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# Orange County

## Introduction

**People Power for Public Health (PPPH) is a community-based initiative led by the California Pan-Ethnic Health Network (CPEHN), a statewide health advocacy organization dedicated to improving the health of communities of color in California.** PPPH researches how local advocacy can be utilized as a critical strategy to build community power and public health, especially for and with communities of color. We highlight the experiences of communities of color in five counties -- Sacramento, Fresno, Kern, Orange, and San Diego -- in accessing quality care. Lastly, we uplift community solutions that must be funded and passed at the local and statewide level in order for communities of color to thrive and live in healthy communities.

In Orange County, CPEHN partnered with MECCA, a collaborative agency of ethnically diverse and culturally competent community-based organizations. MECCA led virtual focus groups with community partners across Orange County with goals to recognize the barriers to health care and resources that prevent a healthy community, as well as listen to recommendations about where government funds should be invested in.

Our data was conducted in:

- 1 Focus groups in the 11 organizations under MECCA**
- 2 Groups separated into adult and youth**

For each focus group, we asked around the following themes:

- How did the pandemic, if at all, change your ability to access health care services?
- When you think of a healthy community, what comes to mind?
- What challenges, if any, do you think exist that prevent communities from being healthy and safe during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What resources and services do you think would help individuals the most during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What are your recommendations around county funding to ensure communities throughout Orange County are healthy and thriving?

This brief shares key conversation themes and policy recommendations from the community members from various community-based organizations.

## Orange County Demographics

In the Orange County interviews, there were a total of 229 participants. Each of the participants were affiliated with different ethnic organizations under MECCA and had experiences related to the following themes mentioned previously.

Name of Organization	Total # of Participants	Racial/Ethnic Groups Represented
Asian American Senior Citizens Service Center (AASCSC)	23	Chinese, Japanese/White, Ecuadorian/Russian, Chinese/Latino, Korean
ABRAZAR	36	Pacific Islanders, White, Hispanic
Korean Community Services (KCS)	15	Latinx/Hispanic, White, African American, Asian
HOPE Community Services	23	Vietnamese, Japanese Chinese, Filipino, Mexican American
Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA) Relief	15	African American, Middle Eastern, Asian, Latinix/Hispanic
Orange County Children's Therapeutic Arts Center (OCCTAC)	20	Latinx/Hispanic, Mexican/American, Guatemalan/American
OMID Multicultural Institute for Development	11	White, Asian, Middle Eastern
Pacific Islander Health Partnership (PIHP)	9	Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
Peer Voices Orange County (PVOC)	23	White, Latinx/Hispanic, Asian
The Cambodian Family (TCF)	24	Asian, Hispanic
Vietnamese American Cancer Foundation (VACF)	30	Vietnamese

## Key Conversation Themes

### Misinformation/ Disinformation around COVID

**Participants shared that they often received either too much or too little information about COVID-19 and it was difficult to obtain reliable information especially because of the politicization of the pandemic. There was also some distrust of government and vaccinations.**

“ People felt like the pandemic was not going to be a problem when they first heard about it in the winter of 2019/2020. They were not worried or scared. They were busy working on their own lives and recovery. Eventually, they realized this was a real thing, and people were dying. It all seemed to happen very quickly. They did not know what to do, and the government was sending out very confusing and contradictory information.”

“ People don't realize the extent of COVID until someone is struggling. A lot of people complain about anti-vaxxers not getting vaccinated, but people don't realize people are disabled who can't get vaccinated. My dad was one of those people who couldn't get vaccinated. I was scared to go back home at first because he couldn't get vaccinated. Double thing where immunocompromised couldn't get vaccine, and if they get COVID they get really affected”

“ A big issue is that a lot of people, especially older folks, don't know about vaccines due to misinformation or language barriers. Hard to access the health care services. A lot of translated resources have been seen on Instagram, but older folks can't access those so that's another barrier.”

### Food Access

**Participants shared not having enough healthy food options, and the only food available was often too expensive.**

“ Unprecedented times for sure, I was alarmed to see the empty shelves at grocery stores, the panic on people's faces and the feeling of fear and uncertainty. Grocery store shelves completely empty added to the feeling of anxiety and panic.”

