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CENTERPIECE

Fielding a Virus

The agricultural season is ramping up for the second time during a pandemic. Is the County ready?

Joel Angel Juárez

Apr 16, 2021



Hartnell College medical student Alvaro “Varo” Hernandez-Torres, right, answers questions from a farmworker about the Covid-19 vaccine at Taylor Farms in Gonzales, Tues., Feb. 23, 2021.

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Juana Hernandez, 67, and her husband, Ciro, 69, sit in their truck waiting to receive their first dose of Covid-19 vaccine. Medical personnel come up to the windows, sanitize the skin of their upper arms, and administer each a shot simultaneously, through either window.

This Chualar couple of 49 years became part of a group of 300 farmworkers to be vaccinated on Feb. 25, at the first mass-vaccination clinic exclusively for farmworkers in Monterey County. One person arrived to the clinic by taxi and another person by bicycle.

“They’ve already administered a lot of vaccines, but I think that we’re still missing people,” Hernandez says in Spanish. She adds: “Even with the vaccine, we still need to continue taking care of ourselves because we don’t know who are the ones that have been vaccinated.”

At this time last year, no vaccine was available and the situation around the pandemic looked a lot different. A lot less was known about the virus at its onset, and U.S. Centers for Disease Control’s safety guidelines and other Covid-related resources had yet to be developed and refined. But the start of the pandemic coincided with the beginning of harvest season.

The Monterey County Health Department reported 182 cases of Covid-19 by April 16, 2020. Four months later, that figure increased to 1,276 people infected – and 31 percent of these cases, for which occupation information is known, were agricultural workers. These numbers began to later level out, as the pandemic became more widespread; today, agricultural workers account for 18 percent of confirmed Covid-19 cases in Monterey County in patients whose occupation is known.

A 2020 report by the UC Berkeley School of Public Health and Clinica de Salud del Valle de Salinas found that many employers in agriculture were not adequately screening their workers for Covid-19 symptoms before the start of their shifts. Work commutes with others outside their household also largely increased their risk of infection, the report found.

Now a year into the pandemic, health officials, employers and community health groups are working to ensure the safety of farmworkers in an effort to avoid a repeat of Covid’s disproportionate impact during the previous harvest season.



Farmworkers Juana Hernandez, 67 and Ciro Hernandez, 69 remain inside their car as they receive simultaneous Covid-19 vaccines during a clinic for farmworkers held at D'Arrigo Bros. Co. in Spreckels on Feb. 25, the first such clinic in Monterey County.

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MEMBERS OF COMMUNITY GROUPS MUJERES EN ACCIÓN AND COMMUNITIES

ORGANIZED FOR RELATIONAL POWER IN ACTION (COPA) began meeting twice a week at the onset of the pandemic to figure out what community needs were after seeing the virus negatively impact their neighborhoods. They began making hundreds of phone calls to locals, going to their respective churches, schools and other places of gathering, building a list and figuring out what people needed to stay safe – and financially afloat – as the pandemic progressed.

“What we were finding is people almost knew that they have symptoms or believed that they were infected but they couldn't afford to stay home,” says Maria Elena Manzo, program manager for Mujeres en Acción. “So now we're saying, ‘let us find you resources so you can actually isolate.’”

Adriana Molina is a *promotora*, or community health worker, with Mujeres en Acción. “We found that a lot of people were left without work, or are behind their bills and rent,” she says.

With no financial support, the volunteers at Mujeres en Acción attempted to do what they could to connect residents with information on available resources from free Covid testing appointments to leads on free isolation housing – but it wasn't enough, according to Molina.

Organizers made a list of things they believed were needed to slow the spread of the virus in the hard-hit farmworker community. The list included better communication from employers about potential exposure and wage replacement for those who miss work due to self-quarantine.

Organizers met with Monterey County Health Officer Edward Moreno and Epidemiologist Kristy Michie, strategizing about how community groups and the Health Department could work together. They call themselves “Breaking the Chain of Infection.” [They later began working with a wider group of community leaders](#), including representatives from the agriculture and hospitality industries and Community Foundation for Monterey County, called the Covid-19 Collaborative.

