

Serving Vulnerable and At-Risk Populations During the COVID-19 Response



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic is revealing stark truths regarding the needs of vulnerable and at-risk populations during times of crisis and disaster. Responders around the world have found that populations that were already considered vulnerable or at-risk prior to the pandemic are now more vulnerable than before.¹ Infection rates have been shown to increase among populations most directly impacted by social vulnerabilities.² Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has created new economic, social, and health vulnerabilities for populations that were not vulnerable prior to the pandemic.

For all active responders, it remains a significant priority to close gaps between vulnerable and at-risk populations and the services to meet their needs. In the City of San José, city officials, first responders, healthcare providers, and community stakeholders took initiative to create innovative approaches to complex problems presented by the pandemic in order to best reach and support vulnerable and at-risk populations. Many of these populations are those who are considered to possess Access and Function Needs (AFN). The City of San José in alignment with California Government Code 8598.3 defines the AFN population as “individuals who have developmental or intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, chronic conditions, injuries, limited English

¹ The United Nations Sustainable Development Group, *COVID-19 and Human Rights: We are all in this together*, April 2020. <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/COVID-19-and-Human-Rights.pdf>

² Ibraheem M. Karaye and Jennifer A. Horney, “The Impact of Social Vulnerability on COVID-19 in the U.S.: An Analysis of Spatially Varying Relationships,” *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, vol:59:3, September 1, 2020, pp. 317-325. [https://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797\(20\)30259-2/fulltext](https://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797(20)30259-2/fulltext)

proficiency or who are non-English speaking, seniors, children, people living in institutionalized settings, or those who are low income, homeless, or transportation disadvantaged, including, but not limited to, those who are dependent on public transit or those who are pregnant³.” This paper highlights key successes and best practices utilized by the City, as well as areas for improvement and existing gaps that will inform future responses by both the City and other jurisdictions.

SITUATION OVERVIEW

Before the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in the United States, the City established regular meetings to discuss active response and to prepare for the pandemic. They reached out to international partners in Singapore and Hong Kong to attain a better understanding about the scope of the virus, and what their city could soon be facing. Like every city in the United States, the City continues to face significant challenges during the ongoing response. Many of these challenges were due to the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Throughout the United States those within in the AFN community were affected far more than other individuals within the community. An outsized number of COVID-19 deaths occurred in congregate facilities including but not limited to nursing facilities, assisted living communities, and correctional facilities and as of August 2020 those in these facilities made up 42% of all COVID-19 deaths in the United States despite making up only 0.6% the population⁴. Given the correlation between impoverished communities and race in the United States it became evident that the African American, Latinx, amongst other communities were more likely to contract the virus, yet the necessary healthcare requirements needed to assist these communities did not meet the need⁵. The City of San José was no exception to this finding as their less affluent and more racially diverse neighborhoods saw higher rates of COVID-19 cases than others. This was exponential for the elderly population in East San José as this population was ravaged by COVID-19.

New information about the novel coronavirus rapidly evolved in the midst of the response. City officials and first responders were required to maintain an adaptable approach while still responding to information requests and the needs of the public. However, some of these challenges are unique to the characteristics of the City. San José is one of the most diverse cities in the United States. Less than half of the households in San José speak English as their primary language.⁶ Imbalance in technology is also a concern, with over 10,000 households having no access to the internet.⁷ This limited the platforms available for use in order to spread awareness of services and perform outreach to vulnerable and at-risk populations. It also created barriers to virtual education as public schools across California began to shut down in mid-March. In addition to technological constraints the City was unable to meet the needs of its most at-risk citizens and could not provide and prioritize personal protective equipment (PPE) dissemination to AFN community partner organizations or individuals⁸.

³ Government Code 8593.3. *California Legislative Information*.

https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/codes_display_Section.xhtml?lawCode=GOV§ionNum=8593.3.

⁴ The Partnership for Inclusive Disaster Strategies. “Failures in COVID-19 Response Harm People with Disabilities and Older Adults.” <https://disasterstrategies.org/report-failures-in-covid-19-response-harm-people-with-disabilities-and-older-adults/>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ San José 2010 Census Data <https://www.sanJoseca.gov/home/showdocument?id=23763>

⁷ Digital Inclusion and Childcare Small Group Workshop

⁸ AFN Small Group Workshop

The COVID-19 pandemic has been one of the most unpredictable and far-reaching disasters in modern history and further revealed the inequities that face the AFN community on a day-to-day basis. City staff and community partners attempted to address many of these gaps in services by creating new resources for response and inclusion yet were unable to meet these needs for a myriad of reasons. A number of the City's innovative and synergistic approaches became best practices during the response and may benefit future responses to crises that require a multi-jurisdictional activation. The City was tasked with taking a proactive stance to meet translation needs as new health guidance regarding slowing the spread of COVID-19 for their diverse and multidimensional residents.

