castro was referred to programs to assist her daughter who has autism. With the confinement and isolation that the pandemic caused, Mrs. Castro had become depressed and did not want to share with others. With the help of PNSB's mental health workshops, Mrs. Castro now feels better and is on a path that will improve the life of her autistic daughter as well as her two other children. Mrs. Castro's eldest son has asthma and cannot work at this time. He has received a small amount of support from the SYB program and is in the process of receiving help to pay for his asthma-related hospitalization last year. Mrs. Castro is feeling optimistic about the progress of her autistic daughter and is very grateful for the help for her eldest son.
3. Mrs. Elsa Vargas, a single mother of 4 children, was severely affected by the pandemic. She lost her job, and she and her children came down with COVID-19 twice. Due to the lack of work, the rent that she owed for her apartment accumulated with interest. She didn't think there was any way she could get out of this situation and did not have enough to cover basic expenses such as food. PNSB helped her with rent, food and clothes assistance. Home Hospital service also came to Mrs. Vargas' home to test her and her children when they were all sick and couldn't go out. Mrs. Vargas is very grateful to the Por Nuestra Salud y Bienestar Program because she feels that without all the help she received, she would never have been able to get out of the situation she found herself in. "There is a lot of need in our community and for that reason there should be many programs like Salud y Bienestar that help us a lot" said Mrs. Vargas.

From these compelling stories, you can see how critical the services are that PNSB has provided to the community. The innovative approaches that have been integral to PNSB need to continue as we move from an acute, crisis phase of the pandemic to addressing the lingering emotional, physical, and financial effects of the pandemic.

We therefore fully support the 2.2 million budget increase recommended by the County Executive for the Fiscal Year 2023 Latino Health Initiative budget. In addition, we are seeking your support to increase this recommendation by \$946,704. This additional increase

will help build upon and sustain pandemic-era innovations and cross sector collaborations and elevate the stories and experiences of Latino patients, families, communities, and community-based organizations, who have demonstrated remarkable resilience while bearing the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The additional funding will allow us to fully adopt the successes, lessons learned, and approach of the PNSB initiative by increasing the capacity of two existing programs of the LHI (Information Line and Health Promoters program) and institutionalize three new services and practices from PNSB (case management, community mental health, and communications/media). These programs/ practices have demonstrated to be highly successful in serving the Latino community and have clear potential beyond COVID-19 pandemic for achieving meaningful and sustainable improvements for all.

In FY23, the LHI proposes expanding its efforts by tailoring and implementing strategies tested and proven under the PNSB initiative including:

- Implementing and institutionalizing an LHI case management program as a collaborative process of assessment, planning, facilitation, service coordination, evaluation and advocacy for options and services to meet an individual's and family's comprehensive health and human services needs through communication and available resources to promote effectiveness, efficiencies, quality, and cost-effective outcomes. With supplemental funding it is estimated that in FY23, a total of 6,000 families will receive case management services.
- Implementing an LHI Community Mental Health program (CMH), an innovative, non-clinical program to help families manage the emotional impacts of trauma with culturally and language appropriate trauma-informed emotional support groups. It is estimated that in FY23, with additional funding, between 690 and 828 clients will be served.
- Develop and implement scaled communications strategies, to inform, educate, and mobilize the Latino community around priority LHI program areas and services. For example, components of the Emmy-winning *Abuelina* campaign could be adapted to promote asthma awareness and education as well as to refer people to the LHI.
- Expand and strengthen LHI's Community Outreach Health Promoters/Community Health Worker program. Supplemental funding would permit have a group of 20 trained health promoters and assign 5 of them 5 days/week to reach over 12,000 community members in FY23.
- Increase its telephone information/referral service capabilities and capacity and promote its availability during community outreach activities as well as by "tagging" communications and media products with the telephone number for additional information, case management, and referrals. Supplemental funds would support four additional telephone lines.
- Increase the capacity and capabilities of LHI to carry-out expanded and/or new program areas and activities by adding two contracted positions using additional requested funds.

We are confident that, as in past years, you will continue to support the efforts of the Latino Health Initiative.

As always, we are grateful for your leadership and support. We look forward to continuing our partnership efforts to improve the quality of life of Latinos in Montgomery County.

We welcome any questions or comments you may have.

Sincerely,

Michelle LaRue, M.D.
Co-Chair

Olivia Carter-Pokras, Ph.D.
Co-Chair