

With Latinos making up nearly half of COVID deaths in Texas, these businesses have committed to vaccinating staff

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Austin American-Statesman

After two men on her construction crew were bedridden from COVID-19 in early 2020, Maricela Rodriguez Barr made a commitment to her team that their health and safety would always come first.

That mindset has continued to grow statewide as several Latino business leaders and owners have pledged to fully vaccinate their workers — a majority of whom they say are Hispanic.

With Latinos making up nearly half of COVID-19 related deaths in Texas and in Austin, and still lagging in vaccination rates, the statewide business campaign is being led by the Texas Association of Mexican American Chambers of Commerce and calls on business owners to “Say Adios to COVID” and fully vaccinate their workforces by Nov. 30.

J.R. Gonzáles, executive vice chairman for the chamber, said this move was a “no-brainer” considering that Latinos make up a large portion of essential and front-line workers, making them most vulnerable to the coronavirus and less likely to have time to get vaccinated.

Rodriguez Barr, president and CEO of the Barr Co., an Austin-based construction company, employs 11 full-time people and works with subcontractors across the state.

Both of her sickened workers, who are Latino, suffered severe symptoms from the coronavirus, she said. Their health and safety meant requiring masks on sites, setting up sanitizing stations and requiring vaccinations as soon as they were available.

It also meant being able to provide workers with paid time off if they were sick with the virus as well as time off to get vaccinated.

“We made a commitment as a team that as soon as the vaccine came out, we were all going to do it,” Barr said. “I took everyone with me that I could once it was out. I am lucky to be educated, and in addition to that, there is a fear that (the undocumented) will get caught or deported.”

Rodriguez Barr said she took the time to educate her people about where to go and how to get vaccinated, emphasizing that the vaccine was free and the best protection and that residential status did not matter.

Critical part of the labor force

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Latinos made up 18% of the labor force nationwide in 2019 — before the coronavirus pandemic.

Data also revealed that 56% of Hispanics worked in service, construction, maintenance, agriculture, transportation, production and material moving jobs.

Access to information — especially in Spanish — has been lacking, which has further slowed the vaccination rates among the community, González said.

As of Thursday, 32.5% of Hispanics statewide were fully vaccinated. Almost 40% of Texas residents identify as Hispanic, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In Travis County, state data show vaccination rates lagging among the community with 21.76% fully vaccinated, where 33.6% of the population identifies as Hispanic.

“Latinos are a majority of the workforce, and they are out there on the front lines and have no choice but to be out there,” González said. “Essential workers can’t work from home; they have to be in their job. And if (one of) the largest groups of people in the workforce are dying from COVID, that is a problem.”

Several businesses owners across the state agree, saying that without their employees they are unable to efficiently run their businesses.

More than 100 businesses have signed on to the pledge, 25 of which are in Austin, as of Thursday. Texas has more than 700,000 Hispanic-owned businesses and the goal is to have at least 1,000 businesses take the pledge, González said.

Rodriguez Barr said that every single one of her employees is fully vaccinated. And when it comes to hiring subcontractors, she ensures that crews are fully vaccinated as well.

“We haven’t had a lot of issues with people resisting the need to get vaccinated,” she said. “I think most people want it. Some people have medical reasons for not getting vaccinated, and I think that is OK. I will just make sure they wear a mask and sanitize frequently.”

Barr said the community has to take care of one other.

“We all have families and people we love, and if we don’t protect each other, it’ll be a chain reaction of people getting sick,” she said.

'We spend so much time together'

Asadas Grill, a sister restaurant to Casa Chapa in North Austin, also joined the campaign. The restaurant, which opened just east of Interstate 35 near Parmer Lane about six months ago, has about 85% of its staff fully vaccinated.

General Manager Rita Barragan, whose family owns the chain of restaurants, said that, one by one, the staff has been getting vaccinated, which has started a conversation that is driving others to get vaccinated.

From personal stories about relatives and friends who have died of COVID-19 to shared experiences of getting the vaccine, Barragan has tried to create a positive environment for her employees to discuss the topic as well as be a resource for those who are unfamiliar with how and where to get the vaccine.

She said employees are given time off to get vaccinated and time to recover — without losing critical work hours.

“We want the customers to feel safe and our team to feel more at ease, especially since we spend so much time together,” Barragan said.

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The chamber is partnering with Your Shot Texas, a philanthropic collaborative aimed at filling the gaps in vaccine confidence by providing information and resources.

A website dedicated to the campaign provides infographics, flyers, and talking points in English and Spanish on COVID-19 and about the importance and safety of getting vaccinated, as well as a link to sign the pledge.

In the coming weeks, the chamber will be working with statewide partners and organizations, including those who have signed the pledge, to set up vaccination clinics in restaurants, businesses, construction sites and other places where the vaccine can be easily accessed, Gonzáles said.

Vaccines will be available for all communities, not just Latinos, he said.

“We are going to bring the vaccine to them and knock those barriers down that prevent people from getting vaccinated, and we hope they will encourage their family members to do that same,” Gonzáles said.