

TEMPE

Guadalupe slashed its COVID-19 case rate. Here's how the town did it

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Veronica Tavena-Perez thought she would be staying home to care for her 3-year-old son after retiring in November from her job as a social worker for the Pascua Yaqui Tribe.

She was at home watching a movie with her son when the phone rang one day in late May. Guadalupe Mayor Valerie Molina was on the line, and asked to meet at Town Hall the following day.

Guadalupe, a town of about 6,600 residents tucked along Interstate 10 between Tempe and Chandler, was in trouble.

COVID-19 cases were spiking in the community that is mostly Hispanic, Native American or a combination of the two. Multiple generations of families often live together and many residents are service workers, deemed essential in the pandemic.

Studies are showing the novel coronavirus has disproportionately affected Native American and Hispanic communities.

They needed a trusted voice in the community to lead efforts to reduce the virus's spread, the mayor told her.

Tavena-Perez, a Guadalupe native, accepted.

“I have worked in the community for the past 40 years,” she said. “I had to help.”

Around the time she returned to work in June, the town had 87 confirmed cases. The number of cases reached 131 by June 16 before the COVID-19 Response Team she leads saw things begin to improve.

Partners on the response team include Maricopa County, the Pascua Yaqui Tribe and Arizona State University.

They've brought in testing. They've delivered food and necessities to people who are recovering from COVID-19 at home. They've educated residents on the importance of wearing masks and social distancing.

And their efforts seem to be working.

'We didn't have the information'

Rumors of the first COVID-19 case in Guadalupe spread through the town in March.

Residents called the mayor for information about the case — who was it and where had the person contracted the virus?

"Do I need to worry about my grandmother?"

"My mom lives there by herself and has underlying conditions," another caller worried.

Molina had no information to give. It wasn't even a confirmed case. "Just the possibility of one sent the whole community into panic," she said.

The calls continued over the next two months as word of more cases grew. Residents thought town officials were keeping them in the dark.

"In actuality, we didn't have the information to share," Molina said.

Other than residents who self-reported, town officials could only turn to state health data that was of little use. The Arizona Department of Health Services reports cases by ZIP code. Guadalupe falls into a larger Tempe ZIP code with nearly 46,000 people.

Despite a lack of data, town officials had a hunch they were experiencing a spike in cases. The calls from residents reporting symptoms and positive test results had increased by mid-May.

Then Arizona State University researchers reached out to town officials with a warning: wastewater samples taken from the town's sewage system showed elevated levels of the virus. ASU had been monitoring for traces of COVID-19 in Tempe and Guadalupe's wastewater since March. The high concentration meant there likely was community spread in the town.

Armed with the wastewater study, Molina made the case to Maricopa County officials for more localized data.

County health officials began combing through paperwork on positive COVID-19 test results to track Guadalupe addresses. They have provided town officials with weekly updates on case numbers and hospitalizations since June 1.

It was “eye opening,” Molina said. “We had so many people in our backyard this whole time dealing with this on their own and we didn’t know.”

Molina spent the next couple of weeks calling and emailing organizations and regional and state leaders in search of help. She looked to other small towns, such as Tolleson on the other side of Phoenix, to share resources and contacts.

With an annual budget of approximately \$12 million and just 17 full-time employees, Guadalupe's resources were sparse.

It was around this time that Molina called Tavena-Perez.

Promotoras hit the streets

Tavena-Perez and Graciela Holguin, a hospice worker with family ties in Guadalupe, joined together as promotoras.

A promotora is a uniquely Hispanic program that serves as a bridge between public health officials and residents. A promotora typically is a lay person with deep ties in a community to establish credibility and trust. Historically in Latin America and the U.S., promotoras have addressed chronic diseases and other health issues.

While other groups have tried to come in to assist Guadalupe through the years, residents can sometimes be wary of strangers, Molina said.

“It’s not that they don’t want the help, it’s that they don’t understand who you are and what the purpose behind it is,” Molina said. “But if we bring someone from our community that people know, have grown up with, they are going to be more likely to open their door than they would to others.”

