How One Leader Works to Protect Victims of Domestic Violence and Her Employees

As told to Eden Stiffman

Claudia Medina is co-founder and executive director of Enlace Comunitario, a nonprofit in Albuquerque that aids victims of domestic violence in Latino immigrant communities in Central New Mexico. When she started the organization 20 years ago, there were no services specifically for Spanish-speaking abuse victims.

In the last month, we realized many victims that we serve were losing their jobs. Most of them work in the service sector, under the table, in many cases. They don’t have Social Security numbers and authorization to work in this country. So when they lose their job, they cannot go and claim unemployment. They cannot get the stimulus money from the CARES Act, which means that they are really in a more financially vulnerable position.

If they are still living with the abusive partner, the abusive partner is often in the same boat. All of a sudden, the pandemic made them stay at home face-to-face, 24/7.

We heard from our clients that, in many cases, the stress of not having a job, of not having any income, seeded more incidents of violence and physical abuse. And more emotional abuse.

So we started thinking, what can we do?

We have 30 employees, all working from home. We cannot see the victims face-to-face because we want to protect their health and the health of our team.

We’ve tried to assure them that we are still providing services. We are calling every one of our current clients and saying, “We are still here for you. What are your most basic needs right now?” And the answer was mostly, “We need cash. We need food. We need to pay three months of rent.”

If women need to leave now, we are not advising them to go to the shelter. Our shelter is one of the largest ones in the country. It has 100 residents. There is no space for distancing. But we are paying vouchers to go to hotels.

We have seen more new clients, but it’s not an avalanche. Many people are still not aware that we serve were losing their jobs. Most of the [public-health] information had been only in English, and many in the city and the state government now are making changes. They now have an interpreter while the governor is doing the daily press conference. And some materials and parts of the Covid hotline are translated into Spanish.

Gifts for Cash Support

We have been sending emails to all our donors, and people have responded well. In the last two weeks, we were able to give $37,000 in financial support to our clients. A consortium of national funders helped us support 150 families with $500 in cash directly.

We sent an email to our current funders saying: If you can help provide monetary assistance to families, please send us whatever you can. We have received more donations this month than in any other month, even though we haven’t done any of our regular fundraising.

We do monthly house parties. Our board members and staff open the door of their homes. They invite their friends and pass the hat. That has been our bread and butter in terms of fundraising. Even though we haven’t been able to do those this month and last month, we still are doing well in our fundraising goals.

The difference is that this money coming in is not for agency operations, it’s for the families directly. And so that will end up being problematic in the future because our fundraising for general operations is going to be down. But we will get there when we get there.

We are trying to focus on helping the families as much as we can, and then we will figure out what to do for more long-term sustainability of the agency.

There are some funders that are really coming together and pooling their resources to help families that are undocumented. I’m super thankful. I’m just afraid that, because of the shock in the economy, the investments of these foundations will take a hit and eventually they won’t be able to provide as much funding as they used to when the economy was strong.

‘I Don’t Want to Lose Them’

We have the most amazing, committed group of advocates and attorneys and counselors. Everybody is working really hard.

We are paying everyone, even the cleaning lady, even though she doesn’t go to clean the office. We want to support all our team members. They are essential to us.

We have a prevention team that used to be out in the community doing presentations. They have moved to do more things via Instagram and social media. They don’t have the same amount of work, and that is OK with me. If they utilize some of that time to be with their kids and to provide self-care to themselves, so be it. I don’t want to lose them because they don’t have enough work for eight hours a day. It costs us a lot of money to train them and to find good people. I am totally comfortable paying their full-time salary, knowing that some of them are not working full-time. When the time comes, when they need to put in more time, they will.

Right now, I don’t know if I’m doing very well at taking care of myself, but I try to meditate a little bit every morning. Not much — it’s new for me. And I walk every day at least one hour out in the neighborhood. Those are my two areas of self-care.

I do a check-in with my employees every week trying to motivate them to take care of themselves. They seem to be in good spirits. No one has gotten the virus yet, thank God. Most of my team members are young, and they have small families. There’s not one person except me who lives just by herself.

We work with trauma, and people get really affected by secondary trauma. So it’s part of our package of benefits to have a wellness benefit. We reimburse for yoga classes, for exercise, for therapy. So I’m reminding them: Use your well-being package and continue doing things that are rewarding and can help you de-stress. Hopefully they are following my advice.