“ Fast food restaurants are convenient and a cheaper option; schools are not offering healthy food.”

“ Not enough healthy food options advertised, and the cost is so expensive .”

## Economic Issues

**Unemployment and financial hardships due to shelter-in-place made it hard to keep safe from COVID-19. People could no longer afford basic necessities due to rising prices.**

“ Prices have doubled. Gas prices are increasing.”

“ People lost their jobs, and lack of income made it difficult to continue paying rent. Housing and home crises were a real fear.”

“ People lost their jobs and people commit[ed] crimes that they never even thought about before. Prices have gone up.”

## Healthcare Shortages/ Overwhelmed Healthcare System

**Frontline healthcare workers were facing the overwhelming demand of caring for COVID-19 patients in addition to providing everyday health care services.**

“ What I've noticed relating to healthcare services are things like not having enough beds, workers are exhausted since low staff. I feel a sense of guilt, thinking if I was sick there might be someone who might be sicker and need it more. Accessing health care services has changed - I felt more guilty if I needed to use it. I have a lot of health problems - whenever I would go out and start sneezing, I felt very subconscious because people might think you have COVID. It's also a struggle needing to go out, but feeling restricted by everything going on.”

“ Clinics and doctors overwhelmed, medical professionals facing burnout and quitting.”

“ Hospitals were overwhelmed and the virus was everywhere, so we were avoiding going to the doctors, clinics and hospitals unless very urgent.”

## Limited Access to Healthcare

**Access to clinics were more restricted except in emergencies and there was a lack of access to preventative care. Participants also had difficulty and lack of access to Covid testing.**

“ Figuring out where and when to take a covid test was difficult. Often did not receive results.”

“ When businesses and places like the Wellness Centers began to close, and people they knew died or got very sick, it was too late for an easy solution. We were never part of anything like this before. They were isolated from their community, and it was hard getting services and even going to the doctor or visiting the dentist. One of our participants mentioned that their son was not only upset, but he was unable to get treatment appointments for a chronic condition.”

“ The pandemic eliminated my ability to go to the doctor. Everything was closed down. Limited appointments...Difficult to access healthcare in person. Online services have been helping with mental health.”

### Mental Health and Drug Use

**Substance abuse from using drugs to cope with mental health that is negatively affected due to the stress and anxiety caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.**

“ Everybody feels stressed out, some people have easy access to these issues. A lot of people sell it on the street. I don't know the population most affected, but I think it's a combo of everyone during this pandemic. People are stressed and have different ways of stress relief. Some people might have easier access than others, especially if they live in an area where people already sell them in the street.”

“ People might be taking them for health reasons or for pain. But, maybe people have been taking them not for physical pain, but for mental/emotional pain. This could contribute to opioid misuse/overuse.”

## Other Secondary Themes

### Built Environment and Safety

**Participants emphasized the importance of having public spaces that are safe and easily accessible by walking because it relieves stress and promotes a healthy lifestyle.**

“ Fortunately my city provides good services - people do Tai Chi, there's a good environment for walking, Zumba, walking dogs, weekend Farmer's Market. Parks are within walking distance. There are abilities to have these stress busters, but it depends if people will go out to use them or make an effort to.”

“ I can walk around and the streets are pretty clean. Those things are really good for mental health and exercise for people in the community. I feel fortunate to be able to walk around in a safe neighborhood, and have clean streets. I can set up a volleyball net at a local park. Important to my mental health to do physical activity.”

## Policy Recommendations & Community Reinvestments

### Places to Get Reliable Information/Community Education

- ✓ **Invest in effective ways to inform the public about information and misinformation and where to access COVID-19 resources such as vaccine clinics and masks.**
- ✓ **Fund centers and programs where community members can access resources, financial assistance, homeless assistance i.e. EBT cards, etc.**
- ✓ **Fund programs such as:**
  - » **Virtual classes for people to interact and socialize**
  - » **Trainings on stress awareness**
  - » **Support groups (online or in person) for grief, stress and other mental/emotional relief**
  - » **Community health education classes**

“ [If the government texted people directly] it would help reduce misinformation at the beginning of the pandemic.”