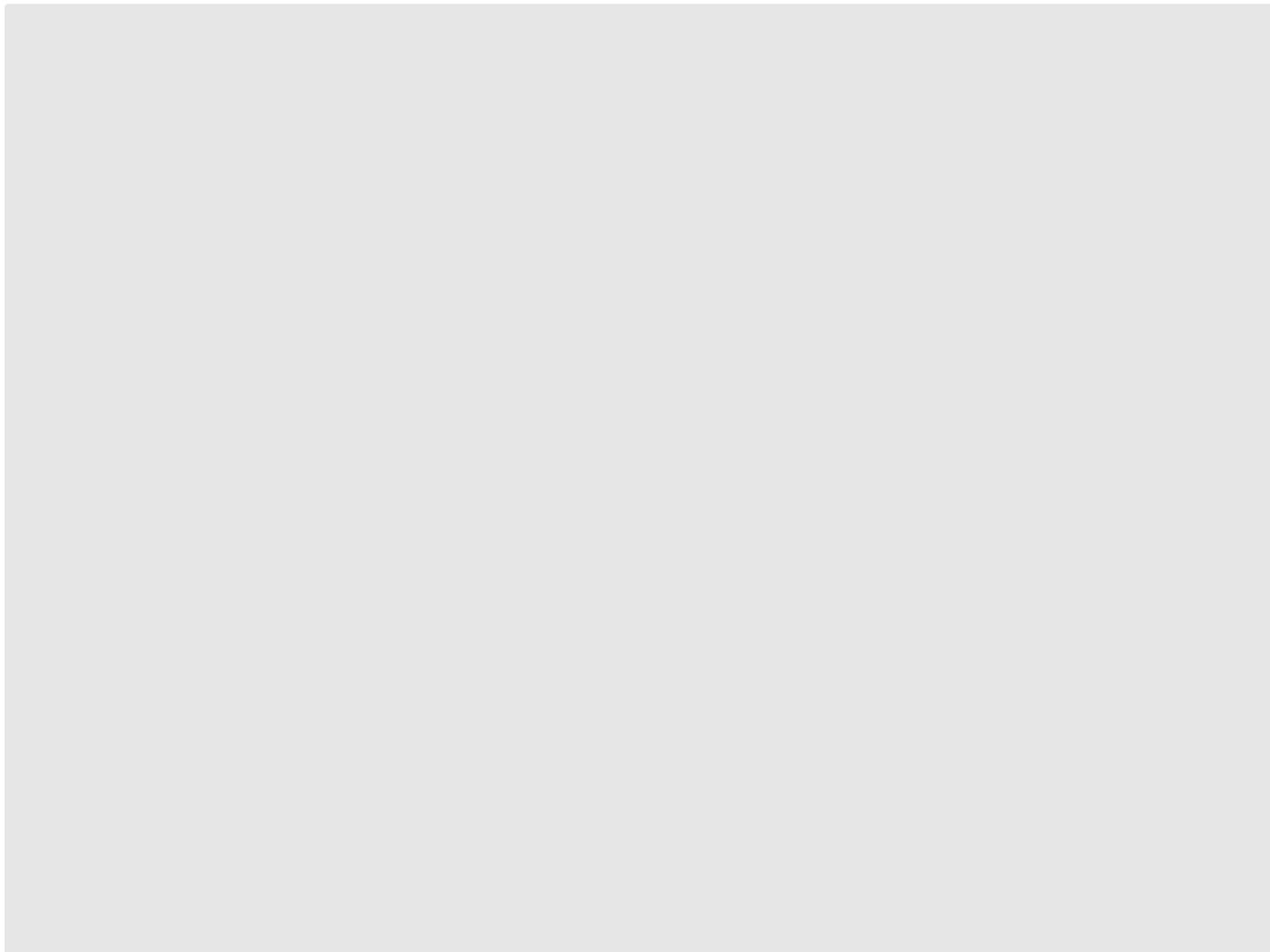
In December 2020, they presented to the Monterey County Board of Supervisors, [who voted to approve a \\$4.9 million budget for a community health worker program](#). That program, called VIDA (for Virus Integrated Distribution of Aid), is currently funding over 110 community health workers across 10 organizations, Mujeres en Acción among them, to provide resources to people in the communities that are hardest hit. One of the groups, Centro Binacional para el Desarrollo Indígena Oaxaqueño, is providing information in Triqui, Zapoteco and Mixteco, indigenous languages from the states of Oaxaca and Guerrero in Mexico that are all spoken in Monterey County.

