Addressing Neurocognitive Disorders, Dementias, and Alzheimer’s Disease in Colonias of the Lower Rio Grande Valley: Establishing a Research Foundation Using Promotores

Noé Garza, DDS, MPH, DPH1,2,3; Marucela Uscamayta-Ayvar, MSc1,4; Gladys E. Maestre, MD, PhD1,3,4,5

Several Texas communities along the Mexican border, including the Lower Rio Grande Valley (LRGV), are home to low-income Hispanic populations, many of whom live in underserved communities known as colonias. These areas have high incidences of neurocognitive disorders, dementia, and Alzheimer’s disease (AD); health care strategies that are culturally and linguistically appropriate for the area are needed. We aim to build capacity to reduce risk, facilitate treatment, and provide caregiver support for affected individuals. However, gaining trust of communities and presenting information about research studies in a way that is culturally appropriate is critical for engagement of underserved communities.

This brief report examines our work with local community health workers (CHWs), promotores in Spanish, to establish contact with, engage, mobilize, and educate the Hispanic communities of the LRGV. Lessons from the successful experience of training promotores in autism spectrum disorder in the LRGV highlight the importance of specifically addressing outreach in health fairs, clinic visits and referral as well as adequate selection, training, management, and support of the promotores as critical aspects. To initiate and sustain recruitment of older adults and care partners in research studies of AD and other dementias in the RGV, we have incorporated these aspects as components of the promotores training and engagement model, which has been developed and implemented by researchers and their colleagues at the School of Medicine at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. Ethn Dis. 2020;30(Suppl 2):775-780; doi:10.18865/ed.30.S2.775

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INTRODUCTION

The Texas Hispanic population represents more than 50% of the state’s poor, and their poverty rates are twice as high as that among non-Hispanic Whites. The Lower Rio Grande Valley (LRGV) is the poorest region in the state, and the McAllen area has the highest rate (42.4%) of child poverty.1 Most low-income Hispanics in this area live in areas called colonias, which often lack basic necessities, such as clean water, sewage systems, electricity, paved roads, or safe and sanitary homes. Colonias exist in Arizona, New Mexico, and California, but Texas has the greatest number and largest population (approximately 500,000).2 In the United States, 28.2% of the population aged ≥25 years has a college degree or higher (26.1% in Texas), but only 5.5% of the colonias residents do.2 Years in school and quality of education affect cognition across lifespan, particularly in older individuals,3 suggesting that school attrition, educational opportunities, and educational quality are important risk factors for dementia and Alzheimer’s disease (AD) in colonias, thus they are also key targets for prevention of cognitive deterioration.

Neurological disorders account for 6% of disabilities and 12% of deaths worldwide.4 Many are progressive, and their rates increase with age. Around 5.7 million Americans have dementia, including 390,000 Texans. In Texas, the prevalence of AD is 13%

1 Department of Neuroscience, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley School of Medicine Harlingen, TX
2 Community Health Worker (Promotor) Training Program, Institute for Neuroscience, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley School of Medicine, Harlingen TX
3 Rio Grande Valley Alzheimer’s Disease-Resource Center for Minority Aging Research (AD-RCMAR), University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, Brownsville, TX
4 Institute for Neuroscience, School of Medicine, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, Harlingen, TX
5 Department of Human Genetics, School of Medicine University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, Brownsville, TX

Address correspondence to Gladys E. Maestre, MD, PhD; University of Texas Rio Grande Valley One West University Blvd. BROBL Rm. 106 Brownsville, TX 78520. gladys.maestre@utrgv.edu or gladysmaestre@gmail.com
among Medicare Fee-For-Service beneficiaries aged ≥65 years, while the national rate is 11.4%. However, the prevalence in the LRGV is even higher (Starr County: 20.7%, Cameron County: 15.7%, Hidalgo County: 19%, Willacy County: 17.7%).

Hispanics have a greater risk of developing AD and experience symptoms 6.8 years earlier than non-Hispanic Whites (mean age of initial symptoms: 67.6 vs. 73.1 years, respectively). Aging Hispanics need immediate health care and AD care, but the related infrastructure and research to advance it, are underdeveloped and insufficiently diverse with respect to ethnic representation. Thus, we focused on building capacity for advancing AD research and health care by leveraging health care and community networks and establishing the LRGV AD-Resource Center for Minority Aging (AD-RCMAR). However, gaining trust in communities and presenting information about research studies in a way that is culturally appropriate is critical for engagement of underserved communities. This brief report examines our initial work with local community health workers (CHWs), promotores in Spanish, to contact, engage, mobilize, and educate the Hispanic communities of the LGRV, with a special focus on colonias along the Texas/Mexico border.

**COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKERS/PROMOTORES**

The American Public Health Association defines a CHW as “a frontline public health worker who is a trustworthy member and/or has an unusually close understanding of and trust from the communities they serve.” CHWs enable the development of individual and community capacities regarding general health in diverse roles, sometimes performing many tasks that may be preventive, curative, or developmental, while in other cases, their role is very specific. In Hispanic communities, CHW are also known as promotores, short for ‘Promotores de Salud’; they positively impact research at many levels especially by facilitating recruitment and retention of participants.

**History of Community Health Workers/Promotores in the Lower Rio Grande Valley**

The LRGV promotores model, “Mano a Mano,” was created in April 1991 in response to three infants with anencephaly who were born 36 hours apart in Brownsville, Texas. This unusual cluster caught the attention of health workers, particularly Ms. Paula Gomez, executive director at Brownsville Community Health Center (BCHC), and Dr. Carmen Rocco, who started a bi-national campaign for local citizens to locate pregnant women needing prenatal care. The focus was training volunteer promotores to disseminate prenatal-health care knowledge. In 1999, the Promotor(a)/CHW Training and Certification Advisory Committee in Texas was charged with implementing standards related to the training and regulation of promotores. The committee continues to review applications from sponsoring organizations or training programs and to recommend certification.

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley’s School of Medicine (UTRGV/SOM) was founded in 2015 and members of the Inaugural Department of Family and Preventive Medicine forged a community-academic partnership to address inter-professional education and integrated care training in the LRGV with support from the United Health Foundation. This partnership focused on the World Health Organization’s priorities in Mental, Neurological and Substance use disorders (MNS) disorders and the Mental Health Gap Action Programme’s (mhGAP’s) curriculum to create the CHW Consortium, which included the Texas A&M National CHW Training Center, University of Texas School of Public Health, and South Texas College. In 2017, the Center for Brain Health was founded,
which formed the basis of the Institute for Neurosciences (IFN) and included an outreach component based on collaboration with promotores.

Training of Community Health Workers/Promotores

Texas promotores are certified by CHW Training Programs by the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) Promotor(a)/CHW Training Certification Program. Courses are at least 160 hours, and continuing education units (CEU) are required to renew CHW certification every two years. The CHW/Promotor(a) training for Mental Health GAP is a 12 CEUs course delivered by the Texas A&M School of Public Health, CCHD’s National CHW Training Center. The program provides basic training in mental health screening and referral to primary health care personnel trained in mhGAP along with training for monitoring and following-up with people with mental illness and their families. The following are core competencies with a specific module for MNS: 1) communication skills to enhance abilities to exchange information with community members, health and human-services agencies; 2) interpersonal skills to improve abilities to communicate and build relationships, particularly when cooperation is required; 3) service coordination skills to strengthen abilities to assist individuals and families through planning, coordinating, identifying, accessing, and monitoring services and support to achieve the best quality of life and full community participation; 4) capacity building skills to enhance abilities to promote individual and organizational capabilities to obtain, improve, and retain skills, knowledge, tools, equipment, and other resources needed to pursue community goals; 5) community needs assessment skills to teach participants skills to systematically collect, analyze, and use information to educate and mobilize communities; develop priorities and action plans, and demonstrate the need for funding proposals; 6) advocacy skills to enhance abilities to effectively communicate, negotiate, or assert interests, desires, needs, and rights of the community; 7) teaching skills to develop abilities related to creating structure and order, boosting productivity, and prioritizing tasks; 9) knowledge on MNS to gain and share basic knowledge of mental health and mental, neurological and substance use services, social determinants, mood disorders, psychosis, alcohol and substance abuse, developmental disorders, self-harm and danger, cognitive disorders, stroke, epilepsy, movement disorders, and chronic pain; and 10) conflict resolution skills to enhance abilities to identify conflicts, acknowledge different opinions, and build consensus around actions needed to address community needs.

In 2018, the UTRGV AD-RCMAR was established to reduce impacts of AD and brain disorders among Hispanics and other minority groups. The organization embraces alliances with community members and organizations rooted in the Institute of Medicine’s framework for collaborative public health action. Within this scope, promotores pursue general primary care principles, recruit patients with memory disorders and dementia, refer patients to primary health care providers, monitor and support patients and families, and link them to community resources. Additional opportunities are offered to promotores via courses, conferences, reflective dialogue sessions, and introductions to different research teams and approaches. Concepts of responsible research conduct are discussed and embedded in training that includes discussions on designing, planning, implementing, and evaluating projects and post-project sustainability. The goal is to engage promotores in sustainability-enhancement efforts including broadening and deepening stakeholders’ involvement.

