

IMPLEMENTATION SPOTLIGHT

FEBRUARY 2021

Community Health Promoters Championing COVID-19 Response Among Florida Farmworkers

PROBLEM

Farmworkers Isolated from Social Support and Medical Care

Immokalee, a city of about 27,000 in southwest Florida less than an hour away from the wealthy enclave of Naples, is part of a parallel world interconnected to the area's wealth by generations of exploitation. There, a large community of migrant farmworkers, about half of whom are undocumented, share a history of abuse in the agricultural industry, which was built on slavery, codified by legislation, and sustained through exploitation of migrants. Although these farmworkers are the heart of Collier County's \$4 billion agricultural economy, they do not reap that wealth. Instead, inequities structured into their living and working conditions have contributed to the devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic for this community, which at times has had highest density of COVID-19 cases in the state.

For migrant workers in Immokalee, a positive test result can lead to unemployment, food insecurity, and eviction. In addition, testing opportunities have been limited due to transportation and schedule challenges, while test results require navigation of an English language online portal. This lack of access to testing and fear of the economic consequences of a positive test have meant many cases of COVID-19 go undiagnosed, increasing disease spread, deaths, and economic devastation.

The situation in Immokalee has been exacerbated by a lack of a coherent federal and state response and limited insight by decisionmakers into local context. Consequently, many who become infected have little access to the information, clinical care, and social support they need to safely quarantine and isolate if infected by or exposed to the COVID-19 virus.



INNOVATION

Community Health Promoters

Health Promoters, hired from the community and fluent in locally spoken languages including Haitian Creole and Spanish, have become the lynchpin in connecting vulnerable community members to everything from information, to testing, to health care, direct cash transfers, to food. The Health Promoters, also known as *Promotoras*, go door-to-door visiting all households in a vulnerable community. They are able to identify social support needs, make referrals for support, and follow up to ensure needs have been met.

They collect data as they go, enabling program evaluation and improvement. After identifying positive cases at mobile testing events, the Health Promoters also perform more targeted outreach, accompanying people who test positive for COVID-19 and their contacts through isolation and quarantine, with the goal of breaking the chains of transmission and supporting those in need. Since July 2020, the Health Promoters have successfully visited over 2,500 households and reached over 8,000 people.

APPROACH

Reaching the Last Mile of Social Vulnerability

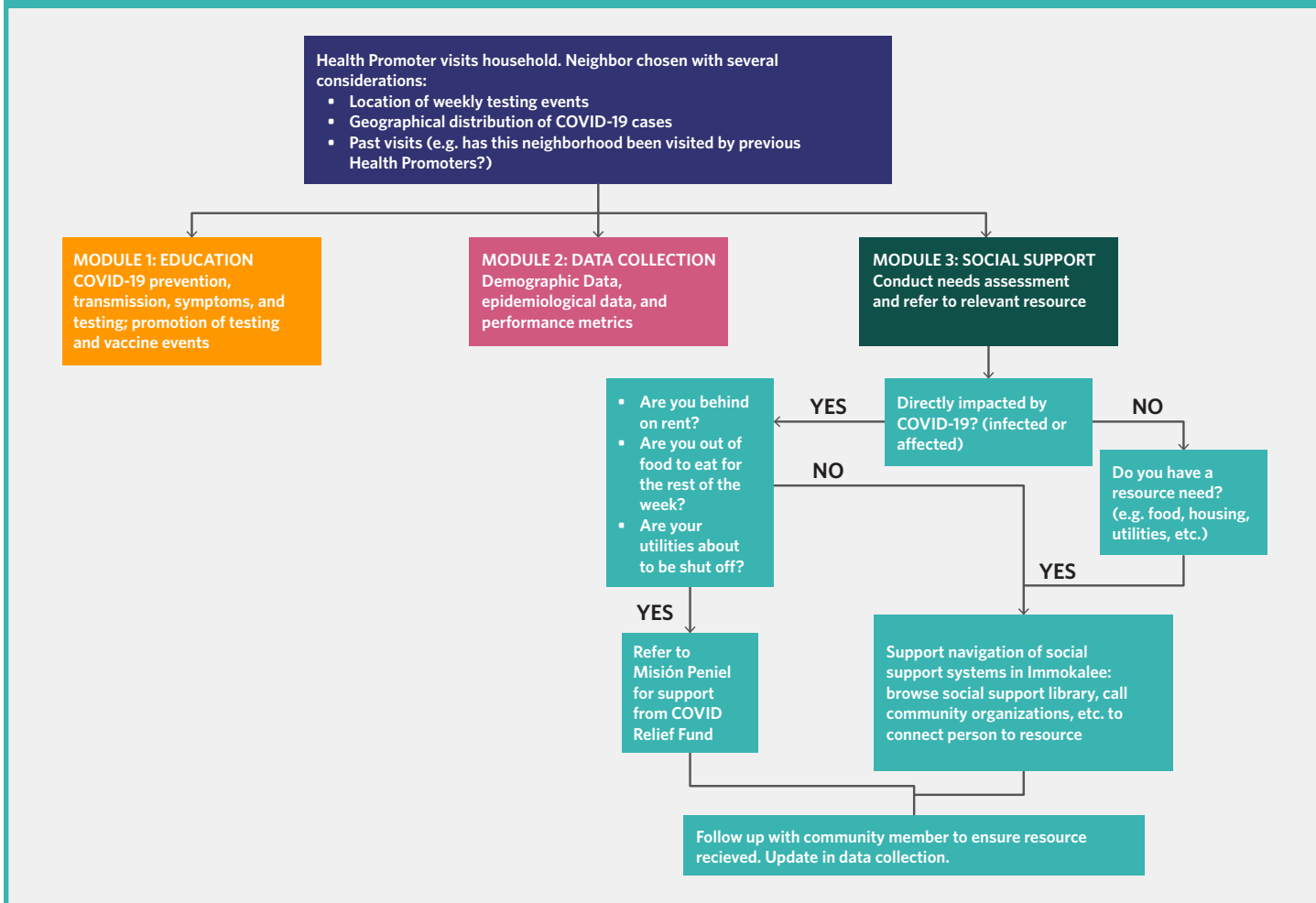
Partners In Health (PIH) began work in Immokalee in June 2020 to build an equitable COVID-19 response with a team of local partners. Based on organizational expertise from decades fighting infectious diseases around the world in the most remote and low-resource settings, often referred to as the “last mile” of health care delivery, PIH developed a plan to train and manage the *Promotoras* program.

