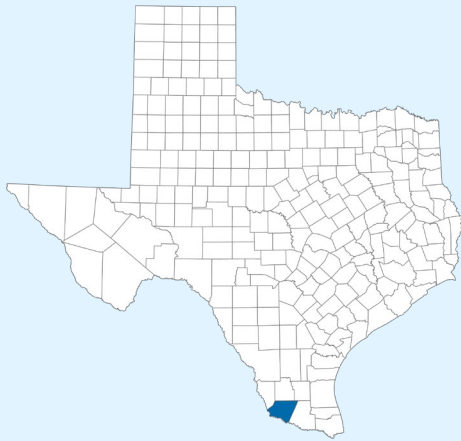


COVID-19 Rural Vaccination Success Story: Starr County, TX



Percentage of population that have completed a primary COVID-19 vaccine series (November 2022)

95.0%

Population (U.S. Census Bureau)

65,920

Demographics (U.S. Census Bureau)

American Indian or Alaska Native (non-Hispanic): 0.0%

Asian (non-Hispanic): 0.0%

Black (non-Hispanic): 0.0%

Hispanic or Latino: 99.2%

White (non-Hispanic): 0.7%

Health Department Governance

Decentralized

Key Vaccination Strategies



Background

Located in south Texas, Starr County borders Mexico, has a predominately Hispanic/Latino population of 65,920 (99.2 percent), and most residents speak Spanish at home.

The Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) provides public health services to the state through regional divisions. Starr County is in Public Health Region 11, which covers 19 counties in south Texas. Starr County does not have a county-run health department. The county judge and local health authority play a critical role in emergency preparedness and response efforts.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Starr County leaders communicated openly with residents about COVID-19 through weekly press conferences, which set the groundwork for promoting vaccine uptake. The logistical considerations they faced while establishing testing sites before many of their surrounding counties primed them for vaccination efforts.

Methods

We conducted nine in-depth interviews with representatives organizations involved in Starr County's COVID-19 vaccination efforts, including the county government, DSHS Public Health Region 11, the Rio Grande City Consolidated Independent School District, the Starr County Industrial Foundation, and a local pharmacy. We also interviewed 16 residents about their COVID-19 vaccination experiences.

Core Partners

The following partners worked together to vaccinate the greatest possible number of residents:

- DSHS Public Health Region 11
- Starr County local government, including County Judge, Emergency Management Coordinator, County Public Relations/Wellness Coordinator, and local health authority
- Local pharmacies, including Popular Pharmacy, H-E-B Pharmacy, and Lino's Pharmacy
- Starr County Memorial Hospital
- Local school districts, such as the Rio Grande City Consolidated Independent School District
- Starr County Industrial Foundation
- State National Guard
- Law enforcement
- South Texas College
- Members of the clergy

Key Strategies



Working with Partners

Local Partners

In Starr County, long-standing local partnerships were essential to successful vaccination efforts. Partners collaborated throughout the COVID-19 response, educating community members and disseminating information early on in the pandemic. Local leaders—including the local health authority, County Judge, school districts, medical providers, and pharmacists—worked together to share information about the vaccine and coordinate vaccination efforts.

By the time COVID-19 arrived locally, Starr County had participated in Operation Border Health and Preparedness (formerly Operation Lone Star)—a full-scale emergency training exercise led by the state, during which local partners practice setting up and operating health clinics that may be needed in a public health emergency—for over 20 years.

Many of the county's COVID-19 vaccination partners had also participated in these exercises, which established clear roles and responsibilities for each partner during an emergency like a pandemic. This training and the network it created allowed Starr County to quickly mobilize partners to help set up COVID-19 testing sites and more. When vaccines became available, the partners pivoted to using the testing sites to distribute them.

Additional partners included student nurses, from South Texas College, and local pharmacists who administered vaccines. Local college students also helped with data entry.

“It wasn’t the first time we were meeting, which is very important, especially for disaster response. You don’t want to meet after the hurricane has hit, or during the hurricane. You want to make sure established relationships exist—or at least they know who to go to and what everyone’s roles are.”

— Texas Department of State Health Services, Public Health Region 11



Conducting Community Outreach & Engagement

Due to the initial limited availability of COVID-19 vaccines, the county established a hotline that residents could call to get on a vaccination wait list. Because the wait time for a vaccine varied, county leaders decided that, to maintain interest in vaccination, they needed to engage with residents more frequently. Waitlisted residents received calls and text messages to schedule appointments, or to remind them that vaccines were on the way.

Starr County employed a number of approaches to generate interest and participation in COVID-19 vaccination, including the following:

- Sending vaccination drive flyers home with students
- Sharing vaccination site information through the county government's social media
- Knocking on doors and advising people to receive the vaccine

Starr County repurposed a longstanding youth-oriented smoking-cessation campaign—Starr County Strong—leveraging awareness of it by creating new Starr County Strong-branded COVID-19 materials. Children received these materials and other bilingual educational resources at school, and took them home to their families. Schools also sent home contact information for school nurses, in case parents had questions.

In addition, Starr County's vaccination partners employed a combination of traditional and newer communication approaches to educate the public. These efforts included community conference calls on vaccine safety and efficacy, during which callers could chime in with questions, and social media promotion such as Facebook Live interviews in Spanish and English with the local radio station.

Because the community experienced disproportionately high numbers of COVID-19 infections and fatalities, education and messaging highlighted that vaccination could mitigate hospitalization and death.



Using Trusted Messengers

Local leaders began their COVID-19 public communication efforts long before the vaccine was available. In particular, Starr County's judge prepared his community for COVID-19 by being fully transparent about the pandemic's dangers, early on. The county judge briefed school officials, members of the clergy, and business leaders on how to prepare and respond. These community leaders then spoke to their respective constituents, providing a unified and consistent message.

