

HIT HARD: Chicago Latinx communities face challenges combatting pandemic

by **ELLA BEISER**
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

With citywide COVID-19 positivity rates beginning to fall at last, for many the end of the pandemic seems within reach. However, positivity rates within Chicago's Latinx communities have remained high at 8.5%, more than two times the citywide positivity rate, according to the City of Chicago COVID-19 dashboard.

Senior Veronica Godina, president of Latinos Unidos, has seen the effects of the high positivity rates on her neighborhood, Brighton Park, on the city's southwest side.

"Basically, all of our neighbors are essential workers," Veronica said. "My dad works in the meat-packing industry. The rates of infection at those factories is insane. Most of our neighbors are also factory workers. There's really no one around that has the luxury of staying at home to do work, because they're factory jobs, you have to go there."

As a result of her father's job, Veronica and her family got COVID-19 earlier this year.

"The way that my dad's job is handling things, it's very easy to get infected and there's not very much space for social distancing," Veronica said. "I wish we had the luxury of my dad not being able to go to work and he could take some time off. Unfortunately, that's not possible."

Referencing the 2020 National Health Interview Survey by the U.S. Census Bureau, Spanish teacher Dinah D'Antoni said that during the pandemic the number of Latinx people reporting feelings of depression was double that of white people. Additionally, the survey found that 40% of Latinx people reported an increase in substance use, in contrast with 15% of other respondents.

Despite this, of the 100,000 people vaccinated in Chicago, over half are white, and just 17% are Latinx according to an article in the Chicago Sun-Times.

Veronica believes the city should be vaccinating communities of color even if they don't fall into the current 1B eligibility group because of how much higher positiv-



MIDWAY PHOTO BY ELLIOTT TAYLOR

PAINTING POWER. A colorful mural covers the wall of a building in the Pilsen neighborhood, located on the Lower West Side of Chicago. With nearly 30,000 Latinx residents, the Pilsen is one of Chicago's primarily Latinx neighborhoods.

ity rates are in those communities.

"Culturally, Latinx households tend to be multigenerational," Veronica said. "Even though not all of them are 65-plus or they're not all high risk, it's very important to begin vaccinating them, because, if not, the rates of infection are going to continue to increase because in one household, it's not four people getting infected, depending on how many people live in your household, it's like six, eight people."

However, the task is not simple. "My parents, they're immigrants from Mexico, and they're very skeptical of the vaccine. And it took a lot of explaining it to them because there's a lot of mistrust in medical stuff," Veronica said. "A lot of people have had the experience where they're not taken seriously, especially when they're Spanish-speaking people and they don't have anyone they can communicate with."

Veronica said many people in her neighborhood are undocu-

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—VERONICA GODINA

mented, which adds another layer of mistrust in the vaccination process.

"There's this distrust of the government knowing your name, basically just being very wary of everything," Veronica said. "They don't want to give their information over when trying to get a COVID test. And when they have to fill out the race and stuff like that, the immediate question is: Who's going to get this information? Why do you want it?"

To remedy this distrust, Dr. D'Antoni said elected officials should work with community organizations and nonprofits to spread information about the vaccine.

"They explain the benefits and the advantages, and they help

them to let them know that it's OK, that they reach out and they can go — they can get vaccinated," Ms. D'Antoni said.

The office of Alderman George Cardenas, whose 12th Ward includes Brighton Park, has compiled resources to help educate and mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Other Aldermen have also provided resources for their communities.

According to Veronica, a critical element to the success of the city's efforts is making information accessible in Spanish.

"The main thing that the city can do to build trust is make the COVID information more accessible to people who don't speak English at COVID testing centers," Veronica said. "I know some people don't want to go because

they're embarrassed about their English skills."

Reaching out to people at their jobs is another possible option, according to Veronica.

"Another way they could do it is like by having workers of the city go to the jobs, the factories and have representatives speak there, speak to the people," Veronica said, "so that the workers can have their questions answered is another great way to do it."

Dr. D'Antoni also believes that as more Latinx people begin to get vaccinated, trust will increase in the vaccine.

"I think the most important thing is to be equitable across the board and reach out to these communities that are underprivileged," Dr. D'Antoni said. "People of color, minorities, reach out to them, let them know: Yes, the vaccine is free, yes, it doesn't matter if you're documented or undocumented. It doesn't matter. Reach out and get vaccinated."

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StreetWise changes face of homelessness in Chicago

by **ADRIANNA NEHME**
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Lee A. Holmes repeats the phrase for what might just be the hundredth time that day: "Would you like to purchase a copy of StreetWise?"