Molina grew up in Guadalupe and remembers the effectiveness of promotoras preaching children's health and teen pregnancy prevention. The program was run by a nonprofit agency that had since closed, but Molina saw a role for promotoras in the pandemic.

The town hired Tavena-Perez, who is Yaqui, and Holguin on a part-time, temporary basis.

Home deliveries

On a recent Thursday, Tavena-Perez reached over the fence of a resident's home and placed a box of food and other items on a chair set below. Inside, the family was quarantining as they recovered from COVID-19.

Tavena-Perez and Holguin have been delivering such boxes to families impacted by the virus since June.

The food boxes include staples such as fish, chicken breasts, eggs, rice and beans and the occasional produce and fruit. The town sometimes provides laundry detergent, disinfecting wipes, toiletries and other items requested by families.

The promotoras also drop off masks and hand sanitizer.

The visits are typically zero contact. They ask families to place a chair or bench outside where they leave the boxes.

Sometimes residents come out to talk with them from their doorstep. Other times the promotoras follow up with a call to check how residents are doing and if there's anything else they need.

They offer information on healthy hygiene practices. They may discuss how to disinfect the home, how to protect oneself when leaving the house or offer details about financial assistance that's available.

The goal is to curb the virus's spread.

The Guadalupe Fire Department and the Pascua Yaqui Tribe also have distributed masks or food and educational materials to families.

Molina sees the promotora program as part of the reason behind the town's improving numbers.

Bringing testing into the community was another key component.

Bringing testing to Guadalupe

The town keeps residents up to date on the pandemic through videos on Facebook and information on its website.

Early in the pandemic, Molina and Vice Mayor Ricardo Vital, who are cousins, shared a video of themselves getting tested for COVID-19 to encourage residents to do the same.

Initially, there wasn't much interest.

Many residents were uncomfortable traveling just two miles away to a testing site on Rural and Guadalupe roads in Tempe, Molina said.

The mayor knew she had to bring testing to them, so she networked. She reached out to U.S. Rep. Ruben Gallego's office, which connected her with Valle Del Sol, a community health agency that primarily serves the Latino community.

Valle Del Sol sponsored a free, two-day testing blitz in Guadalupe in June and about 400 people got tested.

Since then, the town has partnered with other agencies to hold testing events.

The Pascua Yaqui Tribe employs about 100 people in its Guadalupe office. They tested tribal employees and many tribal members in the town.

The tribe and several partners now are conducting COVID-19 testing for seniors and people with disabilities in their homes, said Vital, who works for the tribe.

The tribe is working on an agreement with the county to share the tribe's testing and case data to provide a more accurate picture of the virus's impact, he said.

About half of Guadalupe residents are Pascua Yaqui Tribal members and the other half identify as Hispanic of Mexican descent. Many residents, like Molina, identify as both.

Guadalupe was founded by Yaqui Indians who fled persecution in Sonora, Mexico, and settled in the Salt River Valley in the early 1900s. The Pascua Yaqui Tribe maintains offices in Guadalupe, although its reservation is further south in the Tucson area.

Town and tribal officials estimate that between 1,000 and 1,500 people have been tested for COVID-19 since they started testing residents in June.

The goal is to test everyone at least once, Vital said.

Why Guadalupe was hit so hard

Data has shown that minorities are at increased risk of getting sick or dying from COVID-19 because they are more likely to have underlying health conditions, live in crowded

conditions, work in lower paying essential jobs and have less access to health care.

Limited internet and telephone access, language barriers and a distrust of institutions all can make it harder to access trusted information, according to Johns Hopkins University.

In Arizona, Native Americans have been among the population groups most affected by COVID-19. Native Americans make up just 3.9% of the state's population, but they make up 6% of COVID-19 cases and 11% of deaths, state health data shows.

The hard hit Navajo Nation had the highest infection rate in the country in May, surpassing even some of the worst-hit ZIP codes in New York City at the height of the pandemic.

When Guadalupe officials got their first report from the county on June 1, it showed the town's residents were testing positive at 5.6 times the county rate. Guadalupe had one of the highest infection rates in the county.

Will Humble, former head of the state health department, said many of the same factors that contributed to the Navajo Nation becoming a hot spot contributed to Guadalupe's rise in cases.

