

Community Raised and Community Engaged: The Latinx COVID-19 Response in Milwaukee's 53204 and 53215 Zip Codes

by Nathalie Abenoza, Christian Hernandez, Eli Martinez, Javier Mora, and Sebastian Daniel

Milwaukee is an extremely diverse city known for its scenic lakefront, Giannis Antetokounmpo, breweries, Summerfest, and the wide array of ethnic festivals. Unfortunately, Milwaukee is also known for its racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic segregation. The COVID-19 pandemic and its life-altering effects were severely underestimated across the globe, exposing many critical flaws in our health system. As described previously by Dr. Chris Davis' Perspective in the *Transformational Times*, one of these cracks in the system is how COVID-19 mortality rates are disproportionately impacting people of color locally and nationally. Despite these sobering statistics, enforceable Safer-at-Home orders enacted by our governments, and the masks we now wear, we want to spotlight an incredible community program we have partnered with helping Milwaukee's Southside Latinx community during these trying times.

Ayuda Mutua MKE (Spanish for "Mutual Aid MKE") has transformed into a leading grassroots community program directly combating health and social inequities in our city and augmenting morale for the Latinx community. The organization started small: a group of cultural organizers, community connectors, educators, and social justice advocates from these Southside neighborhoods translating information about COVID-19 on a newly-created Facebook page for Milwaukee's Spanish-speaking community. This small gathering exploded into what it is now, a stronghold providing care packages with food staples, canned goods, personal hygiene products, masks, and diapers. They serve nearly 500 households per week living in predominantly the [53204](#) and [53215](#) ZIP codes. These ZIP codes are approximately 70% Latinx,

more than 50% speak primarily Spanish at home, and have a median household [adjusted gross income](#) of under \$30,000 annually.

Twice a week, Ayuda Mutua MKE restocks food and supplies from the monetary donations they receive, as well as donations from individuals and organizations such as Summerfield United Methodist Church, Lopez Bakery, and the MCW Kern Institute. Every Tuesday through Thursday, community members drive through a roadway adjacent to St. Patrick's Church, receiving their carefully assembled care packages. Community members unable to pick up their care packages have delivery service to their homes coordinated by Ayuda Mutua MKE. Additionally, as if these contributions to the community were not enough, Ayuda Mutua MKE has also created an economic relief fund for undocumented, tax-paying families excluded by recently enacted government policies.

Undocumented taxpayers usually lack Social Security numbers, instead utilizing Individual Taxpayer Identification Numbers (ITIN) to pay taxes. This tax-paying method causes them to be exempt from the congressional economic relief package, preventing workers who are an essential part of the economy from achieving equal opportunity and fiscal safety in today's uncertain times.

Undocumented workers make up a large percentage of not only service sector industries at high risk of job loss, but they are also essential workers such as farmers, grocery store employees, and hospital workers who put their health at risk by working everyday. An estimated 8 million Latinxs—which includes both documented and undocumented workers—are employed at restaurants, hotels, and other service sector industries which are at higher risk of job loss. (See reports [here](#) and [here](#).) This reality is being experienced in Milwaukee.

As daughters and sons of immigrants in solidarity with our community, we answered the call to action to connect and determine how we could best serve our neighbors. We recognized the importance of aligning our medical education lens with the community-led mission envisioned presently. As soon-to-be physicians, the privilege of medical education comes with great responsibility to the community. We identified a need to provide culturally responsive medical information on COVID-19 to the Spanish-speaking and Latinx communities of Milwaukee. At an institutional level, thus far we have worked with MCW Office

of Communications to enhance the COVID-19 website in coordinating the Spanish translation, cultural sensitivity, and health literacy of MCW infographics material. We co-founded MCW COVID-19 Latinx Response team. At a grassroots and community engagement level, MCW Kern Institute has been truly supportive of our mutual goal. We are immensely proud in partnering with Ayuda Mutua MKE as we supply printed bilingual information sheets and facial covers.