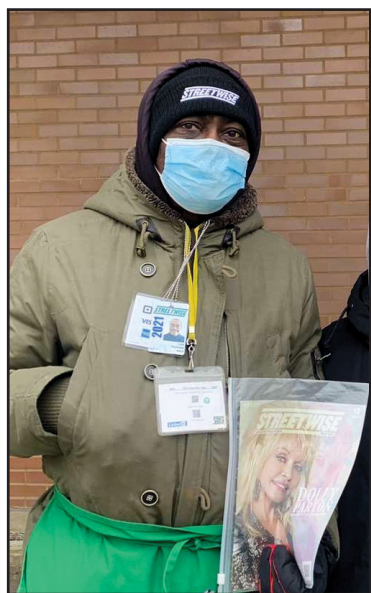
People walk right past him. They pretend not to notice his green apron loaded with the latest edition of the StreetWise magazine — yet Mr. Holmes, a StreetWise vendor, remains unflustered and continues with his spirited pitch.

By presenting vendors like Mr. Holmes with employment opportunities, StreetWise has simultaneously provided many with a life outside of homelessness and changed perceptions about the homeless.

When a vendor joins StreetWise, they undergo an orientation, and as a reward are provided with 15 free magazines to sell. After the orientation, vendors pay 90 cents for a magazine and sell them for \$2, keeping the \$1.10 along with tips. Topics in the magazine range from local news to profiles and columns.

While Mr. Holmes was familiar with StreetWise long before, he only joined after experiencing homelessness.

"I went to one of their orienta-



MIDWAY PHOTO BY ADRIANNA NEHME

A HAND UP. Lee A. Holmes poses outside of a Mariano's in Roscoe Village, holding an old edition of StreetWise magazine.

tions at one of their old headquarters, and I was, like, "This is a scam, who does this?" Mr. Holmes said.

Despite Mr. Holmes's initial doubt, he immersed himself in the organization's programs such as the Transition to Employment Program, which prepares individ-

uals for finding jobs. He also appreciated that the organization provides vendors with basic necessities such as food.

What he found most valuable were the countless hours he spent working on the streets. Mr. Holmes constantly discovered new ways to attract individuals to purchase from him.

"The whole thing is about how do I get an individual that won't acknowledge me and won't speak to me to buy a magazine from me and become a loyal customer," Mr. Holmes said. "So every day or every other day you have to recreate your whole self."

However, attracting customers was often difficult for Mr. Holmes, since many refused to purchase from him based on the negative perception surrounding the homeless community. StreetWise hopes that vendors can form connections with those who pass by and help to alter these perceptions.

"I had a young lady come up to me and ask me what rehab center I came out of, and I looked at her like, 'Does it look like I am a drug or alcohol addict or something?'" Mr. Holmes said. "Would you rather have me have these magazines in my hand or a gun in my hand

taking your wallet? I think this is the better option for me."

According to Mr. Holmes, that same woman was inspired by his words and became one of his loyal customers.

Since vendors at StreetWise independently sell the magazine and are in control of their own profits, Mr. Holmes has picked up skills to expand his passion in entrepreneurship, which began at a young age.

"I was more interested in trading papers and was very fascinated about buying something for one price and selling it at another price," Mr. Holmes said. "I was able to generate or make money off of the little money that I had."

Although his business was successful, he had no concept for financial planning. After joining StreetWise, he learned how to budget his money and spend it on essential items.

Mr. Holmes has since recruited others to join StreetWise as vendors, including his new business partner Paula Green, who he met through family. Ms. Green sells the magazine and also takes pictures for it, which has helped guide her down a good track.

"I was basically homeless, and I didn't have any direction, but now

"The whole thing is about how do I get an individual that won't acknowledge me and won't speak to me to buy a magazine from me and become a loyal customer, so every day or every other day you have to recreate your whole self?"

—LEE A. HOLMES

I feel like I am a little bit more stable," Ms. Green said.

For the future, Patrick Edwards, executive assistant of StreetWise, hopes individuals who buy the magazine actually read it, and view StreetWise as the vendor's business rather than solely a donation.

"Aside from the support for the vendors, I want you to feel as if you got more than \$2 worth of information and experience what I like to call goodness," Mr. Edwards said.

When his shift is over, Mr. Holmes packs his things and leaves the streets. However, his work is not finished. He returns to the area he resides to brainstorm possibilities to increase sales for the following day.

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