Additionally, many residents require assistance with immediate needs, such as food security, housing, and transportation. Because of health guidance related to social distancing, responders needed to plan their approach to housing and transportation access with public health at the forefront of concern. They recognized key strategic partners already involved on the frontlines of addressing the needs of vulnerable and at-risk populations and leveraged those relationships to expand outreach efforts. The City recognizes that there are still significant forward strides to be made. As such, City officials launched a community survey to better understand the problems facing the AFN community during COVID-19. Further, the City is working collaboratively with key community stakeholders to plan two AFN Community Sessions with the goal of devising actionable solutions to the most common problems uncovered by the survey.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND STEPS TO MEET CHALLENGES

The San José community is one of the most diverse in the 25 most populous cities in the United States. First responders were tasked with taking a proactive stance to meet translation needs alongside new emerging health guidance regarding slowing the spread of COVID-19. Hand in hand with that task came the issue of ensuring the internet platforms used for publishing these materials were accessible so that vulnerable and at-risk populations could easily read and use them.

To meet these needs, the City Emergency Operations Center (EOC) established the Language Access Unit within the modular structure of the Incident Command System (ICS) as a way to ensure populations within the city that did not speak English as a first language received timely information regarding the City's COVID-19 response.

While establishing the Language Access Unit was a monumental step toward ensuring equitable crisis communications, the City initially struggled to establish a rhythm that yielded timely and culturally-effective translations during the early phases of the COVID-19 response. The City of San José is the only city in the top 25 most populous cities in the United States to disseminate public messaging in five different languages, including English, Spanish, Vietnamese, Simplified Chinese, and Traditional Chinese. During the response, the Emergency Public Information Officer (EPIO) within the EOC produced Flash Reports which were published twice per day (morning and afternoon). These reports contain pertinent updates and resources in a creative way to keep the residents and community stakeholders informed about ways to promote personal and community health and safety. Inefficiencies were uncovered as the early Flash Reports were developed in English and once finalized and published to the City's website, were then provided to the Language Access Unit for translations to occur. This workflow created a barrier to the

Language Access Unit's ability to release the same information across the City's most widely spoken languages.⁹

Improvements were made and success was achieved. Working collaboratively, the EPIO and the Language Access Unit refined the workflow and reduced the time required to translate and transcreate Flash Reports and other public messaging. The EOC also produced "Flash Reports," which were developed by the Public Information Officer and translated into Spanish and Vietnamese. These bite-sized updates kept residents up to date in a creative and accessible way.

The City also identified key influencers from the community including local celebrities, athletes, and sports mascots to market and spread awareness of public health messaging videos covering key public practices such as wearing a mask, practicing proper social distancing, and personal hygiene measures such as handwashing.

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To meet these needs, the City's EOC launched a Local Assistance and Economic Recovery Task Force to connect with the most vulnerable and at-risk residents of San José, reaching out with basic needs such as food, shelter, health care, and reliable income using innovative and nonconventional methods. The Local Assistance and Economic Recovery Task Force launched a Virtual Local Assistance Center (VLAC) for community members that connected citywide information and resources with the pre-existing 311 telephone line.

The City recognized the growing need to address food insecurity and expanded its food and necessities function to support the County of Santa Clara with its food provision program for individuals and households impacted by the pandemic. They deployed over 6,000 volunteers to support the meal distribution effort. At the peak of the City's food distribution efforts, they were able to provide more than 3.2 million meals per week to those in need. For more information on these efforts please refer to "Food Insecurity" White Paper attached to the OAR.

To address community needs for shelter during quarantine or for individuals experiencing homelessness, the City implemented programs that provided new services, such as utilizing Cal OES-provided trailers, hotel/motel room rentals, and setting up sanitation stations at encampments.

Creative innovations in technology improved the resilience and efficiency in response and supported both the City and its partners while providing assistance to vulnerable and at-risk populations. The EOC launched a Digital Inclusion Branch, which launched a Priority Index as a GIS tool to determine the regions with the greatest need for resources throughout the City, which enabled the EOC team to quickly identify and respond to gaps in services to the community. The Digital Inclusion Branch in partnership with AT&T also launched the SJ Access Hotspots Program which distributed free Wi-Fi hotspots to the community in order to provide internet and technology access to marginalized communities. A specific focus of this effort was to provide access to

⁹ Stakeholder Interview

school- aged youth as they transitioned from in- person to virtual learning. As the program continues and achieves the goal of providing this equity amongst students it could easily transition to providing technology equity across the entire City population.

LESSONS LEARNED & GAPS

As the operational period for the COVID-19 pandemic response continues on, the following are identified areas for improvement for the City while addressing gaps in services to vulnerable and at-risk populations and lessons learned. These areas for improvement may benefit future response efforts as well as inform ongoing COVID-19 response activities for other jurisdictions.

