

Interview of the Month: Marvin Peña, Multnomah County Community Outreach Specialist



Marvin Peña, pictured translating at a COVID-19 vaccine clinic, has worked in community outreach since 2018 and is currently working as a Community Outreach Specialist for Multnomah County. Marvin answers questions about his work, addresses why it's important to engage with underserved communities, and offers some community outreach best practices.

Q: Please introduce yourself: who you are, your work, and how long you have been involved with community outreach.

A: My name is Marvin Peña. In 2011 I immigrated to the U.S. from Venezuela, where I had worked as a journalist. Currently, I am working as a Community Outreach Specialist for Multnomah County.

For the past three years, I have worked with community organizations doing outreach, in particular with migrant workers. But even before that, I worked in different jobs that gave me a first-hand experience of how communities experience disparities. From working as a janitor to construction worker, I could see the different barriers Latino communities faced daily.

With COVID-19, all these inequities increased. That is why I feel so fortunate to be in my position today because I can advocate for this community. Working at the county, I can have a greater impact and bring resources to places needed the most in a culturally responsive way.

Q: How can reaching out to communities help respond to emergencies and disasters?

A: During emergencies and disasters, the underserved communities are the most impacted. Having a constant relationship with these communities allows you to understand their needs and challenges. This knowledge allows responding quickly and effectively because you already know what some of their needs are.

Community outreach builds connections with people they trust and relate to. This trust allows us to reach those who don't trust government institutions but trust their communities and peers. But this work needs to be done on a regular basis and needs to be culturally aware of the community you are working with.

During COVID-19, one of the benefits of having a solid relationship with the communities I worked with is that it helped fight vaccination hesitancy. When the message comes from someone the communities trust and can relate to, they are more likely to listen.

Q: What are some of the current actions Multnomah County is taking to reach communities?

A: Multnomah County has been working hard to build relationships with communities, particularly marginalized communities. The County is aware that they need to build a more diverse workforce representing the community we live in.

Having employees from different backgrounds and walks of life allow the County to be more conscious and sensitive about the communities they are working with.

Q: What are some community outreach best practices? Are there things that you feel are commonly misunderstood or overlooked in community outreach?

A: In my opinion, the best way to do community outreach is to talk to the people who belong to those communities. Understanding their challenges and limitations will give you the information needed to build relationships with honesty and empathy.

Never assume anything about the community you are working with. Believing stereotypes damages the relationship and doesn't allow you to learn from these communities.

It is essential to understand the subtleties among different communities. Even though they may be defined as Hispanics or Latinos, there are differences within these communities. Therefore, it is important always to listen, partner, or support community members to be more culturally relevant, respectful, and impactful.

Q: What would you recommend for anyone getting involved or started with community outreach?

A: I think that being humble and listening is one of the best ways to start your community outreach work. It is essential to understand that community outreach is based on trust, and that takes time.

Forcing or rushing relationships will lead to mistrust. Take the time to understand, relate, and empathize with the community you are serving.

Allow community leaders to take the lead and exercise their influence with their peers. This is key to accomplish your work and make the community have ownership of the process. These strategies will lead to more participation from the community as a whole.