“One way to stop the spread was to hire people from the community as trusted messengers to talk to people to help them understand the need of being safe, using masks and distancing and all that,” Manzo says.

Since January, [the community health workers have been reaching 7,000 people a month](#). They are able to focus their outreach efforts full-time, tabling outside grocery stores and other high-traffic areas. They have helped residents schedule Covid testing and vaccine appointments, and obtain financial aid or housing placements to help those infected with the virus isolate themselves. The outreach also extended to the fields to connect with farmworkers directly.

“We want to reach people [in the fields] so they can know that they can do a Covid test for free and that we can help them get the vaccine to reduce the risk of transmitting the virus now as we near the harvest season,” promotora Maria Zamudio says in Spanish; she worked in the fields before the pandemic.

She adds that with the seasonal increase in workforce, there is a renewed challenge of keeping everyone safe from Covid-19: “More people coming to the county means more people living in the same place.”



Farmworkers attend a presentation about Covid-19 vaccine information by Hartnell College nursing students at Taylor Farms in Gonzalez, Tues., Feb. 23, 2021.

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HOUSING FOR FARMWORKERS HAS LONG BEEN A CHALLENGE THROUGHOUT THE COUNTY AND THE STATE, one that pre-dates the pandemic. With the virus still finding its way into the crevices of daily life, the new challenge posed is securing housing for those infected with Covid needing to isolate from others in their household.

Last July, the state announced the Housing for the Harvest program that provides free housing for up to two weeks to farmworkers who need to self-isolate after contracting the virus or being exposed to someone who tests positive, but find it difficult to do so because of their housing

