

# Cultural Navigators to Liaise Between Indigenous Communities and Public Health Systems

## Community-Based Promising Practice

Health advocacy and health access for Indigenous migrant community members are intrinsic components in Mixteco/Indígena Community Organizing Project (MICOP)'s work. A nurse practitioner founded the group in 2001, and the initial community meetings took place at a county ambulatory care clinic. Before the pandemic, MICOP's work with Ventura County Public Health (VCPH) was based on advocating for the presence of interpreters in health care settings while advocating for systems-wide change at the Ventura County Health Care Agency, the department that houses VCPH. When COVID-19 vaccine rollouts began, VCPH asked MICOP to help build trust with Indigenous community leaders to receive the COVID-19 vaccines and encourage them in their communities. Through this joint initiative, MICOP continued to be a cultural navigator between Indigenous migrant community members and public health agencies. As trusted messengers in their community, MICOP provides Indigenous farmworkers with education, linguistic support, and space to make informed decisions about their health.

## Partners:

Organization names:

- [Mixteco/Indígena Community Organizing Project \(MICOP\)](#)
- [Ventura County Public Health \(VCPH\)](#)
  - Services they provide: [MICOP](#) supports, organizes, and empowers Mesoamerican Indigenous immigrants' through outreach efforts, health and healing, community organizing, and interpretation services. [Ventura County Public Health](#) works to prevent the spread of disease (such as COVID-19), responds to disasters, assists communities in recovery, and assures the quality and accessibility of preventive and health care services throughout the county.
- Location: Ventura County, California

## Description of the Practice:

In March 2021, VCPH allotted 500 vaccine doses for farmworkers at a mobile vaccine site. The county health department coordinated vaccine logistics, including the staffing of travel nurses and vaccine amounts, while MICOP scheduled appointments for Indigenous community members. MICOP reassigned around 20 staff members to call community members to fill vaccination appointments about one week prior to the vaccine clinic. MICOP arranged for the vaccination of 350 farmworkers, and VCPH contracted an agricultural employer who arranged for 150 employees to be vaccinated. It started as a VCPH initiative but MICOP, familiar with the Indigenous migrant community, led the activity.

VCPH later offered a private clinic for community members at one of MICOP's offices. MICOP oversaw recruitment which vaccinated approximately 75 community members. MICOP reassigned staff members who were previously involved in community organizing activities to help with vaccine appointment navigation for these clinics. MICOP later hosted a pilot walk-in vaccination clinic at their office from 4 pm – 8 pm to accommodate farmworkers' work schedules. Even though MICOP staff informed community members about the walk-in clinic, MICOP noticed a better turnout when they registered people and gave them a vaccination appointment time. This is because of the trust MICOP has built in the community. Indigenous community members were more likely to arrive because they knew the person who extended the invitation and they knew they had a set appointment to be seen. Indigenous community members received both navigation and linguistic support before and during their appointment.

At the mobile vaccine clinics hosted by VCPH, MICOP's Promotores de Salud/Community Health Workers welcomed and answered community questions, provided outreach education on the vaccine, and provided Indigenous language interpreters in Purépecha, Mixteco, and other languages.



## Key Strategies:

MICOP's promotores acted as cultural navigators for their communities by using these strategies:

- Assisting both Ventura County Public Health and Santa Barbara County Public Health with mobile vaccine clinics;
- Operating COVID-19 testing sites in Ventura County and Santa Barbara County via a contract with the California Department of Public Health;
- Airing weekly Radio announcements as well as 2-hour long live radio programming with information about COVID-19 on Radio Indígena 94.1 FM in Mixteco, Purepecha and Spanish;
- Distributing information and PPE during Monthly Meeting (food pantry) events in Oxnard, Santa Paula, and Santa Maria.