“ Promoting vaccine clinics and letting the community know risks and benefits of vaccinations.”

“ After a year of protecting ourselves, he contracted covid and passed away. I have entered support groups and I'm still participating in health groups. Before I didn't take care of me (holistically) but now I do.”

“ When introducing them to the topic of cardiovascular health, they were surprised by the prevalence of heart disease and how much they were. They seemed appreciative of the information and resources we referred them to afterwards. When it comes to heart health, it is certainly better to be cognizant and maintain well-being as early as possible.”

## Making It Easier for Residents to Access Care

- ✓ Invest in resources such as telehealth, free rides to clinics or where doctors come to you, language assistance, and more multi/bilingual providers.

“ I am so glad that a Spanish speaking outreach worker was able to help navigate our family through the COVID-19 vaccination process. Without them, I wouldn't know what to do.”

“ She was linked to different culturally and linguistically appropriate community services, where she could find meaningful connections, a sense of belonging, and learn how to be independent step by step through doing positive things.”

“ And the free rides to doctor's visits should be offered to everyone who needs it. Even if you are low income, you need to meet other qualifications. It's a mission to see the specialists.”

## Free Access to Mental Healthcare

- ✓ Provide community members with free access to mental health care, as well as advertise those services that already exist.

“ More mental health services for our communities, especially front-line workers.”

“ A lot of free services in Cal State Fullerton, get some services from this school. Included in tuition/fees are 10 sessions with a therapist/counselor. A lot of students don't use or know they can use that. There is also a stigma that exists about going to a counselor, that something is wrong with me. Stigma has lessened, but it's still there for those who want to seek out help. Other factors students have might be busy or think it costs money, but it was helpful for her when she was in school.”

## Government Relief Funds

- ✓ Allocate relief funds to those who are in need of basic necessities and assistance to live a healthy lifestyle.

“ Generally, having some relief or stimulus is helpful because currently it's hard for people to meet all their basic needs economically.”

“ More money creates better opportunities to create a healthier community.”

“ I believe government relief funds would actually help also since a lot of people actually lost their jobs.”

## Investment in Social Determinants of Health

- ✓ **Allocate funding towards:**
  - » **Safety:** Providing youth with safe spaces, such as schools, that are well-equipped with free wifi, lunch, and recreational sports
  - » **Food Access:** Free nutritious meals for student and families
  - » **Built Environment:** Clean public spaces i.e centers, parks
  - » **Housing Support** such as rental city assistance
  - » **Language Assistance**
  - » **Support for Employment & Small Businesses**
  - » **Increased relief and stimulus**
- ✓ **Support vulnerable populations such as seniors through physical therapy and financial and medical help as well as refugees and those experiencing homelessness.**

“ A lot of schools are safe places from their home life, some people’s home lives are a little rough and they couldn’t go anywhere and had to stay home.”

“ Lunch [should be] provided for kids [and] EBT cards.”

“ The funding should have been spent to homeless people, and to people who are sleeping on the streets and the funds should have been used for the people who are in need.”

“ City assistance should be more accessible for rent.”

## More Ethnically Diverse Research Samples and Research that Focuses on Preventive Approach

- ✓ **Invest in research that consists of participants that reflect the ethnically diverse community and an approach that focuses on prevention.**

“ Spend more on research with a preventive approach.”

“ Having a lot [of] people [in the] same culturally, organizations. Testing sites can help individuals, but it is important to have researchers/scientists with different socioeconomic statuses.”



**Direct Investments to Community Based Organizations, Family Resource Centers and Schools**

- ✓ **Direct funding to community based organizations that provide helpful services and programs to community residents. These include spiritual services, schools, and family resource centers.**

“ The Asian American Senior Citizen Service Center (AASCSC) will continue providing social and mental health support for these non-English speaking older adult immigrants and their family members as well as creating more services for supporting the aging community.”

“ Abrazar’s Mid Way City location closed, and this is where I was able to connect with the senior groups and friends; thankfully Mid-Way City location (Abrazar) opened, and I was able to connect again with my friends who I spend a lot of time with.”