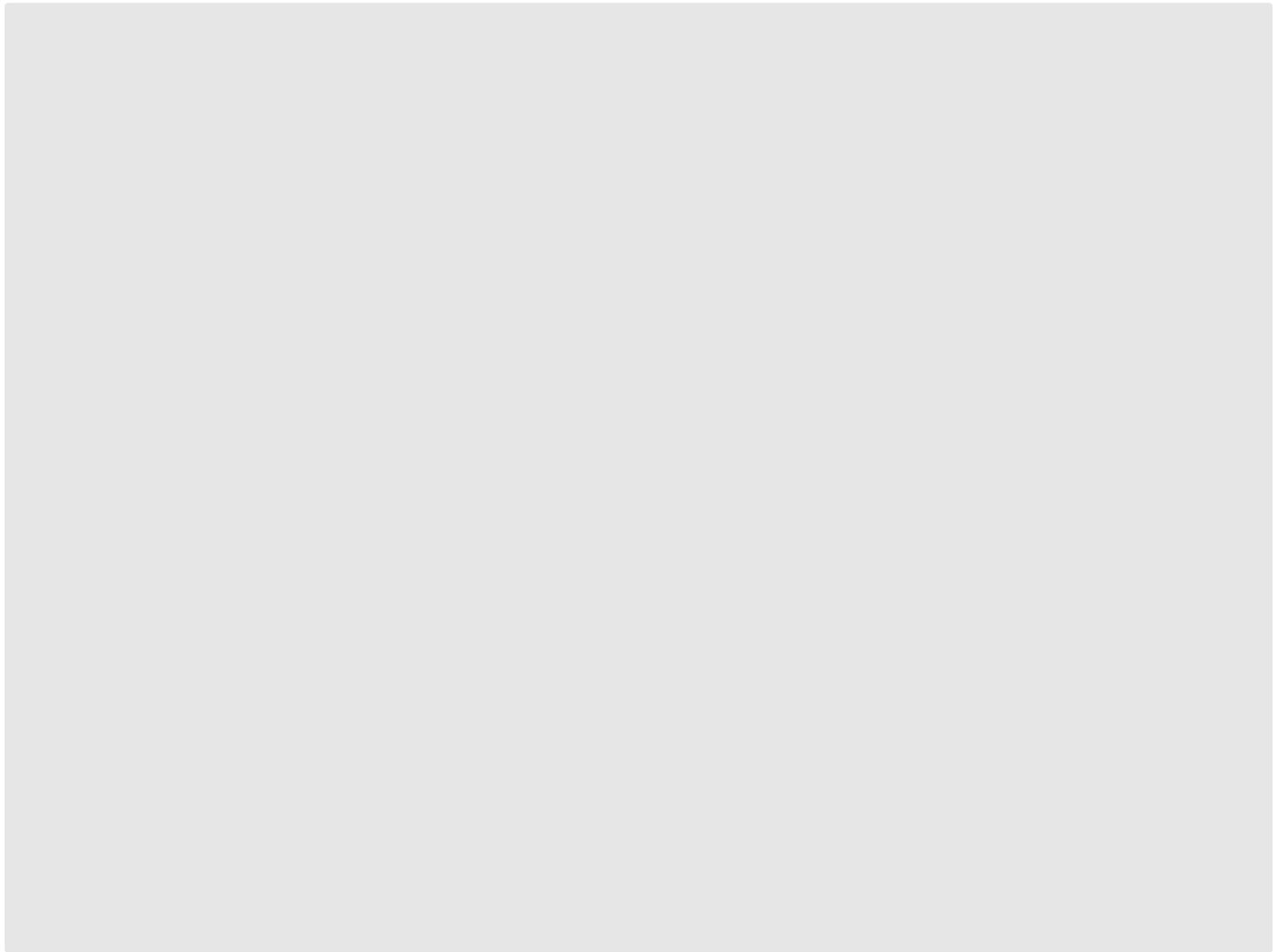
situation. The program took effect locally last October, and is open to anyone regardless of immigration status.

However, only 143 out of the state's up to 800,000 farmworkers have utilized the program, six of those in Monterey County, as of April 11, according to the California Department of Social Services.

A similar program funded by agribusiness in Monterey County and run by the Grower-Shipper Association of Central California – which became a blueprint for the state Housing for the Harvest program – launched in April 2020, and provided room and board to 401 people in Monterey County last year, and another 200 people in Yuma and Imperial counties, where lettuce crops (and some of the workforce) moves in the winter.

Many people do not want to leave their families alone if they need to isolate themselves after testing positive for Covid-19, Zamudio says. In response, she and her colleagues through the VIDA program have been providing groceries and financial assistance to residents to help ensure that they can safely isolate without having to leave their homes for a two-week hotel stay.

Financial assistance is also being offered by the county, but some residents have found it difficult to navigate the process or fear seeking help from a government entity, Molina says. [That's where community health workers come in, connecting with residents](#): “We're going deeper and farther than the health department could do,” Manzo says.



Agricultural workers wait in line as they check in and are registered for their first dose of Covid-19 vaccine at a pop-up clinic held at D'Arrigo Bros. in Spreckels on Feb. 25. The vaccine clinic was the first mass Covid vaccination clinic exclusively for farmworkers in Monterey County, providing 300 doses in a single day.

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AN ESTIMATED 10,000 SEASONAL FARMWORKERS ARE EXPECTED TO ARRIVE IN MONTEREY COUNTY FOR THE HARVEST SEASON, some already having arrived as early as last month. Efforts to mass vaccinate workers in the local agriculture sector began in February, simultaneously with other states where workers are traveling from, including Arizona.

“Prioritize the vaccination of this population and vaccinate as many as you can as fast as you can,” says Christopher Valadez, president of the Grower-Shipper Association. “I think that’s the answer.”