*Radio Indígena 94.1 staff in the radio's production space.*

## Results:

From March 2021 to late June 2021, MICOP and VCPH collaborated on 19 COVID-19 vaccination clinics. MICOP provided interpretation services to 1,740 farmworkers and hosted eight community vaccination events for 569 community members. This collaborative work vaccinated 2,309 Indigenous farmworkers. The collaboration exemplifies how community partnerships, Indigenous language interpretation, and access to hard-to-reach populations were instrumental to these community-based events' success.



## Key Challenges and How They Were Addressed:

**Interpretation Services:** Reliable interpretation was an issue at the vaccination clinics. If MICOP was not available to provide the interpretation service of a Mixteco speaker, staff and clinic volunteers had a difficult time communicating with community members. The original model was to utilize traveling nurses from across the country, but many could not speak Spanish or any of the Indigenous languages spoken in the community. VCPH relied on volunteer interpreters, but this proved to be an unreliable source of interpretation.

At earlier clinics, MICOP Promotores de Salud/Community Health Workers greeted community members and facilitated the registration line, and others assumed the role of interpreters. Throughout the partnership, MICOP had continuously uplifted the language access challenges that a lack of qualified medical interpreters at the vaccine clinics. Ultimately, MICOP decided in early summer 2021 to stop using the Promotores for interpretation as a contract between MICOP and VCPH that included a budget line-item for the promotoras to interpret had ended. MICOP also had to contend with pay differences as the hourly rate of the promotora was significantly lower than the hourly rate for an interpreter due to the additional trainings MICOP interpreters undergo. The public health department's evident need for MICOP's indigenous language services resulted in an official agreement between the two groups so that professionally trained interpreters would be present at vaccination events.

**Vaccine Hesitancies:** In the beginning, the mobile clinics provided Johnson & Johnson vaccines, but some community members had reservations about this vaccine, especially when its use was paused in 2021. Two MICOP outreach workers provided their Johnson & Johnson vaccine testimonials as a community-driven approach to increase COVID-19 vaccine intake and build vaccine confidence among Indigenous farmworker communities.

**Navigation Support:** Originally, the State Immunization portal required an email address to register for vaccine appointments, so MICOP created a COVID-19 email address that the organization could use for community members who lacked an email address to overcome this obstacle. VCPH also provided Community Health Workers/Promotores access to the registration portal.

MICOP also kept an earlier internal spreadsheet to track the person's name, which pueblo (town of origin) they were from, which interpreters to assign for the individual, and if they needed a self-attestation letter to prove that they were farmworkers. Staff added additional information to this spreadsheet to provide continuous care.

## Resources needed and expenses:

MICOP hired a full-time COVID-19 Rapid Response Manager to coordinate the outreach and education efforts. A team of employees helped with vaccine promotion, including managers, outreach workers, and radio staff. Additional expenses include PPE for community members, volunteers, and staff, equipment (tables, chairs, canopy, and tablet/laptop), COVID-19 educational flyers, and other promotional materials.

## Additional Partners:

Líderes Campesinas, Lucha, and Poder supported COVID-19 education and community vaccination events.

## Tools and Resources:

MICOP resources:

- [Outreach and Access](#)
- [Indigenous Language Services](#)
- [MICOP's Radio Indígena 94.1](#)
- [COVID-19 Information Video Playlist](#)

Ventura County Public Health

- [CORONAVIRUS \(COVID-19\) HEALTH CARE AGENCY INFORMATION](#)
  - [COVID Vaccine Questions Answered by Our Experts](#)





## Find out more:

- MICOP's [website](#)
- [Ventura County Public Health \(VCPH\)](#)
- Please visit [www.venturacountyrecovers.org](http://www.venturacountyrecovers.org) for all current data and local updates on COVID-19. Click on vaccines, testing, and information for schools and medical providers for more information.



### *Pro Tips from VCPH and MICOP:*

- *Get to know your partners, get to know their strengths, share your strengths as a public health department, and build trust in the process.*
- *Bring partners into the planning early and communicate regularly. Identify needs, concerns, and questions.*
- *Ensure information is shared from the top to the frontline workers to avoid inter-agency conflict*
- *Plan and coordinate response efforts with lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic.*



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