Starr County hosted weekly press conferences during which they would share relevant information and answer questions. By the time vaccines became available, community leaders had already built trust with Starr County residents by sharing consistent COVID-19 messaging on a regular basis.

"I believe that transparency is the most important. A lot of times, communities or leaders feel like we don't really want to put this out there because we don't want to panic people, but I think there's a right way to do it. Through the leadership of Judge Vera, our community united, and that is what saved Starr County from more devastation."

– Starr County Public Relations/Wellness Coordinator

Materials and messages were delivered via various trusted messengers. For example, pharmacists—who are highly trusted messengers in the community and were responsible for administering many of the vaccines—answered COVID-19 questions by phone or when people picked up their prescriptions.



Offering Mobile, Off-Site & Drive-Through Clinics

Mass vaccination clinics were a key component in early COVID-19 vaccine distribution and success. These clinics were a community-wide effort that involved multiple partners, including local school districts. Local school districts—including the Rio Grande City Consolidated Independent School District—were critical to the vaccination initiative’s success because they provided access to school resources, including gyms to hold the vaccination clinics, school nurses to administer vaccines, and the school district’s police department to help with traffic control.

To ensure that everyone had access to vaccines, clinics were held three to four times per week in different parts of the county. Vaccination initiative leaders also established drive-through clinics for the elderly, and those with mobility issues.



Overcoming Transportation & Other Access Barriers

Starr County prioritized making the vaccine available to anyone who wished to receive it, authorizing the Texas National Guard and local pharmacists to make home visits to the homebound, repurposing Meals on Wheels vehicles for this effort. To further reduce transportation and/or scheduling barriers, vaccine clinics were held in various locations, on multiple dates, and at differing times.

Community Member Vaccination Experiences

We conducted in-depth interviews with 16 residents. Due to initial limited supply, they reported having to wait when vaccines first became available. However, they said that they had no problems getting a vaccine once the supply increased. Interviewees also reported receiving their vaccine at either a local school, pharmacy, or doctor's office. Some participants were initially unsure about vaccine safety, citing concerns about the short vaccine development time and lack of information around long-term effects. Ultimately, their motivation to get vaccinated outweighed their concern.

Interviewees said that the following factors helped convince them to get vaccinated:



A desire to protect themselves, their families, and the wider community, especially as many interviewees knew people who had died or become very ill from COVID-19 before vaccines were readily available



Discussions with family members and friends who received the vaccine without any adverse consequences



Trust in the science behind vaccination and the messengers promoting the vaccine, including health care professionals and local leaders



Work requirements or job-related risks, including an employer vaccination mandate or a job involving frequent exposure to COVID-19 (e.g., health care provider or teacher)

Takeaways for Other Rural Communities

1. Leverage existing partnerships and infrastructure.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Starr County had decades-long partnerships built through annual emergency-preparedness exercises. County officials leveraged these existing relationships to rapidly establish COVID testing sites early on, and subsequently used the processes established during the testing phase to set up mass vaccination clinics. To support vaccination efforts, Starr County also drew upon the expertise and skills of local partners, including nurses and students at the local college.

2. Engage trusted community leaders, to share a consistent messages.

Trust was an essential component of the county's ability to successfully respond to COVID-19 and vaccinate its community. Local leaders established trust by being transparent about the pandemic, without causing widespread panic. Before the first cases of COVID-19 reached Starr County, the County Judge briefed school officials, members of the clergy, and business leaders on how to prepare and respond. These community leaders then spoke to their respective constituents, providing a unified and consistent message. When COVID-19 lockdowns began in Starr County, the County Judge, medical professionals, and other local leaders shared the latest COVID-19 updates through weekly press conferences that were open to the public. This transparency built trust between the leaders and their community. When vaccines became available, the public trusted local leaders' recommendations to get vaccinated for their own well-being, that of their families, and of the whole community.

3. Identify and use the communication channels most likely to reach your priority audience(s).

Starr County officials primarily communicated with residents through press conferences and Facebook, the most frequently used social media platform among community members. Starr County's Facebook page not only promoted the vaccine, it provided updates on the status of vaccination events.

4. Know your community and distribute vaccines in locations that are convenient, familiar, and heavily frequented.

Many Starr County residents received their vaccines at off-site clinics, at local schools, or in pharmacies. Initially, Starr County conducted some vaccination events in remote parts of the county. However, this was curtailed after officials found that rural residents were accustomed to traveling to more populated areas to visit the grocery store or pick up prescriptions. Local pharmacies were effective distributors of vaccines because pharmacists were trusted and frequently interacted with community members. Local schools also proved to be excellent vaccination partners, as they had resources—such as school nurses and gyms—that were both familiar and convenient to community members and could be turned into mass vaccination sites.

Methodology

On behalf of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), NORC at the University of Chicago (NORC) and East Tennessee State University (ETSU) conducted a qualitative study to better understand vaccine confidence and demand in rural communities. The study explored the following topics related to COVID-19 vaccination in rural communities: factors influencing COVID-19 vaccine confidence; strategies implemented to address vaccine demand and access barriers to increase COVID-19 vaccination rates; individual-level perspectives on COVID-19 vaccination in rural areas; and lessons learned related to COVID-19 vaccination efforts for rural communities. The qualitative study included case studies in six rural communities. Between April and July 2022, NORC/ETSU interviewed organizations involved in COVID-19 vaccination efforts and community members who had received the COVID-19 vaccine. Organizations and community members were recruited from the following study sites: Leflore and Jefferson Counties, MS; Marshall County, IA; North Country Region (Carroll, Coos, and Grafton Counties), NH; Perry County, KY; Rio Arriba County, NM; and Starr County, TX.