

Empowering Latino Youth as Mental Health Advocates Project

Final Summary Report

Introduction

The primary objectives of this project are to empower Latino youth as the experts in developing innovative strategies using media arts to reach other Latino youth throughout Los Angeles County, provide education about the importance of mental health care, destigmatize mental health issues amongst Latino youth, develop culturally sensitive resources/tools, and to increase Latino youth engagement in the LACDMH stakeholder process.

Outreach and Recruitment Campaign

To begin this process, a promotional flier was developed, which included a logo to be incorporated into social media pages. From the outset, Youth Coordinator Britany Flores played a key role in making sure that materials were youth friendly and would captivate and engage our target youth population between 16-24 years of age. The project flier contained a QR code to a google application/screening form to gather basic demographic information, etc.

An intensive community outreach campaign was launched in the summer of 2022, and continued for over 6 months. In addition to having booths at community events, an email outreach campaign was launched, as well as networking and outreach via social media. One result of outreach and networking was having our flier included in the Trauma Prevention Initiative (TPI) First District Community Newsletter. TPI is a part of the Office of Violence Prevention of the LA County Public Health Department. This information, as well as project flier can be found on our Instagram page @latinxyouthmentalhealth.

Outreach was conducted at the following Community Events: (where we had a booth)

- Getty Festival “Getty 25 Celebrates San Gabriel Valley” - Community Art Festival at Tony Arceo Memorial Park in El Monte - 7/16 and 7/17 2022.
- Chicano Moratorium Event at Belvedere Park, East Los Angeles - 8/27/22
- Mount San Antonio College Community Resource Fair - 3/15/23
- Temple City High School Health Fair - 4/7/22
- City of Baldwin Park & DMH Service Area 3 Mental Health Awareness Month Event at Morgan Park - 5/13/23
- Baldwin Park High School Mental Health Wellness Fair - 5/19/23

Meetings were held at the following schools:

- New Village Girls Academy - Met with Principal Jennifer Quinones and Kyle Denman, Internship Coordinator;
- Baldwin Park High School - Met with NAMI Advisor Nicole Melamed and made a presentation at NAMI Club's "Mindful Monday" - 3/20/23;
- South El Monte High School - met with two students who completed online screening/application form;
- Sierra Vista High School - Met with a group of students who had completed online screening/application form (mostly Mental Health Pathway Students) and Teacher / NAMI Club Advisor Melanie Graf;

Shared information with the following schools:

- El Monte High School
- Fernando Ledesma High School - El Monte Union HS District
- Applied Technology High School (ATC) - Montebello Unified School District
- Helen Bernstein High School - LAUSD - met briefly w/ Principal Alejandro Ramirez
- Garfield High School - LAUSD, East LA
- Grand Arts High School (Ramon Cortines) - LAUSD, Downtown LA
- Whittier High School

Summary of Outreach and Recruitment

At the community events where we had a booth, we were able to speak to community members about the project, and pass out our flyers. All interested individuals were able to fill out their contact information on a sign-in sheet. Because Operation Street Kidz (OSK) also mentors young people through film production and produces films, there were specific sign-in sheets for both Latinx Youth Mental Health and for Film & Entertainment. Each person who expressed interest in the Mental Health Project received a follow-up email with the official flyer and link to the google form/application.

With regard to schools, one successful outcome of networking via social media was that we were able to successfully connect with the Baldwin Park High School NAMI Club via Instagram. So when we made a "cold call" and went to the school right at the end of the school day, we were very fortunate to be able to meet with Teacher / NAMI Advisor.

This resulted in OSK being invited to a “Mindful Monday” NAMI Club event in her classroom, and later we had a booth at their mini-Mental Health Fair in May, which was an excellent student-organized event!

Another outreach success was LACDMH's Service Area 3 Health Awareness Month event in May in the city of Baldwin Park. By networking with the Baldwin Park Unified School District at this event, we were able to meet School Psychologist (at the District), Perla Mendez, who connected us with the NAMI Advisor at Sierra Vista High School immediately following this event. This connection successfully led us to recruit a group of interested students from this school.

More often than not, however, physically visiting a high school did not yield any positive results, and is extremely time consuming and labor intensive. Schools selected for “cold call” visits were all upon referral, or selected for a specific reason. For example, ATC High School (Montebello Unified) has already been training students to be mental health advocates and works with the Teen Line Program. Upon visiting the school, we were unable to speak to the teacher involved with this program, but received his email contact. After sending an introductory email, with flyer and link to application form, we received no response at all.

