KEY ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE PROMOTORAS PROGRAM DURING COVID-19

MISSION ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AGENCY
DECEMBER 2020
“Promotoras, as community outreach workers, have quickly become integral to MEDA’s service delivery model. Their understanding of and connection with the community members we serve has proved invaluable, especially during this crisis. We look to evolve this work to ensure its full integration into our approach to service delivery over the long term.”

LUIS GRANADOS
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, MEDA

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“My greatest achievement as a promotora and as a human being is to be able to provide my services in the best way, to create trust with clients, and help them feel comfortable. That fills me with satisfaction. I love my work, knowing that I can help others and share what I know.”

PROMOTORAS TEAM MEMBER
INTRODUCTION TO MEDA AND THE PROMOTORAS PROGRAM

The Mission Economic Development Agency (MEDA) is a nonprofit organization based in San Francisco’s Mission District that predominantly serves low-income Latino families, workers and small businesses. Founded in 1973, MEDA combines a suite of programs—direct asset-building services, school-based family supports, affordable housing development, loan disbursement, advocacy and technical assistance—to build Latino prosperity, community ownership and civic engagement.

In 2016, MEDA began to recruit community members as grassroots outreach workers, or promotoras, to serve as on-the-ground liaisons between local residents and MEDA programs. Latin American countries first adopted promotoras programs in the 1970s for public health purposes, to serve marginalized, harder-to-reach residents. This model has also been useful for engaging our clients over the past four years. MEDA serves many residents with limited English proficiency who face difficulties in navigating local service systems, and many undocumented residents who cannot access public benefits. Embedded in school- and community-based sites across the neighborhood, promotoras offer a first line of assistance to local residents. Our team members are able to provide information, offer supportive services and direct clients to more intensive services offered by MEDA’s coaches and community partners. By offering an accessible point of connection, our 20 promotoras are a lifeline for our underserved neighbors, and complement the work of MEDA’s and our partners’ program staff.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made the work of the promotoras all the more crucial. COVID-19 exacerbated many of the structural disparities that low-income Latinos in San Francisco already faced, and many of our clients have deeply suffered the financial and health consequences of the pandemic. With coordination and support from MEDA’s Community Initiatives Manager, the promotoras have embraced a range of new roles and responsibilities in order to serve the many residents facing urgent needs and difficult circumstances during the COVID-19 pandemic. In June 2020, JPMorgan Chase invested $250,000 in MEDA to fund the expansion of the promotoras program and augment the invaluable work that promotoras have advanced during the pandemic.

Despite the steep challenges that COVID-19 has posed, the promotoras have thrived in their role as community leaders in 2020. This report explores the many contributions that the promotoras have made to the Latino community and to MEDA before, and during, COVID-19, and considers opportunities for the promotoras program in the years to come.
DATA METHODS

During the summer and fall of 2020, MEDA’s Evaluation team gathered perspectives and insights on the promotoras program from a variety of stakeholders, including MEDA staff, MEDA clients and the promotoras themselves.

Our data collection activities and sources are listed below.

- Phone-based focus groups with:
  - 19 promotoras
  - 15 clients who have received MEDA services during the pandemic

- Online surveys of:
  - The promotoras team
  - MEDA service staff

- One-on-one interviews with:
  - One promotora
  - MEDA’s Community Initiatives Manager
  - MEDA’s Associate Director of Data and Learning

- Aggregated client service data from MEDA’s Salesforce database

This report uses thematic analysis to connect perspectives, experiences and insights across these eight data sources into a distilled set of key findings. (See page 4.)

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, all data collection activities were remote. To protect people’s privacy, we anonymously quote the promotoras, MEDA staff and clients who contributed their perspectives to this report. We have translated client and promotora remarks from Spanish.

“\textit{The promotoras represent the people we serve in our community. They are the mothers, the workers, the caregivers, the activists and changemakers.}”
CONTEXT: LATINOS AND COVID-19 IN SAN FRANCISCO

The onset of COVID-19 in March 2020 worsened the existing financial, social and health disparities that our low-income Latino community members have long faced. Combined with data gathered from our clients, the citywide statistics on our community’s health and social service needs are alarming.

**HEALTH DISPARITIES**

1. Latinos make up 15% of San Francisco residents, but have accounted for 46% of COVID-19 cases citywide through November 2020. On a case rate basis, this means Latinos have been 3 times more likely to contract COVID-19 than the citywide average.

2. Overcrowded housing is a major factor behind the COVID-19 spread among Latinos. 44% of MEDA clients live in overcrowded housing, per a 2017 study.

3. Latinos statewide have no healthcare plan, the least insured racial/ethnic group in California. 1 in 7 Latinos statewide have no healthcare plan, the least insured racial/ethnic group in California.

4. The Mission District has been a COVID-19 hotspot, and low-income Latinos have been highly impacted. As an April 2020 UCSF study in the Mission revealed:
   - Latinos made up 44% of people tested, but 95% of positive cases
   - 9 in 10 of those who tested positive cannot work from home
   - 9 in 10 of those who tested positive make less than $50,000/year

**FINANCIAL CRISIS**

5. 73% of MEDA clients* lost their job due to the pandemic.

6. 50% of MEDA clients* needed to submit letters to their landlord indicating inability to pay rent, per the rules of San Francisco’s eviction moratorium.**

Many Latino small business owners, especially those who are ineligible for public assistance, have faced financial shortfalls due to pandemic-related lockdowns and capacity restrictions.

**SERVICE GAPS**

7. Many of MEDA’s clients are undocumented and thus ineligible for many public benefits. 75% of clients were ineligible for relief checks through the CARES Act.

8. Many residents are monolingual Spanish speakers and can face challenges in navigating public agencies, or learning information about health advice and local resources.

9. Many Latino students face extra distance learning barriers, with many families lacking access to computing devices, high-speed internet and digital literacy skills at home.

In order to meet the enormity of these challenges, in March 2020 MEDA reorganized our programs to serve a high volume of clients remotely and address their income, housing and business-related needs. As the following pages explore, promotoras have been an integral part of our pandemic response efforts, and a critical lifeline for many community members in harrowing times. Despite these challenges, the promotoras have risen to the challenge and excelled in several capacities.

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*Clients seeking services from MEDA between March and November 2020.

**This figure combines clients who wrote a letter to their landlord on their own, plus those requesting assistance from MEDA.
SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS AND FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

This report explores the key contributions and achievements of the promotoras during the COVID-19 pandemic across three core domains:

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<tr>
<th>Serving Families in Need</th>
<th>Promotoras have assumed several essential roles within MEDA’s pandemic response programs, such as providing direct services to community members.</th>
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<td></td>
<td>As local residents and native Spanish speakers, promotoras engage their neighbors in culturally affirmative ways, building trust and inviting more clients to seek services.</td>
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<td>Promotoras have been essential in advancing MEDA’s service partnerships with other city and community agencies, enabling us to address more of our community members’ urgent needs.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Developing Leadership Skills</th>
<th>Promotoras’ wide-ranging work during the pandemic has established and expanded their roles as trusted local leaders.</th>
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<td>Promotoras have become proficient in our service delivery and data systems, and have bolstered their own professional development as skilled service providers.</td>
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<td>The promotoras program is an enriching opportunity for local residents who are passionate about supporting their fellow community members.</td>
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<th>Strengthening Our Organization</th>
<th>As engaged members of the community, promotoras help MEDA develop a better understanding of the different needs and challenges of our service population.</th>
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<td>By taking on several roles during the pandemic, promotoras have been pivotal in supporting MEDA’s staff within a highly stressful work context.</td>
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<td>Promotoras are our frontline community liaisons, and uphold MEDA as an accessible, trustworthy resource for Latino families.</td>
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We look forward to leveraging the promotoras program in several key areas, including:

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<th>Future Opportunities for the Promotoras Program</th>
<th>Developing the promotoras program into a workers’ cooperative for sustainability and stability</th>
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<td>Incorporating promotoras across MEDA’s post-pandemic community recovery efforts</td>
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<td>Deepening integration between the work of the promotoras and that of MEDA’s staff</td>
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<td>Sharing lessons learned with other nonprofits to start their own promotoras programs</td>
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The promotoras team has been indispensable to MEDA’s pandemic response, personally engaging and supporting hundreds of community members with multiple urgent needs.

Offering an array of services and supports. The sheer number of clients seeking services and the severity of needs required the promotoras to take on many more services and responsibilities than before the pandemic. Promotoras became essential in providing short-term direct services to hundreds of local families across multiple programs, helping MEDA’s staff to focus on more specialized or intensive client supports. In addition, promotoras have referred clients to MEDA programs and community partners, answered questions about available community resources, and provided other ad hoc assistance as needed.

In working with community members, promotoras have:

- Conducted needs screenings with community members, and referred to appropriate MEDA staff for follow-up services
- Referred clients to partner agencies’ services
- Helped clients apply for affordable housing on San Francisco’s online portal, DAHLIA
- Supported clients in applying for relief through the GIVE2SF COVID-19 Response & Recovery Fund
- Assisted clients in writing letters to landlords to announce nonpayment of rent, per the city’s eviction moratorium
- Provided information about remote learning resources for students and families
- Promoted MEDA’s bilingual Facebook Live informational events through social media
- Updated client service records in MEDA’s Salesforce database

With all of these responsibilities, promotoras have occupied crucial roles across the entire spectrum of our crisis response activities.

“A promotora sent me a link [to apply for a relief grant]...and helped me fill everything out. Thanks to [her], I was able to pay two months’ worth of rent and stay up on payments.”

| MEDA CLIENT |
| A promotora sent me a link [to apply for a relief grant]...and helped me fill everything out. Thanks to [her], I was able to pay two months’ worth of rent and stay up on payments. |

| PROMOTORAS SERVICE HIGHLIGHTS BEFORE & DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC |
|---|---|---|
| COMMUNITY MEMBERS SCREENED FOR PANDEMIC-RELATED NEEDS | 1,522 | FAMILIES PROVIDED WITH PANDEMIC-RELATED SERVICES | 432 | AFFORDABLE HOUSING APPLICATIONS SUBMITTED WITH SUPPORT FROM PROMOTORAS | 1,653 |
| THE PROMOTORAS TEAM HAS HELPED PROCESS | 72% | OF CLIENTS’ AFFORDABLE HOUSING APPLICATIONS SINCE 2016 – 18,000+ FORMS | PROMOTORAS HAVE HELPED MEDA SUPPORT | 40% | MORE FAMILIES WITH HOUSING OPPORTUNITY SERVICES IN 2020, COMPARED TO 2019 |
| BEFORE THE ONSET OF COVID-19, PROMOTORAS CALLED | 3,082 | LATINO COMMUNITY MEMBERS TO ENCOURAGE PARTICIPATION IN THE 2020 U.S. CENSUS |
“Sometimes, due to the language barrier, people in the community do not look for the kind of help [that MEDA provides]. The promotoras are] really needed in the community, because many times, mostly because of fear, people don’t apply for services. The more we are informed...we will have better opportunities for our community.”

**Providing culturally affirmative services and engagement.** As Latina and Latino community members, promotoras are able to outreach to local families by building connections through shared language, backgrounds and experiences. By supporting community members in native Spanish, promotoras help to address the language barriers that many residents with limited English proficiency face when seeking supportive services. As well, promotoras are local residents whose own families have struggled with the financial and health consequences of COVID-19, and can connect to our clients through enduring those common challenges. Building familiarity and trust is central to the work of the promotoras, who help our clients feel more understood, safe and empowered to advocate for themselves and their families.

“Promotoras...have stepped up to the challenge. Not only were they facing the [difficulties posed by the] pandemic, but they...use[d] what they knew, and learned to help other families who could be in the same situations.”

**Expanding MEDA’s service partnerships.** Promotoras have been at the forefront of MEDA’s new joint initiatives with both community-based organizations and citywide agencies, which has enabled us to connect our families to a wider network of necessary services during the pandemic. Without the work of the promotoras, these collaborations would not have been possible.