The UTRGV/SOM and the UTRGV AD-RCMAR have initiated programs to study impacts of MNS including autism, AD and related brain disorders among Hispanics with the purpose of developing health care strategies to improve diagnosis, care, and prevention of these conditions. Embedded on the planning of these programs are strategies to respond to local socioeconomic conditions, culture, and educational levels. One of the mechanisms to promote community engagement is the implementation of alliances with CHW/promotores organizations, which resulted in community-academic partnerships (South Texas Promotores Association, BCHC Mano a
Mano, Proyecto Juan Diego, Red de Promotores, Migrant Health Promotion Salud, LGRV CHW Consortium, and Area Health Education Center Program) toward the implementation of programs for MNS led by promotores organizations.

Promotores are also research partners for the UTRGV AD-RCMAR pilot projects that offer them opportunities to participate at all stages of research, particularly in defining research questions, instrument development, participant recruitment, data collection, and research dissemination. Enhancing promotores’ capabilities to implement interventions and data analysis is necessary before their involvement and UTRGV AD-RCMAR supports several mechanisms of interaction with them in which empowerment and commitment to developmental activities are explored through informational sessions and public trainings using social media, listening sessions and development of resources that facilitate visualization of information and data.

Promotores focus on the following: training and informing communities about behavioral health, dementia, AD, and related disorders; making home visits to detect potential issues affecting health or healing and identifying needed services; eliminating language barriers that affect health care access or treatment adherence; creating educational networks that extend deeply into communities; recruiting research participants; using the Mini-Cog as a screening tool for referrals for individuals concerned with cognitive-performance changes.

**Efforts to Date**

Since 2017, an average of 80 promotores have participated in each training. A clinical research certificate and stroke-care course are being developed. To conduct colonias research with promotores, we minimized course dropouts by simplifying learning experiences and adapting protocols and data-collection instruments to the languages and cultures; we further highlighted opportunities to access older adults by respecting the role of elderly people in colonias culture.

One of the few reports of using promotores on MNS in the LRGV was focused on training promotores to engage parents on early detection of autism. Given the participation of one of the UTRGV AD-RCMAR’s members (NG) in that team, we have extracted the lessons and adapted to engage promotores in early detection of cognitive decline in older adults. The Hispanic Autism Research Center (HARC) developed a “train-the-trainer” program that included an educational intervention for CHWs, with a practicum (visits) and focus groups to identify perceived strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum. Two organizations that group a substantial number of promotores in the LRGV were invited to participate in the training: Proyecto Juan Diego in Cameron County and the South Texas Promotor Association in Hidalgo County.

Fifty-eight promotores out of the sixty invited received training using the Developmental Milestones and the Warning Signs of Autism: Promotora Training Guide developed by the Organization for Autism Research (OAR) to identify normal childhood-developmental milestones and recognize delays. All but one self-identified themselves as Hispanic and there were four males in the group. More than half of the promotores (55%) were aged ≥50 years, and almost a third (39%) held 12 grades of education as their terminal degree (high-school). All 56 promotores completed the five sessions of approximately one hour: 1) introduction to developmental milestones; 2) developmental milestones; 3) outreach during a health fair; 4) outreach during clinic visits; and 5) referral information and review. Each participant completed a pre- and post-training survey that was also developed by OAR and modified by the HARC with the purpose of assessing gain of knowledges. Analysis of the responses revealed that promotores significantly improved their knowledge of developmental milestones and warning signs of autism after the training, (60.5 ± 16.4% vs 73.6 ± 18.2%, t= 5.7, P<.0001).

Ten promotores volunteered to implement the OAR curriculum during home visits and provide families with materials from the CDC campaign, “Learn the signs. Act early.” Twenty-seven promotores participated in focus groups conducted after training, and they emphasized the effectiveness of the interactive workshop as opposed to strict lectures and that it prepared them well for their community outreach. They were also interested in reviewing material in another workshop or providing it to other promotores.

One of the most revisited themes in focus groups was the community’s desire for more information regard-
Promotores in the Rio Grande Valley - Garza et al

Conclusions

Promotores are active stakeholders in developing strategies for establishing research foundations for studies of complex neurocognitive disorders such as ASD in the LRGV. Promotores provide services in locations with relatively inaccessible formal health care, contributing to community health and wellbeing, and also engage individuals residing in colonias to research studies. However, it is critical to frame engagement of promotores within community-academic partnerships that begin with genuine interest in addressing local health needs. Extension of lessons from the ASD study, and the incorporation of the mhGAP strategies in training of promotores support the feasibility of deploying CHWs to recruit older adults and care partners in research studies. The LRGV population’s characteristics make early detection of AD and dementia and support for patients and caregivers high priorities, and working with promotores is an effective means of achieving them.

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Promotores in the Rio Grande Valley - Garza et al

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