Other barriers resulted from the stigma of mental health in the Latino community. Many people who visited our booth at community events may have been fearful to discuss mental health challenges with other people around. They may even have been uncomfortable signing their name on the “mental health” interest sheet. Additionally, at the community events, we met community members of all ages. We met a mental health professional who was very, very interested in having her teenage niece (who was not present) participate in our project. The niece had been through a number of mental health challenges, but we were unable to connect with her, even though we followed up with the Aunt and sent her information to pass on to her niece. We also were working with a Latino high school teacher in El Sereno, who wanted his students to participate with us. But in the end, however, he said that it was difficult to mandate their participation, since they'd be doing it outside of school. The teacher's own son (a high school student), however, is one of our successful participants who recorded his story.

Strengths of participating in outreach events includes the fact that Operation Street Kidz has been mentoring young filmmakers for many years, and in the last two years launched a film production program. At two high school events that we participated in, this was a huge advantage, because many students are interested in the arts, media

and careers in entertainment. At Temple City High School, we had a booth at their health fair organized by the LA County Public Health Department. The two coordinators, Annette Trejo and Evelyn Gonzalez found our booth to be especially interesting to promote, and they were yelling into the bullhorn during lunch, inviting students to visit our booth. So we had many many students visit and talk to us, and we had many sign our interest form for film and entertainment. Much to our surprise, upon following up via email and phone with the Latino students, we found that several also had suffered from mental health challenges, and we had one student actually apply. While we were at the school, not one student mentioned any mental health issues with us.

Summary of Applicants and Participants

In total, we had 47 individuals complete our Google Form to apply to participate. Please see attached Excel spreadsheet for summary. One individual did not qualify, as he did not meet the age requirement (53 years of age). 19 additional individuals dropped out without attending any training sessions. Of the 19 who dropped out, we actively worked with 6 of these, through email communications as well as telephone meetings, and two we met with in person at their high schools. Here is a brief summary of the six:

- Maleenah, Age 20 - “a child of generational trauma.” She has been a previous participant in our film production program, and through this, we knew that there was a history of alcoholism in her family. Through telephone conversations where she shared her experiences, we understood that she had experienced severe trauma. It was too painful for her to move forward in sharing her story.
- Alina, Age 16 - She was actually more interested in participating in our film program and ended up dropping out.
- Fatima, Age 16 - Born in El Salvador, we met her at her high school. She was one of 5 students recommended by the school's Internship Coordinator. We met with these 5 students as a group to present the project, and Fatima and another student applied to participate. In working with Fatima one-on-one, she shared that she had a 2 year old daughter, and that she had serious anger issues, and really wanted to participate with us. We were working with her to register for the Youth MHFA training—she had asked if she could take the training while watching her baby. She was unable to take the virtual training, and ended up dropping out.

- Isabella, Age 16 - We met her through her high school, and she signed our interest form for film and entertainment. In following up with her via email, we also shared info about our Latinx Youth Mental Health Project, and to our surprise she applied.

She shared this in her application: "my father and mother both grew up not believing in mental health, so when I started to struggle and ask for help they shut me down and said that it was all in my head and the reason for having such low energy and not being able to get out of bed for most days physically was because I was "lazy" many times I would have to cry or beg for help from my father who would refuse to schedule appointments for me and one time I had a mental breakdown that led me to being hospitalized it was scary and a dark turning point for my family and me. Not only that but when it comes to medication it is looked at as a way to make yourself seem like "you want to be sick" and that is not true. I remember when I first started medication my mother was furious with me for agreeing to such a thing, and she got even angrier when

She was very enthusiastic about participating with us, and at first said that she talked it over with her parents and they agreed. When we were helping her register for Youth MHFA training, however, we believe that her parents did not let her take this training, and she suddenly dropped out.

- Bryan, Age 19 - Met and recruited him through our partner organization, the Boyle Heights Arts Conservatory. He applied to participate, because he wanted help with his Court (OSK has had a juvenile court program in the past). However, while we were working with him to register for the Youth MHFA training, he unfortunately was arrested for gun possession and went to the County jail.

- Marisol, Age 19 - girlfriend of Brian, who also ended up dropping out once he was arrested, as they had too many issues to deal with.

All of the 27 individuals on the spreadsheet have attended at least one training with us. Of these, 5 dropped out before advancing to work on their oral stories. The majority felt that it would be too difficult to share their story on camera. One of these, Daniel, was extremely enthusiastic about participating. He had also been a part of our film program, as an aspiring actor, model and filmmaker. He suffered extreme trauma, as a homeless foster youth and having spent several years in prison. He registered for the Youth MHFA training, and participated the first day. But we noticed that during the breakout session, everyone was engaged in role-playing exercises on how to communicate with someone contemplating suicide. It was at this point that he left the Youth MHFA training, and did not come back. After this, he informed us that he would not be able to record his story.

Summary of Pre and Post-Surveys

All participants completed the Pre-Survey prior to attending any training workshops. Then after recording their Oral Story, they completed the Post-Survey. In addition, results are discussed under “Lessons Learned” section below.