In Immokalee, the “last mile” represents not only physical distance, but also social vulnerability. To reach the most vulnerable, PIH has supported the Healthcare Network of Southwest Florida, a federally qualified health center, to recruit, train, and deploy *Promotoras*. These staff represent local linguistic, racial, ethnic, and geographic diversity and help bridge the gap between the health care system and the community.



Right: Maria Plata, Lead Health Promoter for Southwest Florida with Healthcare Network, knocks on a resident's door during door-to-door COVID-19 education canvassing along with team members from HCN and PIH in Immokalee, FL on Friday, Dec. 4, 2020. Photo by Scott McIntyre for Partners In Health

Decision and Action Tree for Health Promoters during household visits





PARTNERSHIPS

Community-Based and Trusted

Embedding Health Promoters into the structure of a local organization like the Healthcare Network and in partnership with community organizations leverages the resources and trust that local partners have established over time. In Immokalee, because *Promotoras* are administratively housed within the Healthcare Network rather than a government public health entity, they refer patients with COVID-19 or chronic conditions directly to medical care at the Network's clinics.

In addition to the Healthcare Network, other key local partners include Collier County Department of Health; the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), an internationally-recognized human rights and social justice organization, and Misión Peniel, a ministry of charity that provides relief to Immokalee farmworkers.

By partnering with the CIW, the Health Promoters build upon decades of advocacy and trust-building established by this organization to respond to the needs of the community. The CIW's history and expertise also helped ensure that recruitment strategies for the Health Promoters were inclusive of marginal communities like migrant workers, and that training modules reflected community values.

Through the Hollyhock Fund, PIH has worked with Misión Peniel to support currently infectious cases to isolate and to alleviate the long-term social and economic burden on individuals who were previously infected with COVID-19. Since implementing this social support system in December 2020, the team has helped to distribute over \$210,000 in cash transfers to households impacted by the pandemic.

NEXT STEPS

When neighbors trust the person knocking on their door and know they will be able to feed their families and pay their rent—even if they have to quarantine due to COVID-19—they are more likely to be empowered and enabled to get tested and to self-isolate when needed. This helps to protect the whole community's health and well-being and break chains of transmission.

Going forward, PIH and its partners intend to apply the same principles to ensure that community members are well informed about vaccination and that, ultimately, all who chose to get vaccinated in Immokalee, can.

"I really admire the love that you all have for the patient, to make sure we are all ok and we have what we need. I am so thankful for you and that you found me."

—Recent patient who engaged with local Health Promoter, receiving testing referral, direct cash transfer, and continued monitoring and support.

www.pih.org/stopcovid

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Partners In Health (PIH) is a social justice organization that responds to the moral imperative to provide high-quality health care globally to those who need it most. From Newark, NJ, to North Carolina to Navajo Nation, PIH has been working with public health departments and community partners around the country to develop comprehensive COVID-19 public health response strategies. Learn more: www.pih.org/stopcovid