



'It's an act of love': Volunteers go door-to-door in Maryvale to encourage vaccination

BrieAnna J. Frank Arizona Republic

Published 3:41 p.m. May 1, 2021 • Updated 3:58 p.m. MT May 1, 2021



Volunteers spread COVID-19 vaccine information in Phoenix's Maryvale neighborhood

Around two dozen volunteers gathered to spread COVID-19 vaccine information in Phoenix's Maryvale neighborhood, a community hit hard by the pandemic.

Around two dozen volunteers fanned out across Phoenix's Maryvale neighborhood on Saturday morning as part of an effort to increase vaccination rates in the area that has been among the hardest-hit and most underserved throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

The group met in the parking lot of St. Vincent de Paul parish and school near 51st Avenue and Osborn Road at 9 a.m. Most were associated with Valley Interfaith Project, a network of various places of worship, nonprofits and other organizations across the county.

The parish is hosting a series of weekly vaccination events starting on May 5. Saturday marked the second weekend that volunteers went door-to-door to tell Maryvale residents about the clinic.

Valley Interfaith Project organizer Monica Dorsey directed volunteers to split into teams of two with an English and Spanish speaker, knowing that it was possible language could be a barrier to vaccine access and information for many in the neighborhood. Each pair grabbed a pen and clipboard with flyers and a chart showing what Maryvale pocket they were assigned to.

They each set out by 9:30 a.m., with some driving to their respective locations further away while others, including Pam Poley, 69, and Leticia Lowry-Garcilazo, 26, walked the few blocks to their assignment.

"I really feel like so many people have been left behind and this is one of the best ways I know to try to advocate for justice for all, for equal share of the benefits of society," Poley told The Arizona Republic about her involvement with the Valley Interfaith Project.

Poley lamented the poor vaccination rates in Maryvale, which The Republic previously reported were the lowest in the Valley at 24%.

Though she said she thought the St. Vincent de Paul connection would "breed more trust" among the community, she wasn't entirely sure what to expect as she walked door to door. "I'm not sure what we're going to come up against," she said. "Is it going to be a lot of 'oh good' or is it 'what are you guys doing here'?"

Despite her concerns, the duo was successful. Poley and Lowry-Garcilazo first approached two men outside of a home near 55th Avenue and Earll Drive. They were not aware of the clinic, but recognized the parish and said they would follow through with getting the vaccine there.

The next people they spoke with had already been vaccinated. Things were off to a good start, and Lowry-Garcilazo, who is originally from Mexico City, was thankful.

"It is really humbling to walk the streets of my people," she said, adding that it is "really sad" that the Maryvale community is often overlooked and underserved.

Residents last year reported wait times of up to 13 hours at a COVID-19 testing site in Maryvale, prompting organizers to make changes to ensure a more efficient process.

Lowry-Garcilazo had multiple conversations in Spanish as they traversed the streets, telling The Republic that part of her efforts on Saturday included letting people know the vaccine was free, safe and available to everyone. She said some people in the neighborhood have been hesitant to get the vaccine because of their citizenship status, and she hoped to dispel any concerns so people felt comfortable getting the shot that could potentially save their life.

'It means a lot to me'

Volunteer Jovany Cruz Hernandez, 19, hoped to do the same. Cruz Hernandez, who is Hispanic and lives in Maryvale, said he "can relate to these people" and had discussions with them about how much COVID-19 had impacted their lives.

At one home, he was told that the entire family had come down with the coronavirus at one point and that the homeowner ultimately became one of the more than 17,300 Arizonans who died from COVID-19.

Though the virus devastated many families in the community, Cruz Hernandez said he knows firsthand that the losses didn't translate to more resources or aid for the area. He told The Republic he joined the Valley Interfaith Network's efforts because he was one of the people they visited last weekend. He said he "had trouble" trying to get his family vaccinated and knows the process can feel overwhelming.

He was "concerned" by the low vaccination rates in Maryvale, but understood how they came to be.

"I recognize that some people, especially in this neighborhood, can be fearful of vaccines," he said. "Knowing that I can do something about that, and also the church is making it easy for people, if I can just relay that information to everyone here, it means a lot to me."

Cruz Hernandez's partner on Saturday was 76-year-old Carol Wilson, who said increasing vaccination rates in areas like Maryvale has implications for people both inside and outside of the community.

"I just think it's an act of love to spread the word and to encourage people," she said. "Perhaps they're frightened or don't know how to proceed with the vaccine. For me, I just think it's a moral responsibility to be vaccinated. It's looking out for all of humankind."

Monica Dorsey said about 500 homes in Maryvale were visited on Saturday and that she "absolutely" believes the effort will translate into higher vaccination rates.

She said the goal is to vaccinate between 1,500 and 1,800 people through May, adding that it is the "best feeling in the world" to know that Maryvale, and the larger Phoenix area, would be safer because of it.

Dorsey said the door-to-door efforts are also a key part in disseminating vaccine information, adding that "personal contact seems to make so much of a difference."

"Everybody is convinced social media is the way to reach people, but if you want to really, really reach them, you have to see them, talk to them, find out what's on their mind, hear their stories," she said. "It's so important and it is effective and we'll stay at it until percentages get where they need to be."