Training Workshops

Two virtual training sessions and the Youth Mental Health First Aid Training were mandatory components of the project.

Virtual Training #1 included an introduction to the project, as well as introduction to project staff and OSK. LACDMH liaison, Dr. Luis Guzman also participated in our first Virtual Training #1 session, to present an overview of the LA County DMH and the Latino UsCC. Virtual Training #2 covered Social Media, included ice-breaker activities and engaged participants in discussing social media strategies. Youth Coordinator Britany Flores moderated and designed these trainings.

Outline of Virtual Trainings: Also attached are the Power Point presentations for each of the two trainings

Welcome to “Empowering Latinx Youth Through the Lens as Mental Health Advocates”

- Introduction of DMH, Latino UsCC, and OSK
- Video of OSK
- Mission of Project
- Expectations of projects: participants
- Participants introductions - Ice Breakers
- Pillars: Arts, Community outreach, social media
- Participants take survey on pillars
- Slack: Communication
- Reminder/updates: youth mental health first aid training and services

“Introduction to Social Media : Empowering Latinx Youth Through the Lens as Mental Health Advocates”

- What is social media?

- Mission and Vision
 - Create content for various platforms to promote and spread awareness on mental health.
 - Utilize the arts to present information: music, films, painting, creative writing, etc.
- The importance of perspective
 - A picture is worth a thousand words
- Organization for social media safety
 - Statistics of the affects social has on youth
 - Statistics on cyberbullying
- Methods to staying safe on social media
 - Take care with what you share
 - Ask for permission/consent
 - Self check-in
- Creating a safe and enjoyable experience utilizing social media.
 - Free response
- Some effective social media platforms we can utilize
 - Free response
- Icebreakers
 - Different scenarios of posting information regarding national mental health day on different social media platforms

Youth Mental Health First Aid Training

This is an 8.5 hour training which we took over two consecutive days. We were able to work with the State of California Department of Education to customize a training session for our participants.

Youth Mental Health First Aid is designed to teach parents, family members, caregivers, teachers, school staff, peers, neighbors, health and human services workers, and other caring citizens how to help an adolescent (age 12-18) who is experiencing a mental health or addictions challenge or is in crisis. Youth Mental Health First Aid is primarily designed for adults who regularly interact with young people. The course introduces common mental health challenges for youth, reviews typical adolescent development, and teaches a 5-step action plan for how to help young people in both crisis and non-crisis situations. Topics covered include anxiety, depression, substance use, disorders in which psychosis may occur, disruptive behavior disorders (including AD/HD), and eating disorders.

Attached please find “Youth Mental Health First Aid Training Completion” and Spreadsheet of participants who completed the training that we set up “Operation Street Kidz YMHA” (Note: 2 additional participants completed Youth MHFA training on another day)

Recording of Oral Stories - “Stories of Resilience”

We met with each participant initially via telephone, and then in person one-on-one to begin to have them share their story. Through this process, we provided suggestions on structuring their story. We provided a “Documentary Structure,” which divides the story into three phases, beginning, middle and end (Please see attached). We encouraged each participant to feel free to share only what they are comfortable sharing, being cognizant of the possibility of being triggered recounting traumatic events.

The filming of the oral stories took place at the Boyle Heights Arts Conservatory and at the East Los Angeles Library. Our filmmakers worked with each participant, who gathered still photos and video clips to incorporate into their stories. The stories range from 4 minutes to about 20 minutes in length, as the content varied from one participant to the next.

Social Media Campaign and Networking

The completed “Stories of Resilience” have been published on our Latinx Youth Mental Health YouTube Channel. A Latinx Youth Mental Health Instagram page has been set up (@latinxyouthmentalhealth), with additional Instagram pages set up for each of the following Service Areas of LA County: Service Area 3 (@latinxyouthmentalhealthsa3), 4 (@latinxyouthmentalhealthsa4) and 7 (@latinxyouthmentalhealthsa7). A Tik Tok page Latinx Youth Mental Health has also been established. Participants have been promoting their own stories through their own personal social media platforms as well.

Project Outcomes

This project has been significant in establishing a foundation for Youth Mental Health Empowerment in three service areas of Los Angeles County, upon which we can expand in the future. The majority of participants who filled out an application to participate, expressed a strong desire to help, encourage and support other youth going through mental health challenges, and that they did not want others to suffer in isolation.

For all youth who joined the project, even if they did not record their story, at a minimum, they are aware that efforts are underway in LA County to support youth experiencing mental health challenges, and to address the stigma in the Latinx community.

Collectively, through the sharing of their stories and discussion of addressing the stigma of mental health in the Latinx community, each Youth Advocate developed increased awareness and knowledge of the power of their voice, and the potential to bring about positive change. We have had much discussion about the importance of increasing access to culturally sensitive therapists / service providers, as well as the real life challenges of high school and college students in accessing continuous and on-going care.

