UC SANTA BARBARA
THE Current

August 6, 2020
Shelly Leachman

Force for Good

The still surging COVID-19 crisis has disproportionately affected marginalized communities nearly anywhere you look. That disparity is marked in northern Santa Barbara County, where a vast majority of positive cases have been recorded among its populations of Indigenous migrants and undocumented residents.

The Latinx and Indigenous Migrant COVID-19 Response Task Force —conceived by Dr. Van Do-Reynoso, director of the Santa Barbara County Department of Public Health, and helmed by physician Melissa Smith, director of health equity initiatives at UC Santa Barbara — is working to help these individuals by focusing on their experiences, health education and equitable treatment in the face of the pandemic.

The group also counts multiple UCSB graduate and undergraduate students, as well as several staff and faculty affiliated with the UCSB Center for Publicly Engaged Scholarship, among its collaborating partners.

“We are trying to respond, rapidly, to emerging challenges and realities of this pandemic,” said Smith, who also works in the Santa Barbara County Health Care Center in Santa Maria, caring mainly for Indigenous women farm workers. “With the recent spike in cases, which is happening primarily in North County, there’s been a deeper dive looking at data there to inform strategies. And our task force will support that in whatever way we can.

“The task force is focused on strengthening collaboration between the Santa Barbara County Department of Public Health and cross-sectoral partners who work

with Latinx and Indigenous migrant communities," added Smith, also chair of the expert healthcare panel convened to guide the reopening process in Santa Barbara County.

The task force grew organically out of a course that Smith co-teaches, with Melissa Morgan-Consoli and Maryam Kia-Keating of UCSB's Gevirtz Graduate School of Education, about community-based participatory research on health disparities. Grounded in social justice, the approach calls for people who are disproportionately and directly impacted by health inequities to be involved in every stage of the research and subsequent action. In partnership with various community organizations and the Santa Barbara County Department of Public Health, projects tackled in the class over the past two years have centered on various health concerns of Santa Barbara County immigrant communities.

The course was wrapping up its 2020 winter quarter, which looked specifically at health concerns of the Latinx and Indigenous migrant communities, just as the virus began to swell.

"That's when Van Do-Reynoso asked if I could help create a task force to continue that focus on the concerns of immigrant and undocumented Latinx in the county, but drilling into how the COVID-19 pandemic is impacting them," Smith said. "We need to hear from people in those communities about their own lived experiences, so we applied those principles of community-based participatory research to the creation of this task force."

According to Nayra Pacheco Guzman, language justice associate with the task force and a representative of El Centro Santa Barbara, the work of task force members and participants has been key in developing ongoing innovative and culturally relevant solutions in the face of COVID-19 by the community for the community. "We operate out of language justice principles to ensure that community leaders can engage in the work as their fullest selves regardless of what language they speak so that the vital information and efforts developed also reach our community in the many languages spoken here," she noted.

"The task force has also been a space for growth via issues that need addressing at a larger level, as participants elevate systemic problems that affect our local prison population, LGBTQ+, Black and Pan-Asian members of our county," Pacheco Guzman continued. "We are being challenged to look at social intersections and

connect them through a public health and community lens.”

The group began meeting weekly by Zoom at the end of March and now has more than 150 participants representing over 60 organizations from across the county.

“It is a very vibrant, iterative process whereby we are hearing from community based organizations,” Smith said, “and some farm workers themselves call in with interpretation support, so we get to hear directly what is going on in their communities during the pandemic. Then collectively we troubleshoot, brainstorm about how we can address this challenge, share resources, make an action plan and carry it out.”

Those actions have included key messaging — in the way of videos, audio PSAs, radio announcements and ads on social networks, in multiple Indigenous languages — about how to protect against transmission, how and where to get a free COVID-19 test, where to find face coverings and handwashing resources, and contact tracing.

“Throughout the county you have essential workers — people cleaning the hospitals, people working in grocery stores — real frontline workers. And all those folks, most have low-paying wages and are more likely to be living multiple families to one apartment,” Smith said. “So not only are they experiencing increased risk of exposure due to the work they’re doing but they’re also in living situations that put them at greater risk because they can’t physically distance as easily as others can.

“That’s what is so strong and important about having all these different community organizations and institutions represented on this task force,” she added, “and our UC Santa Barbara students have been very involved and are making great contributions to these efforts.”

That includes Trevor Auldridge, a Ph.D. student in sociology at UCSB and National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellow. Having worked with Smith in her participatory research course, he contacted her to inquire about local efforts to promote health justice in response to COVID-19. She invited him to join the task force.

“I have extended family who have died from COVID-19; I have family members that have severe respiratory illnesses and other diseases that put them at an increased chance of getting COVID-19; and I have many friends and family who have lost employment because of the current economic crisis,” Auldridge said. “I figured I

could do community aid on their behalf in Santa Barbara, and the Task Force seemed like a very tangible medium to do so.

Auldridge in his role has conducted multiple projects deemed urgent by the collective. He developed a database of COVID-19 related grants for organizations providing direct relief to immigrant communities and assisted in research for successful grant applications. As reopening began, he worked with undergraduate collaborators Arianna Macias, Karina Cruz and Monica Bajwa to collect data for a demographic profile of people in the county who might be at greater risk of contracting the virus — “people of color, people in dense living circumstances, people in essential, low-paying occupations,” he noted — to understand what structural interventions might assist them.

“As an institution that hopes to develop a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society,” Auldridge said of UCSB, “we have an obligation to serve Indigenous communities through responsive, interdisciplinary public works.”

A 1.5 generation immigrant, Alex Maldonado, who landed on the task force through her ongoing work as a graduate student researcher with Smith, has directly experienced “the health issues of being a minority immigrant in the U.S.”

“As such, I am passionate about social justice and health equity, and I am very interested in community action that engages in advancing health equity efforts,” she said. “I know there is great wisdom and power in community work, and my dissertation revolves around health among immigrants in the U.S. Indigenous immigrant communities experience, an intersectionality that puts them in a particularly vulnerable position because of language and cultural barriers in both their home countries as well as destination countries.

“It is especially important to understand the obstacles that Indigenous migrant communities experience and to work alongside them to find collaborative ways that work to advance the health interests of every community,” Maldonado continued.

With that in mind, Smith said the task force has recently expanded its umbrella. In efforts to create a broader county-wide effort, they are seeking collaboration with leaders from the Black and Pan Asian communities, “to support health equity collaborative projects that are inclusive of all historically marginalized individuals.”

“Our UCSB team is interested in supporting and responding to the priorities of all of these communities,” Smith said. “As our partners from those communities can guide the work of the students, that’s what we are interested in doing. We have a strong desire to lift those concerns up.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.