The less than one-square mile community is dotted with single story homes, many built before the 1980s and smaller than 1,200 square feet. Many have multiple generations of families living together.

When a family of five lives in a two or three-bedroom home, that leaves little space for someone who is sick to separate themselves, Molina said.

She knows this firsthand. Molina said she was forced to quarantine in her bedroom for three days in April as she waited for results of a second COVID-19 test after being exposed to the virus.

She had no symptoms, but couldn't risk exposing her teenage son or elderly parents who live with her.

Molina does all the grocery shopping and picks up medication for her parents, who have not left the house other than for doctor appointments since March. Her brothers dropped off food and necessities while she stayed in her room.

In the end, she said her results came back negative.

Many residents work service-oriented jobs that may put them at higher risk of contracting COVID-19. Guadalupe's median household income is just under \$32,300, about half the

county's median income. A third of residents live below the poverty line, according to census data.

Many Guadalupe residents also have preexisting health conditions, such as diabetes and hypertension, which makes them more susceptible to the virus, Vital said.

Guadalupe has seen 403 reported COVID-19 cases as of Sept. 2, but the numbers are improving.

Gatherings also a factor

The social distancing that has been required in the pandemic hasn't always come easy in the close-knit community where residents love to gather and where hugging and kissing are deeply ingrained customs.

Religious leaders early on encouraged churchgoers to nix warm embraces and handshakes in favor of head nods and other friendly gestures. But customs are hard to break.

Molina said back in April, during a meeting to go over Holy Week events, she told attendees to take precautions and avoid shaking hands. But a flurry of handshakes ensued at the meeting's close.

The more than month-long Lent period and Holy Week typically are filled with culturally rich weekend processions in Guadalupe. The ceremonies and blessings carried out by members of the Pascua Yaqui Tribe's various cultural societies blend Yaqui and Catholic spirituality and traditions.

Those religious ceremonies were scaled back this year but people still got together, Molina said.

She's convinced that large gatherings around Easter, Mother's Day and graduation spurred the virus's spread, despite state restrictions on large gatherings and the town's suspension of event permits.

Remaining vigilant

Attitudes are changing, though.

The idea of the virus was still a bit conceptual for many residents in late April and May. Now, most people have experienced or know someone who has experienced COVID-19, said Town

Manager Jeff Kulaga.

People are refraining from gathering in large groups and taking more personal responsibility.

"It got real," he said. "People realized that you might be 35 years old and be OK but what about your elder tia or nana?"

While some residents initially were embarrassed to report that they had COVID-19 or to seek services, the town's education and testing efforts have helped normalize the virus, said Angelina Matuz, a member of the Pascua Yaqui Tribal Council.

People sharing their personal struggles with the disease have helped, too.

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Matuz and several of her immediate and extended family members contracted the virus in May. Her daughter, who has diabetes, was hospitalized for three days.

She shares her story in the hope that others will take the virus seriously and to show that it's not something to be embarrassed about, she said.

"This isn't something that's bad or only certain people get. It can happen to anyone," she said.

The number of new cases week to week has declined over the last month and no new cases were reported in the last week. The rate at which residents are testing positive has leveled off and has remained at about two times the county rate since late June, according to the weekly report the county continues to provide to the town.

Serious cases remain low and no hospitalizations were reported in the last two weeks. Molina estimates about 10 Guadalupe residents and a handful more people with ties to the community, including EMT Jose Gomez, have died from COVID-19.

Officials say they must remain vigilant and continue following distancing and mask protocols even as metrics improve in Guadalupe and statewide.

Molina worries that students returning to school could lead to another spike in cases if they contract the virus and bring it back to their parents or grandparents. There's an estimated 1,100 school-aged children who get bused to three different districts in nearby Tempe and Ahwatukee.

Even one sick child could help the virus “spread like wildfire,” she said.

But she's hopeful the town is headed in the right direction and said they couldn't have done it without help from the tribe, county and other partners.

"We were kind of forgotten at first. Small cities and towns shouldn't have had to fight this hard," she said. "But I think we're catching up."

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