Our participants had varying degrees of experience in talking about their mental health challenges and sharing their stories. Youth Coordinator Britany Flores shared the fact that since she was diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder in high school and going through therapy, it took her about 5 years before she was able to comfortably talk about what she has been through. With this in mind, we proceeded with each participant with a supportive and compassionate mindset, understanding the difficulty in sharing their story. And that the process of talking about their experiences is a step forward in their healing journeys.

In addition, each “Story of Resilience” is unique and has the potential to positively impact many, many youth through social media. Three of our Youth Advocates who recorded their stories at the East LA Library actually were able to watch and listen to their peers share their stories on film during the live filming. This experience had a powerful impact on each of them, as they learned about difficult and painful experiences of their peers, and that they are not alone in experiencing challenges.

By the same token, we have witnessed excitement among youth after viewing some of our first “Stories of Resilience” published on our YouTube Channel. Viewing these videos definitely had a motivating impact on them in wanting to participate in the project and becoming Youth Mental Health Advocates to support and encourage their peers.

Youth Testimonials:

Andrea Barrientos: “Thank you once again for having me and listening to my story. It was also interesting to hear other people’s story face to face—it really opens your eyes to other people’s lives and what they have gone through.”

Benjamin Garcia: “Right now I’m being introduced to this new mental health thing, so I want to get more involved in it, I want to learn more about it and continue to be a part of this program. I want to help others... it’s very motivating for me, and knowing that things get better.”

Anahi Jimenez: “I’ve enjoyed the process of being part of this project and sharing my story. I’m hoping that it can encourage and help other youth, and to let others know that they are not alone.”

Lessons Learned

Empowering Latinx Youth through the Lens as Mental Health Advocates, was a project funded and coordinated by the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health and the nonprofit organization Operation Street Kidz. There were various challenges that were encountered throughout the process of conducting this project such as limited resources and participation.

It is to be noted that the project targeted Latinx youth in Los Angeles County, which limited data on youth mental health of different ethnic groups. As a result, this project is only effective to the Latinx community of Los Angeles County. Nevertheless, individuals of different ethnic groups found interest in the project, showcasing the necessity to continue the expansion of the project to other service areas and ethnic groups. By doing so, it allows the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health to gather more data on youth mental health across the spectrum which can lead to better services that lower the risk of mental health challenges among youth.

However, at the commencement of the project, there were 47 participants who completed the first phase of the project. After completing the first phase, various participants opted out of the project due to lack of communication. Additionally, after completing the second phase, more participants opted out of the project due to feelings of discomfort, difficulty speaking, and confusion. As a result, there were only 25 participants who completed the entire project. It is evident that the lack of participation was a significant challenge when gathering data on youth mental health. Through this opting out process, the lack of proper acknowledgment of participants' own understanding of their mental health significantly affected their ability to continue participating in the project. For that reason, it is important to understand and highlight the challenges that many youth encounter with regard to their mental health prior to recording oral stories. Thus, referring participants to proper resources that allow them to continue to process and learn about mental health outside of the project was required.

As previously discussed, the pre-survey indicated the basic information youth had regarding their personal views on mental health along with their own personal experiences. Additionally, a post-survey was conducted after completing the training and oral stories. As a result, there was a positive response regarding the ability to utilize social media as a tool to bring mental health awareness. More specifically, in the post survey, participants were asked, “How helpful is social media on raising mental health

awareness?”. Majority of participants' responses were ranging from 3-5, indicating a boost of confidence in participants' ability to utilize social media as a tool of advocacy.

Recommendations

Thus, the mental health project was a learning experience for both participants and OSK. There were various lessons and challenges throughout the process of conducting this project. It has come to our attention that there are a few recommendations for the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health on improving outreach and engagement to the Latino community in order to increase accessibility, penetration, and retention of Latino youth consumers and their families receiving mental health services. For instance, various participants expressed the lack of proper mental health resources within their school campuses. More specifically, participants like the USC student, Anahi expressed in her interview, the limited sessions students are granted before having to connect to an off-campus therapist. As a result, this enables a risk factor for youth to continue to receive support and services to assist their mental health. Given that, it is recommended that the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health create a collaboration with schools from K-12 and colleges to assist youth. Through this, many youth can also become aware of the possible workforce opportunities in mental health and ultimately decrease the lack of mental health workers in our county.

Additionally, the lack of parental education regarding mental health in the Latinx community has a significant effect on youth mental health. As previously discussed, participants ranged from ages 16-24. Various of our participants were high school students who were obligated to get consent from their guardians to participate in the project. This can create a barrier for participants who are under age that are interested in mental health projects and resources. For that reason, it is highly recommended for there to be more resources available for Latinx parents on mental health such as training and workshops. By doing so, this can allow parents to break transgenerational trauma, stigma, and create healthier relationships with their children.