Translation and public-facing information services for the diverse community of San José have experienced success. However, a few groups have not had their needs met as messaging to the community is not disseminated in Tagalog, a language for which the number of primary speakers meets the City's requirements for translation. The Language Access Unit initially did not focus on translating into simplified English for those community members with low literacy rates or English language learners.

At the beginning of the pandemic some messaging for the community and external stakeholders was not prepared and translated in time for landmark events such as the statewide and local stay-at-home orders and non-essential business shutdowns. While the creation of the Language Access Unit seeks to solve this issue, the City should continue to prioritize the translation and distribution of public-facing information and could use templates of materials developed from this response in order to more rapidly deploy information in the future.

Messaging materials related to COVID-19 also deployed the use of idiosyncrasies that translate well in English, but do not have an equivalent in other languages. This creates additional confusion and sometimes requires community organizations to alter the translation for vulnerable and at-risk populations. The City can avoid this occurring in the future by using translation vendor pools and drawing upon the resources available from community partners to create public messaging in the native language, rather than translating English materials. languages.

Another language barrier that has arose through COVID-19 response is how the City communicates using American Sign Language (ASL) and closed captioning for meetings and messaging. The City should prioritize ways to communicate messaging through ASL and closed captioning channels in the same way it employs messaging for other languages mentioned throughout this paper. The City needs to ensure consistent ASL and all messaging for the community. The City should also employ the use of Otter.ai for closed captioning creation during tele-conferencing on platforms like Zoom. Addressing this issue will solve a technology barrier that is stopping some AFN members from being a part of the conversation.

AFN community members have also raised a number of concerns regarding issues involving access to transportation to both food distribution and COVID-19 testing sites. While the food distribution effort was an incredible success for the City the effort did not include a delivery service method for those who did not qualify for Meals on Wheels, which is limited to individuals over the age of 60. If food distribution of this scale is going to remain an operation of the City, it is prudent that the Food & Necessities Branch works with the Transportation Department to bolster a food delivery program or a way to transport individuals in need to the distribution sites.

Another concern raised by the community was fact that many large-scale COVID-19 testing sites were not accessible to some members of the AFN community. City transit staff was not allowed to take community members to drive through testing sites, due to guidelines put into place by the City to mitigate the risk of driver exposure.

However, the large-scale testing sites were oftentimes set up far away from the accessible entrances and thus made it extremely difficult for members of the AFN community to access the testing site. In addition, there were multiple complaints that the vehicles used for transport were unsanitary and had not been properly cleaned in between passengers. In the future the City will need to make every effort to ensure community members can easily access large-scale testing sites and should brainstorm solutions and guidelines for allowing drivers to take individuals to drive through sites. This would not only be helpful for testing sites but would proactively assist in planning for assisting AFN community members receive vaccinations from these sites.

Given the rapid nature of COVID-19 response the City was required to act at an incredibly fast pace to mitigate issues facing the AFN community. In doing so they were unable to engage with community-based organizations (CBOs), such as FAST, that the City did not already have active MOUs with. This breakdown in engagement led to a number of missteps that led to wasted costs and time. In the future the City should engage these partners more in meeting such as the City Council's AFN Subcommittee, where partner organizations can assist with disaster services efforts and provide continual input.

CONCLUSION

In the face of a rapidly evolving global pandemic, the City of San José acted quickly to anticipate the needs of vulnerable and at-risk populations within its jurisdiction. By focusing on ensuring public guidance was easily accessible by a diverse community, the City succeeded largely in overcoming language barriers to vital public health and safety information. Additionally, the City showcased its ability to creatively problem solve to meet unanticipated needs while operating in a long and grueling response. New and pre-existing partnerships with CBOs and businesses were utilized to rally the community in support of those most vulnerable and at-risk.

The City used innovative technology to streamline response approaches and identify gaps in services for vulnerable and at-risk communities, resulting in targeted outreach campaigns to those most at need during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Other jurisdictions could benefit from incorporating a Language Access Unit into their EOC structure during activation. The establishment of this unit centered EOC efforts to respond to gaps in services to vulnerable and at-risk populations, and provided the resources needed to undertake the task of translation all informational materials into five different languages for the public.

Additionally, the creative problem solving with strategic partners from the community could benefit future response by thinking outside of the box, innovating using technological tools, and anticipating barriers to internet and other platforms for the distribution of informational materials.

The successes and areas for improvement experienced by the City of San José are only a surface-level view of the complexities of this unprecedented response. This paper demonstrates that future responders have the capacity to build upon these successes, empowering them to meet critical gaps in services during crisis and disaster events.



COVID-19 PRELIMINARY OPERATIONAL ASSESSMENT REPORT (OAR)

SAN JOSÉ OFFICE OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT