

10 Un Respiro de Vida, a breath of life

Giving wings to farmworker
families during the COVID crisis

*Belinda Hernández-Arriaga and
Juan Carlos Ruiz Malagon*

Overview

Farmworkers are one of the most vulnerable populations in the United States. At the same time, they are the backbone of our economy and our country. During COVID and natural disasters, farmworkers continued in the field, supporting the country, while their families suffered compounded disparities. Understanding best practices to provide direct support to this community is necessary to support their well-being. Ayudando Latinos A Sonar is a California nonprofit that has been on the front lines of working with Latino families in a rural Northern California community. Through their story, we understand the impact of going out into the fields to bring cariño (care), advocacy and support to farmworkers and their families during crisis.

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a global emergency due to the contagious and deadly nature of the virus. This emergency brought upon shelter-in-place mandates, extended lockdowns as well as guidelines to limit social interactions (Chicas et al., 2022). Although this was the case worldwide, governmental guidelines deemed certain individuals “essential” at the start of the pandemic. Within the United States, agricultural workers were included in the designated group of essential personnel. There are an estimated 2.5 million farmworkers with a larger majority of them being foreign-borns and more than half lacking any form of documentation (Hernandez and Gabbard, 2019; Tippet, 2020). It is estimated that more than 68% of farmworkers are either from Central America or Mexico, which creates implications for racialization and systemic exclusions due to the legacies of racism within the United States.

Compared to other workers who were deemed essential, farmworkers face an increase in limited occupational protections in addition to facing language barriers, lack of access to social resources and adequate educational and legal services (Liebman et al., 2021; Ramos, 2018). In spite of farmworkers contributing to the 1.109 trillion dollar industry of agriculture, they were faced

with unique challenges of survival in relation to both health and social realms (Devadoss and Luckstead, 2008; National Center for Farmworker Health).

Amid the pandemic, existing social and health injustices only were heightened due to the legacies of systemic racism found within the United States (Bailey et al., 2017). COVID brought an unfamiliar wave of crisis to the world, but not so unfamiliar for farmworker communities who have endured decades of exploitation and exclusion from governmental support. For farmworker families, their experiences during COVID have been physically, emotionally and economically challenging. While most of the country went into quarantine, our farmworkers went out into the fields every day to provide food, nutrition and health for our country. They were in the direct line of exposure to COVID, many who did not start out with personal protection like face masks, face shields, goggles and hygiene protection. Instead, they worked long hours, side by side and with rigor to make sure that our country was taken care of. The crisis of COVID hit their families economically and physically as some lost their jobs, falling ill to COVID, many who do not have access to medical insurance. Their children had an increase in exposure to COVID as a result of parents having to continue working in the fields. Farmworker children grappled with school inequities living in remote areas with minimal wifi as well as the economic and physical hardships that plagued their families. As the COVID pandemic swept through the United States, the physical and emotional sacrifice of our farmworker community was heroic as they pushed through difficult and life-threatening work conditions to keep harvesting food for our communities. Their families endured a pandemic crisis vulnerable and exposed with minimal resources, unable to quarantine. As essential workers, they continued strong, even in the face of death and tragedy with COVID in the fields and in their homes.

While farmworkers battled COVID, a Northern California Coastal community of farmworkers faced a second threatening crisis of the CZU Lightning wildfire, burning over 86 acres (cite). Families were displaced, losing work and housing in the midst of the pandemic.

Farmworker children were challenged with attending online classes, displaced from home and with minimal access to technology and resources. Fleeing their homes with minimal belongings and already in fear, the trauma they endured was compounded by the natural disaster that plagued them. A crisis response organized by the Latinx led nonprofit organization of Ayudando Latinos A Soñar, also known as ALAS, www.alasdreams.com, is presented as a model of trauma and community response. ALAS embraces the SBFC metamodel that underscores community intervention as key to the well-being of families and children in schools (Gerrard & Soriano, 2018). What we have learned at ALAS is that community partnerships with farmworker families are critical and necessary as extending support and direct care. As Latinx writers, we introduce the work of ALAS through the lens of scholars, SBFC professionals and community organizers.

As a first author, I identify as a Latina Licensed Clinical Social Worker, Educator and Founder of ALAS in the rural community of Half Moon

Bay, California. Second author identifies as a Latinx public health scholar, first-generation and low-income college student and from a farmworker family from Central Mexico. This chapter gives a “cariño” (care) perspective of the accompaniment and crisis response work organized by ALAS. Lessons learned on working with farmworker families during crises are necessary as we embrace and elevate them as key pillars of our country.

According to testimonios shared with ALAS from the local Latino farmworker community of the North Coast in San Mateo County, they report working alone in the fields for thirty years with no outreach or services provided directly to them onsite. During our initial visits with them, they repeatedly stated that “In thirty years no one has helped us with any services, no one has come to visit us or meet us here on the farms”. One senior farmworker shared during ALAS’ Farmworker Fridays, “In all my years as a farmworker on the Coastside, no one has even offered us a coke to drink, nothing”. Coastside Farmworker families have been an underserved community, facing mounting challenges of inequity and disparities that are evident in the economic challenges they are plagued by, the educational barriers their children navigate, complicated housing situations and the devastation of the COVID pandemic. The reality of the isolation they have lived through pushed ALAS to create urgent programming that addressed the crisis and instituted long-term support.

ALAS has committed to embed itself in spaces where there are families facing disparities and isolation as well as engage in systems like schools, churches, city and government to provide programming, outreach and advocacy. Farmworkers receive resources for medical enrollment that otherwise they would be challenged to access. Children receive I.E.P. advocacy by ALAS staff to increase educational equity and resources. Victims of crime receive accompaniment by our ALAS mental health team and overall we position ourselves in spaces to advocate and provide ongoing support where needed. In summer of 2021, as children suffered isolation from the pandemic, ALAS hosted its first ever summer camp for five weeks to sixty children, the majority from farmworker and essential working families. The emotional healing that happened as a result of the camp was significant. The City of Half Moon Bay and the County of San Mateo have recognized our work and program as a trusted agency in the community.

Procedure

While businesses were forced to shut down during the pandemic, ALAS opened the doors to accompany farmworker families. All of the ALAS programs discussed in this chapter were developed out of a direct response to COVID and the wildfires. ALAS was motivated by a sense of urgency and cariño (care) to enact a culturally centered impactful crisis response. What was most important during this crisis was to go out into the community to take the resources. The ALAS team pivoted to emergency response, with all staff motivated to be there for the community. The first priority to address was

the economic and food disparities that were scarce. The irony of farmworkers harvesting our food but not having enough food for their families is heart-breaking but true.

Basic needs during crisis

Food support was one of the most important responses to the crisis of COVID and wildfires. The trauma of what farmworkers were living through was complicated by economic disparities that included loss of wages, loss of employment, COVID infection, health challenges and quarantine. Before the team could address the emotional challenges, ALAS heard from the community how critical it was for them to get access to healthy food. ALAS organized several food initiatives to include a home delivery program, a food pantry and a warm meal program.

ALAS' staff and community volunteers delivered food to the homes of those ill with COVID and or in quarantine. Instacart or Doordash was not an option for the many families that were isolated and in fear. ALAS used the generous donations of philanthropy groups, city and county officials and the community to supply food directly to the homes of those in the farms and community. ALAS learned the complexities of COVID and transmission in shared housing spaces. This reality posed another complication of families not being able to cook in shared kitchens due to risk of exposure. With numerous calls coming in, ALAS sent staff out daily with cooked meals to families. Each step of the way, ALAS listened to the concerns of the community and what was needed.

The second food program initiated during the crisis was setting up a whole foods pop up food pantry. ALAS worked with local farms, food delivery programs and mobilized donations from across the community to set up a drive through the food pantry. Creating a COVID-safe food pantry, ALAS developed a car drive up procedure with 250 cars, feeding over 1,200 individuals each week. Many in the community who wanted to support local farm workers found an opportunity to give back and came out to volunteer, collect food supplies and share resources. One of the most important considerations in setting up the ALAS food pantry was taking into account what the community needed to eat and be healthy. The pantry focus was sharing whole healthy foods that the community consumed, including fruits, vegetables, milk, eggs, rice, beans, oil, maseca and more. ALAS gave each car a food card to use for their additional grocery needs and made the process very simple. There were no complicated forms to complete or questions about status or work income. The food pantry operated on a trust basis and as a result witnessed large numbers of farmworker families utilizing the program. One teen shared, "we are only eating right now because of the ALAS food pantry".

One positive outcome of the pantry that stood out during COVID and the wildfire response was the direct outreach ALAS was able to do each week during the pantry. ALAS engaged those coming to the food pantry as an opportunity to share information about COVID and critical resources of

support. The food pantry became an emergency portal of communication. ALAS staff passed out flyers for COVID vaccine clinics, shared county announcements and provided COVID education and resources for mental health and medical support. Most importantly, we were able to hear how the community was doing and what they needed during this time. The food pantry became a base of communication during the crisis and an opportunity to share PPE with the community. We gave out masks, hand sanitizer, gloves and even face shields. For students, we checked in about wifi hotspots and assessed for educational challenges they were having. The food pantry provided a good communication portal for us to understand weekly what the community was suffering. Two years later, the food pantry continues forward as a result of the continued pandemic and economic crisis.

The next food program ALAS began was the Farmworker Friday lunch program. This program was born out of a Taqueria calling to offer lunch to farmworkers during the pandemic. From this day forward, Farmworker Friday's was born. An important part of this lunch program is that the community becomes a part of donating and supporting this cause. Individuals and companies that want to make a difference sponsor a meal for farmworkers and their families. This bridge of connection from the community to the farms was a key foundation of support. For the farmworkers, it was and continues to be a positive source of support to see others appreciate their work and contribute to their well-being.

Un Respiro de Vida masks

When COVID hit, there were no masks available to the farmworker community. While the numbers were rising, a panic broke out among those in the field of how they would stay safe, given the close proximity of their work together. Several of the ALAS staff, including a Mental Health Clinician and our Arts Director, Zenón Barron, brought together mothers from ALAS to sew masks for the community. In the first months of COVID, ALAS mothers made over 15,000 masks. They worked non-stop to make masks to be delivered to the farms.

Fabric and donations were donated from across the country. There was an outpouring of community invested in showing their care for the farmworker community. In addition to masks made, ALAS received an outpouring of donated masks once they became available. At every food pantry or community contact made, ALAS made sure to give masks, hand sanitizer, donated face shields and any PPE supplies.

Vaccine education and support

One of the early concerns presented to ALAS staff was the assumption that the Latinx community would not get vaccinated. In hearing from the community, the opposite was true, they wanted to be protected, safe and be able to go to work and return to their families. The community shared how scared they were to be infected as it forced a shutdown to their overall well-being,

especially to those living in shared housing. To be proactive and get education to the community, ALAS launched the first Latinx testimonio video for the community. Senior farmworkers volunteered to be the first to be vaccinated with San Mateo County and ALAS' support. We worked with them to share their stories of the importance of staying healthy for their families and shared it widely across social media. ALAS staff also went to meet with families on the farm as well as all farmworkers to provide vaccine information. As a result of building trust, staff partnered with the County and other groups to co-facilitate vaccine clinics at the farms. Work was done to enroll them and support the vaccine and booster process. The Latinx community responded with lots of enthusiasm and a large number were vaccinated; others received COVID education, reducing the spread of COVID to others on the Coastside.

El Jardin summer camp

To support the youth, ALAS developed a summer camp on site at the farms to provide reading and activity for the youth. Children at the farms were struggling to connect to wifi and attend online school. Many students had challenges with completing homework at home due to language and technology challenges. However, another key stressor that was identified was the emotional fatigue of what COVID presented in their lives. The sudden departure from school, the health and economic challenges of COVID, and many being locked up in shared housing for long periods of time, concerned our ALAS team. University of San Francisco (USF) School of Education faculty partnered with ALAS to bring education and tutoring straight to the farms for the first summer program in the fields and online. Every week children were smiling, excited and reported the positive impact of having teachers and community come out to be with them.

Keeping safe with all the PPE, it was significant to note that USF committed to making a difference while also going out during a time when others were sheltering in place. With safety in mind, the ALAS and USF team understood the critical importance of getting education out to a vulnerable population that had minimal access to online learning.

Following the first year of education in the fields, ALAS wanted to impact a larger group of children getting ready to go back into school in the Fall and launched a bigger El Jardin summer camp. Together with USF educators, artists, youth counselors and ALAS staff, El Jardin was an immersion into the arts focused on healing and educating in a way that built community and fun. Below is a sample of the core activities offered in the camp program:

Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays

Class 1	Capoeira
Class 2	Hip Hop
Class 3	Voz & Guitar

Class 4	Arts & Crafts
Class 5	Cajon
Class 6	Sewing

Tuesdays, Thursdays

Academics: math, science and reading

Soccer included every Tuesdays and Thursdays for big muscle movement and development. The soccer program is led by coaches and youth camp counselors.

Youth that participated in the camp shared how much they loved being back with friends and engaged in learning. Several youth stated that during COVID, they felt as if they were stuck in cages and now were free. The emotional crisis of COVID was glaring as children seemed to come back to life as they immersed themselves in the activities and cariño that was shared with them at El Jardin. ALAS has committed to continue this camp every year with the same goal of bringing arts and culture front and center to the farmworker community.

Our veggies are Moonraised

In our visit to the farms, we felt the cold foggy air come upon us. Farmworkers shared that they spent many mornings cold, starting their day early at 5 am with little protection. ALAS decided to begin a Hoodies for Farmworkers program. With permission from local Latino youth, we worked with them to transform their slogan of “We Are Moonraised” to “Our Veggies Are Moonraised”. Hundreds of green hoodies along with gallons of drinking water were given out by the ALAS Farmworker team. Farmworkers shared that having warm clothing meant so much as they worked long days in the field. With an outpouring of support during COVID, community members and corporate sponsors contributed donations of rain boots, jackets, knee pads, PPE, gloves, sanitizer and other equipment that helped with their job. ALAS made an Amazon Wish List organized by farmworkers. With donations, they were able to get direct support and save their income for rent and basic necessities for their families. Listening to what the need was and finding creative ways to increase resources for this community has been an important part of ALAS’ crisis response.

Mental health in the fields

One of the most important areas of support given during COVID and the wildfire crisis was mental health support. For ALAS, it was important to rethink office visits as it was a time of quarantine. Telehealth was not an option for everyone as the majority did not have access to technology or wifi. Families shared the increased stress and isolation their children were experiencing.

Many children and families reported feeling overwhelmed, fearful and anxious. ALAS also was supporting many families with grief and loss of loved ones. With the increasing urgency to provide support, ALAS' mental health team went out to the farms to offer direct support and provide group counseling for children and mothers. We found that this was a critical life line for many that felt very alone and unsure of what was happening in the world around them. As School-Based Family Counseling practitioners, it was critical for us to be able to create space for healing and wellness. So many needed to process grief, isolation, fear, illness and sadness. Our crisis response not only addressed the emotional domain but also focused on physical health and well-being.

Cultural consciousness and humility

ALAS centers the community as its core tenet in order to celebrate identity and cultural pride. In doing so, our programming is reflective of the vision and mission to work for social wellness through multicultural practices, mental health care, as well as collective support for education, immigration and advocacy. ALAS' commitment to their community, especially their Latinx/e population, is rooted in cultural, social and linguistic consciousness. This enables a social justice lens to be applied that is race-conscious and policy-informed in order to effectively serve community members through familial relationships rather than a hierarchical approach. *Familismo* has enabled ALAS to build trust with their Latinx/e-community through unconditional support, acceptance, warmth, protection and loyalty (Calzada et al., 2013; Patrón, 2021). In essence, *familismo* provides ALAS the opportunity to protect its community members against physical and emotional stress through the support networks it has developed over the years (Marin and Marin, 1991). This focus on family is a hallmark of the SBFC approach.

Through these support networks and community *familismo*, staff has been able to embody cultural humility due to their commitment to self-reflection and self-critique regarding the power dynamic that exists in advocacy work (Tervalon and Murray-García, 1998). ALAS centers a constructive process to have staff consistently bring forth their cultural identities and backgrounds in order to build recognition and respect for those they serve who may have different cultural priorities and practices (Tervalon and Murray-García, 1998). Cultural competence is challenged in all the programming conducted at ALAS; rather, the space centers lifelong learning regarding privilege, positionality, identity and community. This has enabled ALAS to successfully advocate for the community and lead programming that address systemic injustices and barriers, especially for farmworker communities.

Challenges and solutions

Challenges during this time were the glaringly dangerous COVID infection. It was clear that every day that passed ALAS was out in the community, far

from being quarantined. The commitment of the staff was admirable and concerning all at the same time due to the reality that they could become infected with COVID. Staff members were given the opportunity to stay at home; however, many in our team choose to put themselves on the front lines for crisis support. They committed to change, even when the vaccine had not been made available. Other challenges included COVID exposure, getting PPE that was scarce and meeting the increase in demand from the community. As families got sick and the pandemic worsened, ALAS had to increase staff to get supplies and warm meals out to isolated and quarantine families. As a team, ALAS had to do remote meetings, but worked in isolation. On a daily basis, ALAS was on the front line of COVID working on behalf of the community and giving it their complete devotion.

