

County supervisors to consider \$2.3 million to fund pilot program targeting neighborhoods hit hardest by Covid.

Pam Marino Dec. 19, 2020



After finishing a day of harvesting, about 30 migrant workers working for Fresh Harvest lined up to attend a training on Covid-19 safety procedures from Natividad medical residents. The initiative launched in April as an early effort by the agricultural industry to stop the spread of the virus among essential workers just as the Salinas Valley season was picking up. *Parker Seibold*

With a sense of urgency to combat Covid-19 among the Latino neighborhoods where the virus has wreaked the most havoc, the Monterey County Board of Supervisors scheduled a special meeting for noon on Monday, Dec. 21, to consider a nearly \$2.3 million pilot program to employ community health workers beginning Jan. 1.

Those workers would help educate families, as well as connect people who are tested with needed services, such as temporary housing for quarantine or isolation, cash assistance, food, medical care and information about employment rights.

The pilot program is [based on a similar program that's been underway in Fresno County for several months](#). That program uses *promotores*, trusted people from community-based organizations to reach out to people who may not know what services are available, or in the case of undocumented workers, are too afraid to come forward.

On Dec. 8, the group COPA, Communities Organized for Relational Power in Action, gave a presentation to the board asking for consideration of a program that would hire 100 community health workers to replicate in Monterey County what has been done in Fresno. One of the co-chairs of COPA's "Breaking the Chain of Infection" group, Jack Herbig, told supervisors COPA's proposal came out of more than 2,000

conversations with Latino families and individuals throughout Monterey County impacted by Covid.

Supervisor Luis Alejo urged the board to meet as soon as possible to create a program before it was too late.

"I'd hate for us to not get things rolling before the shutdown for winter holidays," he said, worrying that if the board waited until January after a winter recess, a program wouldn't get off the ground until February.

Alejo wanted to use \$6 million in CARES Act funding that County Budget Director Ezequiel Vega said wasn't going to be used by Dec. 31. That money was budgeted to go elsewhere to make up for budget gaps caused by the pandemic, Vega said. He didn't see the county having \$6 million to pay for an ongoing program.

Arguing the money was for a crisis situation, Alejo pushed back, insisting the board should have the flexibility to use the money.

"I don't want our story to be, 'Oh we had \$6 million, we just used it to reimburse other costs,'" Alejo said.

County Administrative Officer Charles McKee suggested his office and the Monterey County Health Department work with COPA to put together a proposal and bring something back to the board before the break.

The result is a recommendation, published late Friday afternoon, that includes spending almost \$2.3 million of cannabis tax money to fund the three-month pilot, from Jan. 1 to March, 31. The expenditure requires a vote of four of the five supervisors.

The plan includes paying 100 community health care workers \$1,000 per week for 12 weeks, along with seven data analysts and seven coordinators, for a total personnel cost of \$1.8 million. Other operating costs include personal protective equipment, printing, phones and travel. The budget also includes \$30,000 to pay for essential supplies people might need in quarantine, like food and diapers.

The implementation of the program and expenditure of the money will be overseen by the Community Foundation for Monterey County. The foundation will disburse the monies to eight community-based organizations that will hire the workers, including COPA, Building Healthy Communities, California Rural Legal Assistance and the city of Gonzales.

Last month, Dan Baldwin, the president/CEO of the Community Foundation, took on the role of leading a coalition of stakeholders from government, the agriculture and hospitality industries, health care and community groups to find ways to combat the continued rising number of cases of Covid-19 among the Latino community.

Baldwin is scheduled to give a presentation to the board on Monday, ahead of the discussion of the pilot program.

