

Bring Out the White Coats!



Felix Nuñez
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for the Underserved

Dr. Felix Nunez is President of the Board of Directors of the *Association of Clinicians for the Underserved*. He is also Medical Director for *Molina Healthcare* in Southern California.

Here are key take-aways from his conversation with Ken Banta about the challenges we face in encouraging people in Latino communities to take COVID-19 vaccination:

1. The Latino community may not have as easy access to vaccines as other populations.
2. Hesitancy in this community may not be as great as people assume and any that exists is based on reasonable concerns that can be addressed.
3. Civic leaders must reassure the community that getting the COVID-19 vaccine will not affect immigration status.
4. Physicians, nurses, and other clinicians are trusted sources of information, as are community health workers, also called *Promotores*.

Most indices show that vaccination rates in Latino communities, especially among those who are underserved, are low. How do those compare with others?

Of the white, Asian, Latino and African American populations, vaccination rates are amongst the lowest among Latinos. They are second only to African Americans. In addition, morbidity and mortality rates are higher, too. When people in Latino communities, especially in those that are underserved, get COVID-19, they are more likely to have very serious disease and to die.

This is not just a problem in my area, but across the country. It can be a special problem in states like California, New Mexico, and Texas with large Latino populations. Without getting this significant segment of the U.S. population vaccinated against COVID-19, we won't reach herd immunity.

What are the main causes of lower vaccination rates in the Latino communities?

There is some vaccination hesitancy, although we think that may be overplayed in terms of its importance. It's there because of concerns about the safety and efficacy of the vaccine but then, that exists in all populations. It is not unique to Latinos.

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When it comes to actually getting the vaccine, the Latino population may not have as easy access to vaccines as other populations. That is because of their demographics and the workplaces they occupy.



Finding vaccination sites that are accessible after hours or on weekends, for example, can be difficult. If they are self-employed, they can't take time off, because it's a matter of their livelihood.

Another reason is the technology gap. We've known about that for quite some time. Vaccination appointments are booked principally through electronic systems that require skill to navigate, find a vaccination site and schedule an appointment.

Another reason that may not apply to other groups is a concern for immigration status. If someone is here legally as a resident, with the intention of becoming a citizen, being what is called a "public charge" can count against them when they apply for citizenship. Some people may be concerned that if they accept the vaccine, since it's free and provided by the government, it might be more difficult later to get full citizenship. Then, obviously, those who are "undocumented" avoid any contact with government agencies at all.

Finally, and this should probably be higher on the list, are language barriers and cultural competency issues. We need to advertise to the Latino community in appropriate languages. Sometimes it's Spanish, sometimes it's English. Any communication must also be culturally appropriate, reaching those groups where they are.

What can and should leaders do in their own organizations?

The most successful examples I've seen lead by example and make the vaccination process as seamless and simple as possible. That can mean accommodating their schedule and allowing them to get to vaccination sites when those are open. It could also mean contracting with pharmacies or others to bring vaccines onto the worksite, making them available during the workday and giving employees the opportunity to get the vaccine there.

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It could also mean arranging for experts to speak to the staff about their questions and concerns. Some people have questions about safety and efficacy. It's very easy to discount those concerns, "wave off" any fears and tell people to "get over it and just get the vaccine." These are legitimate questions, and we need to help people through that.

What can leaders do in their communities?

In our community I've seen leaders work with vaccination sites. For example, they're working with organizations like federally-qualified health centers trying to get vaccines to the community, inviting them to their sites to host a vaccine clinic. If their organizations have the space, they can host or sponsor a vaccination clinic. They could encourage staff to volunteer.

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Leaders can also promote the philosophy that we're all in it together. Say "We're 'all in' on vaccines." Hammering that message home is critical. Do it with your staff. Do it with your families and do it with your community. If we're not all vaccinated, the risk is still there.

Who would be trusted communicator with the Latino community? If you were a business leader, who would you want to invite to speak?

I can speak from both personal and professional experience. I was born and raised in Los Angeles, with a commitment to service. I thought that might be in religious life, but I was also very influenced by a Latino physician working in the community who became my mentor. He was involved in policy and impacting the community. Personally, his example led me to begin the journey to become a physician. My training focused on urban health and eventually I pursued an MPH. The bulk of my practice has been in South Los Angeles, in health centers, including as CEO of a nonprofit health center servicing predominantly Latino and low-income populations with lots of immigrants.

Don't minimize the value of clinicians in white coats and stethoscopes. I've experienced that professionally. Latino physicians can have a positive impact because they are amongst those in the Latino community who hold a special position. Other clinicians, including nurse practitioners, physician assistants and nurses with clinical experience, do as well. They are very respected. Have them speak to your staff.

Also from my experience, some Latino communities have a long tradition with community health workers. You can reach them through local nonprofit health centers. These community health centers have resources they can share and contacts within the community, including with trusted community health workers. In Spanish, we call them *Promotores*, which means they promote health.

Unfortunately, this is a "ground game." It's going to take "word of mouth" communications with some people in the Latino community. I'm confident that there are people open to being vaccinated. We must provide them with the right information and the best reassurance.

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You mentioned the concern of some that getting the vaccine might risk eventual citizenship. What can a business leader do to alleviate that concern?

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Civic leaders must reiterate that getting a COVID-19 vaccine will not affect immigration status and that the data will not be used in a negative way, whether you're here with or without documentation.

I think bringing in the voices of trusted civic leaders is important to reassure those populations. Getting the word out through trusted physicians, nurses and community health workers can help.

Do you have any other advice for leaders?

I applaud any effort to get more people vaccinated. It's really critical. As we work towards that goal, remember that the Latino community is not homogenous. It must be approached from different angles. That sometimes takes extra effort, but it's well worth it.

Hesitancy is not insurmountable. The resistance and hesitancy I see comes from very reasonable concerns and questions. Answering those questions and being open minded will go a long way.

I see this in the clinic, where I still see patients. When I have the opportunity to speak to them and reassure them, they're open to the vaccine. We give it to them right there. This is a population we can work with, and success is something that we can certainly achieve. If we put effort into it and work with our employees and staff, we'll get people to where they need to go which, in my view, is being fully vaccinated.

Felix Nunez, MD

Felix Nunez, MD is the President of the Board of Directors of the Association of Clinicians for the Underserved and Medical Director of Inland Empire Molina Healthcare where he works with a team to assure a collaborative approach to care coordination, quality improvement, network integration and utilization management. He trained in Medicine at Harvard Medical School, did his Residency at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA and studied Public Health at the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health.

Association of Clinicians for the Underserved

The Association of Clinicians for the Underserved is a transdisciplinary membership network uniting clinicians, advocates and organizations in the shared mission of improving health equity for the underserved. It provides professional education, training, technical assistance, and clinical tools and programs to thousands of clinicians and organizations each year.

Association of Clinicians for the Underserved and Covid-19 and Vaccine Confidence

The Association maintains a curated set of resources about Covid-19 at <https://clinicians.org/programs/coronavirus-resources/>

Molina Healthcare

Molina Healthcare is a FORTUNE 500 multi-state healthcare organization providing managed health care services under Medicare and Medicaid programs and through state insurance marketplaces. Through its locally operated health plans, it services approximately 4.6 million members. Its mission is to provide quality health care to people receiving government assistance. Molina is committed to the communities it serves through many initiatives, providing employees with opportunities to volunteer and honoring community heroes with its Community Champion Awards.



The Vanguard Network catalyzes high performance with leaders and their organizations.

Global Vaccination Advisors helps identify and leverage the underlying attitudinal and emotional drivers and barriers to COVID-19 vaccination



Global Vaccination Advisors