By amplifying the spread of medical information to dispel myths, strengthening truths in the community, and distributing masks to areas of the city particularly vulnerable to COVID-19, we are helping to “flatten the curve,” keep people out of hospitals, and increase our health providers’ safety. As stated by the leaders of Ayuda Mutua MKE best, “we don’t see ourselves as a charity.” Instead, the group considers the work they are doing as solidarity: “After all, we are all neighbors and all in this fight against the coronavirus together.”

We have one last sweet note to end on. MCW Kern Institute is also providing their famous customized cookies reflecting our shared values of Compassion, Care, and Competence — *en español, por supuesto.*

En la unión está la fuerza.

If you are interested in learning more about Ayuda Mutua MKE and providing support, we welcome you to explore the following links:

- Ayuda Mutua MKE’s Facebook page: <https://bit.ly/2y3OUoq>
- Ayuda Mutua MKE’s Newsletter: <https://bit.ly/3a9O1YD>

Donations of food and checks are accepted at the following location:

- Mondays & Fridays 12–3pm
St. Patrick’s Church, 723 W Washington St, Milwaukee, WI, 53204

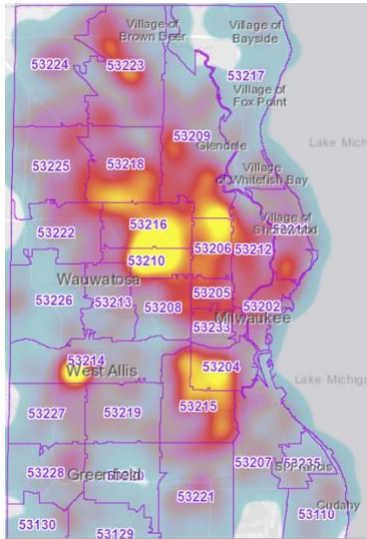


Figure 1: COVID-19 cases heat map as of 4/11/2020

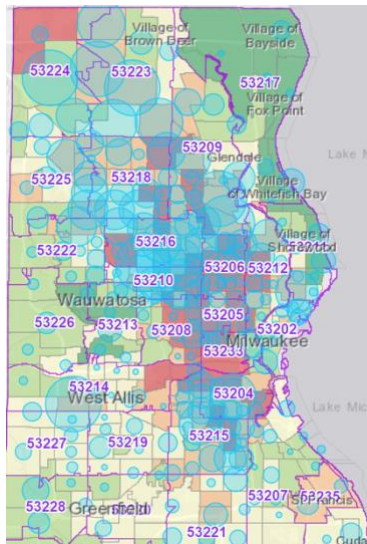


Figure 2: COVID-19 cases overlaid with income levels (green-highest incomes, red-lowest)

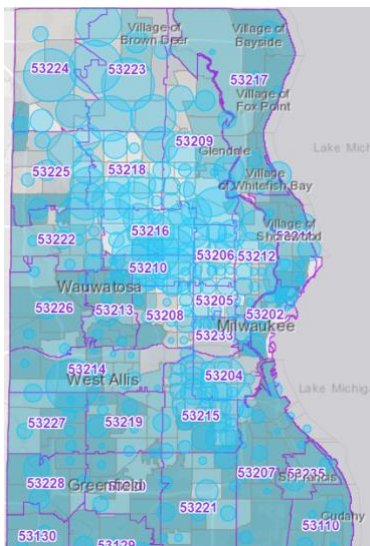


Figure 3: COVID-19 cases by percentage of white population (blue - greater % white)

Nathalie Abenoza, Christian Hernandez, Eli Martinez and Javier Mora are medical students at the MCW–Milwaukee campus. Sebastian Daniel is an artist, educator and cultural organizer who is part of Ayuda Mutua MKE.

Return to *Transformational Times* by selecting the browser tab to the left at the top of your screen, or by using your browser's back arrow.