

The year 2020 is designated as “the Year of the Nurse”—no one knew how true that moniker would be, as we watch the pandemic continue to unfold and nurses lead on the front line of all aspects of health care. Over 30,000 nurses serve in federally qualified health centers (health centers). A NACHC webinar held on October 15, 2020 describes how nurses from three diverse health centers are meeting the challenge of providing extensive flu vaccine coverage to their populations while also planning for COVID-19 vaccine readiness. These nurses, and their associated innovative models for care, are highlighted here.

Raising Immunization Rates, Lowering Costs, and Expanding Access in Southwest Chicago

Esperanza Health Center offers a medical home to over 35,000 patients at four locations in the southwest area of Chicago. Primarily serving a Latinx population, staff at Esperanza are both bilingual and bicultural, aware of the nuances in health beliefs, health access and health barriers that impact influenza immunization coverage in their community. **Nate Peña**, MSN, RN, CNL is a care manager at the center who leads efforts to overcome traditional barriers to care through collaboration and innovation.

Unlike many centers whose uninsured population has been dramatically reduced by the Affordable Care Act, Esperanza’s population still struggles with coverage—approximately 30% of the users are uninsured. Immigration status is largely responsible for this gap in coverage, but the center doesn’t let the gap extend to health care delivery. After noting that 47% of their insured population received flu vaccine last year as compared to 39% of their uninsured, Esperanza set out to improve equity.

Nate notes that people often assume that vaccine hesitancy—lack of vaccine acceptance—is to blame when minority or cross cultural patients have lower rates than others. What Esperanza found though, was that cost was the real barrier. Collaborating with Chicago’s Department of Health, the center was able to obtain free vaccine supply for the uninsured. In response, Esperanza saw an increase in demand for vaccine this year as compared to last, particularly among the uninsured. There has been over a 25% increase in requests for vaccine at office visits and rates are expected to exceed previous years despite the constraints of the pandemic.

Access is also something Nate and his colleagues are always working on. As infection control methods have altered in-person medical care, Esperanza has decided to offer vaccines outdoors and via a drive-through model. Chicago has harsh summers and winters, but

staff are committed to working with the weather as well as with the culture. Pods were used for COVID-19 testing and are now being tested for vaccine delivery.

Nate is weighing how their current flu vaccine delivery methods may be adapted or integrated into COVID-19 vaccine care. First, they will aim to better understand their population—the health beliefs, acceptance and challenges that confront their Latinx neighbors as it relates to a new vaccine. Surveys on attitudes and beliefs about a potential vaccine are being planned. He stays attuned social media and community communications to better design health messages that proactively support evidence-based practice while countering misinformation.

Nate pays attention to provider and staff challenges, too. He is considering how to deal with possible needle shortages, staff limitations and increased risk for injuries. Needle sticks are a concern as packaging differs from other vaccine delivery modes, compounded by changes in location of actual service. A dedicated immunization room or exam room makes routine more repetitive with increased safety in redundancy. Switching to drive-through, outreach and pod locations requires extra care and education to protect from inadvertent needle injury.

Nate doesn’t seem fazed. He speaks with deep knowledge of his patients and obvious admiration for his colleagues. They aren’t strangers to challenge and are open to adapting as the situation requires. In this time of uncertainty, it looks like Esperanza is set to substantially improve flu vaccine coverage while attending to the needs that their patients prioritize. When COVID-19 vaccine is ready, Esperanza will be too.