A GSA partnership with Clinica de Salud began providing Covid vaccine clinics exclusively for agricultural workers in Monterey County in February. The first clinic began with 300 people, and their capacity has now increased to about 4,000 vaccines per weekend event. As of April 6, they

have vaccinated over 15,000 agricultural workers, and expect that number to increase to 45,000 by July at their current pace, according to Valadez.

The weekly GSA-Clinica vaccine clinics in Salinas and King City are held by appointment-only and coordinated with agricultural labor contractors seeking to get their workers vaccinated. The GSA coordinates vaccine appointments and Clinica provides the support staff and equipment; as a federally qualified health center, Clinica is receiving vaccine supply designated for food and agricultural workers directly from the federal government.

“I think over the next weeks, we will have a growing demand by our companies who will ask for support in helping them obtain vaccination appointments through our program for their H-2A employees as they arrive,” Valadez says, referring to agricultural workers who come to the U.S. on temporary H-2A visas. Contractors from out of the area are vaccinating some of their workforce before they arrive to work in Monterey County for harvest season, Valadez adds.

Hernandez, who attended the first GSA-Clinica vaccine clinic with her husband, says one of her daughters is currently helping farmworkers get their Covid vaccines in Yuma, Arizona; many workers there will soon be traveling to Monterey County. (Hernandez and her husband have since been fully vaccinated.)

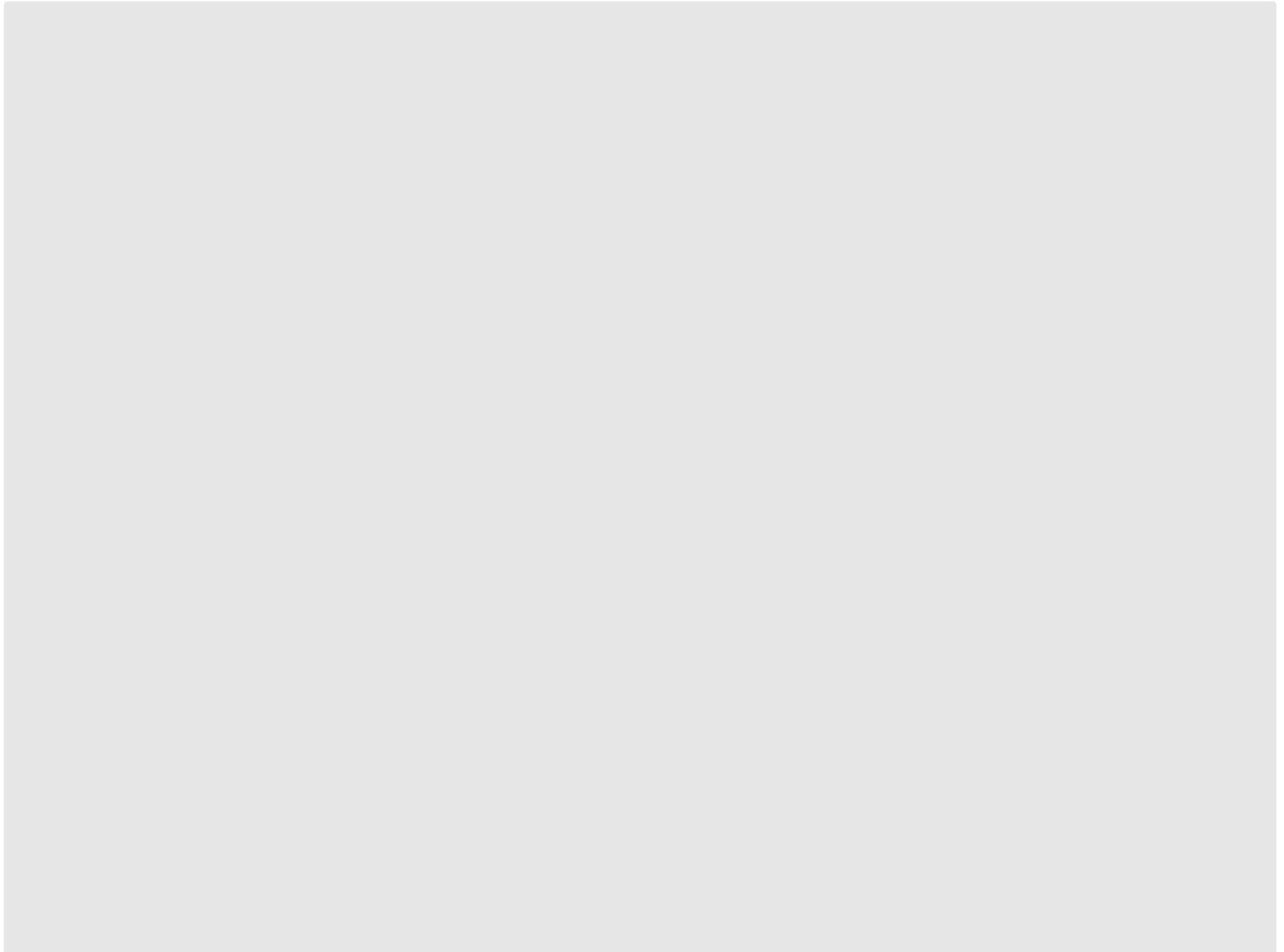
But even with the vaccination efforts by the GSA-Clinica partnership, in addition to efforts at local hospitals and clinics, willingness to receive the vaccine remains a challenge.

