

## ▶ SPOTLIGHT ON SUCCESS STORIES FROM THE FIELD



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## Building Bridges: Advancing Public Health Equity Through the Hispanic Outreach Initiative Team

**Editor's Note:** The National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) strives to provide relevant and useful information through the pages of the *Journal* for environmental health professionals. In a recent membership survey, we heard your request for information that spotlights successful environmental health programs across the different areas of environmental health and from different sectors of the profession. We listened and are pleased to publish this column that shines a spotlight on success stories from the environmental health field. These stories enable us to learn from our peers and provide an avenue to incorporate successful programs, innovative solutions, and unique approaches to our own programs and initiatives.

The conclusions of this column are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views or official position of NEHA, our funders, or our partners.

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### Introduction

In 2024, the Pima County Health Department's Consumer Health and Food Safety (CHFS) Division launched the Hispanic Outreach Initiative to improve communication and build lasting trust with the county's large and diverse Hispanic population. Located along the U.S.–Mexico border, Pima County is home to a substantial number of residents

who speak, or prefer to speak, Spanish. Past public health emergencies revealed critical gaps in language access and community engagement, highlighting the need for a more intentional and equitable outreach approach.

While communities of color have been disproportionately affected by health inequities, CHFS prioritized outreach to Hispanic residents, the largest ethnic group in Pima

County (Arizona Prevention Research Center, 2024), to ensure resources were directed where both need and potential impact were greatest. This targeted approach remains aligned with broader equity goals and reflects a commitment to addressing structural barriers within public health systems.

### Strategy and Alignment

In response, CHFS developed a comprehensive outreach strategy rooted in language access, cultural competency, and community trust-building. This initiative aligns with Retail Program Standard 7 (Industry and Community Relations) of the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) Voluntary National Retail Food Regulatory Program Standards and supports a Pima County resolution that declares racial and ethnic health inequities and income inequality a public health crisis (Pima County Board of Supervisors, 2020).

The initiative aims to empower permit holders and community members to make informed decisions related to food safety, aquatic safety, and other environmental health code requirements affecting permitted facilities. To foster meaningful and sustainable relationships, CHFS began by proactively engaging Hispanic community organizations, prioritizing regular collaboration over engagement only during inspections or emergencies.

To improve accessibility, the team created a bilingual online request form that allows individuals to request educational materials, presentations, or consultation meetings in Spanish. Outreach efforts extend beyond



Photo 1. Members of the Hispanic Outreach Initiative Group. Back row (from left to right): Alejandro Perez, Tony Olguin, Anthony Cisneros, Nicole Barnett, and Martin Perez. Front row (from left to right): Ana Lopez Francisco, Melissa Duran, Rocio Alvarez, and Cesia Estrada. Photo courtesy of Cesia Estrada, Pima County Health Department.

permit holders to the broader public, reinforcing CHFS's role as both a regulator and a public health partner. These efforts have resulted in multiple Spanish-language public presentations highlighting CHFS's expertise and available resources beyond regulatory enforcement.

### Cross-Divisional Leadership and Workforce Support

The Hispanic Outreach Initiative is a collaborative, cross-divisional effort led by 10 Spanish-speaking environmental health professionals representing field operations, administrative support, supervision, and management across CHFS programs (Photo 1). Team members conduct inspections and provide customer service in Spanish, support the development and translation of educational materials, and actively contribute to outreach and community engagement events in Spanish.

A significant number of outreach requests involve permitting requirements for mobile food trucks and temporary or seasonal event booths, sectors in which many Spanish-speaking residents own or operate businesses. Addressing these needs helps reduce regulatory confusion, improve compliance, and support safer business operations.

To sustain this work, CHFS provides the team with 4 hours per month of protected collaboration time, which meets on the third Thursday of each month to focus on planning, project development, live Spanish translation practice, and continuous improvement activities. Team members receive multilingual pay in accordance with county policy, recognizing the value of their language skills and rein-

forcing CHFS's investment in staff capacity as a core component of equity work.

### Translation, Coordination, and Capacity Management

CHFS collaborates closely with the Pima County Public Relations Communications Team to ensure translations are accurate, culturally appropriate, and technically sound. CHFS subject matter experts lead translations of highly technical materials when external capacity is limited.

To support coordination and accountability, the outreach team maintains a centralized SharePoint hub to track ongoing and completed projects, meeting agendas and recordings, presentations, outreach metrics, and educational materials. Recognizing workforce constraints, CHFS strategically limits outreach commitments each quarter to ensure outreach efforts remain sustainable while staff fulfill core regulatory responsibilities.

### Deliverables and Measures of Success

Key Spanish-language resources developed or supported through the initiative include:

- Pool operator and technician certification courses
- Food handler certification courses
- Collaboration with the National Environmental Health Association to verify Spanish translations of a national food safety certification study guide

Additional translated materials include educational handouts, email blasts, newsletters, Facebook posts, and regulatory updates related to:

- Permitting processes
- Other business-related regulations
- Health code guidance

Success is measured by both qualitative and quantitative indicators, including establishing trusted community connections before emergencies, year-over-year participation in outreach, sustained partnerships with community organizations, and improved understanding of regulatory processes. Over time, CHFS also plans to use findings from its FDA Retail Program Standard 9 risk factor studies to assess reductions in noncompliance, fewer rescinded plan reviews, and increased operational efficiency through reduced staff time spent redirecting inquiries.

### Conclusion

The CHFS Hispanic Outreach Initiative demonstrates how intentional communication, workforce investment, and community-centered practices can advance public health equity. By embedding trust-building and language access into routine operations, CHFS is strengthening regulatory effectiveness while fostering healthier, safer, and more resilient communities. ✨

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