Conclusion

ALAS embodies familial relationships in all their advocacy work, especially with the farmworker population. As a community organization, ALAS believes that in order to support a community, you must transcend boundaries established within the professional realm. Activist accompaniment provides individuals who have been most oppressed and excluded to take agency over their activism and provided raw emotions (Tomlinson and Lipsitz, 2019). ALAS works toward developing and maintaining long-term relations with the community in order to establish interpersonal *conocimiento* (Hernandez-Arriaga and Argenal, 2022). In doing so, we are actively engaging with them in order to live and experience the conditions the community faces rather than separating ourselves. By incorporating emotional presence in the work conducted within the community, humanization is reestablished in order to create sensory connectors in community narratives. Through these community narratives, ALAS responded effectively and rapidly to crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In situations of dire need, ALAS has established trauma-informed services in order to address the most pressing disparities being faced. ALAS is able to address complex issues due to the emotional connection and trust that has been developed over the years. *Familismo* truly guides the nature of work and response ALAS has; all efforts are approached with cultural consciousness and with the mission to disrupt cycles of injustices.

References

- Bailey, Z. D., Krieger, N., Agénor, M., Graves, J., Linos, N., & Bassett, M. T. (2017). Structural racism and health inequities in the USA: Evidence and interventions. *Lancet (London, England)*, 389(10077), 1453–1463. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(17\)30569-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(17)30569-X)
- Calzada, E. J., Tamis-LeMonda, C. S., & Yoshikawa, H. (2013). Familismo in Mexican and Dominican families from low-income, urban communities. *Journal of Family Issues*, 34(12), 1696–1724.

- Chicas, R., Xiuhtecutli, N., Houser, M., Glastra, S., Elon, L., Sands, J. M., McCauley, L., &Chicas, R., Xiuhtecutli, N., Houser, M., Glastra, S., Elon, L., Sands, J. M., McCauley, L., & Hertzberg, V. (2022). COVID-19 and agricultural workers: A descriptive study. *Journal of immigrant and minority health*, 24(1), 58–64. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10903-021-01290-9>
- Devadoss, S., & Luckstead, J. (2008). Contributions of immigrant farmworkers to California Vegetable production. *Journal of Agricultural and Applied Economics*, 40(3), 879–894. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s107407080000239x>
- Gerrard, B., & Soriano, M. (2018). The role of community Intervention in school-based family counseling. *International Journal for School-Based Family Counseling*, 11, 1–11.
- Hernandez, T., & Gabbard, S. (2019). Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 2015–2016: A demographic and employment profile of United States farmworkers. *Dep Labor Employ Train Adm Wash Dist Columbia*.
- Hernandez-Arriaga, B., & Argenal A. (2022). Todos Somos Humanos, Danos Una Oportunidad. In C. Magno, J. Lew, & S. Rodriguez (Eds), *(Re) Mapping Migration and Education* (pp. 158–175). Brill Publications.
- Liebman, A. K., Seda, C. H., & Galván, A. R. (2021). Farmworkers and covid-19: Community-based partnerships to address health and safety. *American Journal of Public Health*, 111(8), 1456–1458. <https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.2021.306323>
- Marin, G., & Marin, B. V. (1991). *Research with Hispanic Populations*. Sage Publications, Inc.
- Patrón, O. E. (2021). Complicating traditional understandings of familismo: Precariousness in the lives of queer Latino men in college. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 17(1), 30–48.
- Ramos, A. K. (2018). A human rights-based approach to farmworker health: An overarching framework to address the social determinants of health. *Journal of Agromedicine*, 23(1), 25–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1059924X.2017.1384419>
- Tervalon, M., & Murray-García, J. (1998). Cultural humility versus cultural competence: A critical distinction in defining physician training outcomes in multicultural education. *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*, 9, 117–125.
- Tippett, R. Counting Farmworkers in the 2020 Census. Carolina Demography, 16 April 2020. www.ncdemography.org/2020/04/16/counting-farmworkers-in-the-2020-census/.
- Tomlinson, B., & Lipsitz, G. (2019). *Insubordinate spaces: Improvisation and accompaniment for Social Justice*. Pennsylvania.