Only half of Monterey County farmworkers are willing to get vaccinated, according to a December 2020 study by the UC Berkeley School of Public Health. As community health workers do outreach to farmworkers, part of that now includes educating them on the vaccine in an effort to dispel any misconceptions, Zamudio says.

Monterey County has reported a total of 43,157 cases since the start of the pandemic, with 3,568 of those cases in people who work in the agricultural sector – the biggest category besides retired/unemployed. (Another 23,692 cases – by far the largest portion – are identified as occupation unknown, as of April 12.)

“When Monterey County was hitting one of its worst spikes in December that sent us into shutdown mode again, those weren’t ag workers,” Valadez notes. “Ag workers weren’t even here – they were not working, or they were gone, at least the ones that migrated to the area.”

Now, those workers have started to arrive and outreach is underway to get them connected with resources as soon as possible.



Promotora Maria Zamudio of Mujeres en Acción hands plastic bags containing information on Covid-19 resources to farmworkers at a Watsonville strawberry field, just across the county line in Santa Cruz County, on April 1. Zamudio and five other promotoras, all part of Mujeres in Acción, currently serve the Castroville region.

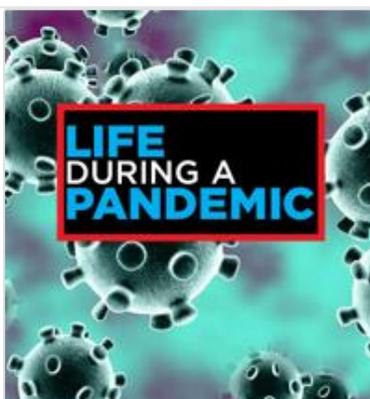
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ZAMUDIO AND ANOTHER PROMOTORA, ADRIANA SANTANA, VISIT WORKERS PICKING STRAWBERRIES at a Watsonville field just across the county line in Santa Cruz County in early April. The group of 32 farmworkers, including some H-2A workers, tend to plots of land across both Santa Cruz and Monterey counties that are operated by their contractor. Some workers wear masks, while others do not, and they halt work and gather in a wide circle to listen to what the promotoras came to say.

Zamudio and Santana reinforce the need to maintain social distancing, proper use of face masks and hygiene. The promotoras continue on, telling workers about the importance of getting tested for the virus and the availability of vaccines that they are eligible for as agricultural workers.

Each is handed a bag with information on resources available, including a direct phone number for Mujeres en Acción; some workers opt not to wait, and instead individually walk up to the promotoras to sign up to get involved in their resource network on the spot.

“We do this from the heart to help the community,” Santana says in Spanish. “Our goal is to reduce Covid cases and ultimately end the pandemic, and we are working hard together to accomplish that.”



Monterey County in the Time of Coronavirus (Sept. 28, 2020-present)

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