Some promotoras have provided in-person services and referrals at the Mission Hub, a food distribution center that has become a congregation point for residents to receive help from local organizations. Their presence at the Hub has helped refer MEDA families to organizations that provide additional services, and have brought additional community members to MEDA’s pandemic response services.

Furthermore, six promotoras have taken on key roles for MEDA’s new partnership with the San Francisco Department of Public Health and UCSF Contact Tracing program. These specially trained promotoras contact Spanish-speaking families exposed to COVID-19 in order to provide referrals to testing, treatment and support services as needed. With the deep spread of COVID-19 among Latino families, these new duties are crucial to mitigating the virus within local Spanish-speaking communities.
DE lA COMUNIDAD, PARA lA COMUNIDAD

DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP SKILLS

**DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP SKILLS**

The promotoras have taken on new leadership roles during the pandemic, thriving as capable service providers and trusted sources of support for community members.

**Fostering local leadership.** Although promotoras are humble about the work they do, it is clear that they have cemented their role as community leaders through all of their roles and responsibilities during the pandemic. Promotoras must be effective communicators with many different people, help families facing a number of different circumstances and balance technical advice with emotional support. These are all undeniable leadership qualities, and some promotoras have noted how their participation in the program has helped them grow in self-confidence and flourish as community changemakers.

*PROMOTORAS TEAM MEMBER*  
“[Being a promotora] has helped me feel more secure when expressing myself—something that was a little hard for me.”

**Strengthening professional skills.** Members of the promotoras team have adopted new technical and professional abilities through their new service provider roles. In addition to their ongoing talents as outreach workers, promotoras have learned how to navigate multiple social service systems; update client records in MEDA’s Salesforce database; and help clients build their own digital literacy skills. As such, promotoras have built skill sets that would make them valuable additions to the staff of many different community organizations.

“It satisfies me that families receive help, receive a relief check, receive housing, because it’s more than just a promise [we made to them].”

**Fueling passion for service.** Promotoras are deeply committed to serving and improving the conditions of the families in their community. The promotoras program offers our participants the professional opportunity to pursue this personal passion as part of their day-to-day activities. While team members have faced their fair share of hurdles when helping community members in dire circumstances during the COVID-19 pandemic, they nevertheless speak with deep zeal for their work. Promotoras have rejoiced in seeing the families they serve receive the necessary support to stay in their homes, keep food on the table and ensure their children have a safe learning environment.

79% OF PROMOTORAS HAVE BEEN WORKING WITH MEDA FOR ONE YEAR OR LONGER

100% OF PROMOTORAS FEEL COMFORTABLE WORKING VIA PHONE OR COMPUTER TO SUPPORT COMMUNITY MEMBERS

95% OF PROMOTORAS FEEL THAT MEDA HAS PROVIDED AMPLE SUPPORT TO LEARN NEW RESPONSIBILITIES AND ROLES DURING THE PANDEMIC
Promotoras ensure that MEDA is a trusted name among community members who would benefit from our services, and provide essential support for MEDA’s service staff.

Deepening MEDA’s community presence. Promotoras have been essential to ensuring that MEDA can maximize its outreach among the many underserved and marginalized families in need of pandemic-related supports. In addition to providing services to families actively seeking support from MEDA, the promotoras team has also conducted preemptive outreach to hundreds of community members, to make sure that families have not slipped through the cracks. As embedded community members, promotoras also bring back to MEDA their deep knowledge about our clients’ priority needs and concerns, which helps us make our programs more effective and accessible.

“Promotoras have spoken on behalf of the organization, they have offered resources, they have called clients [with the] understanding that all of us are going through this situation…They have played a [very] important role because people call them directly [for help].”

Supporting service staff. The pandemic has been an especially taxing time for MEDA’s program staff, who take great pride in their service to community members. With so many families seeking support, and going through such distressing circumstances, many staff have contended with exhaustion and vicarious trauma. By taking on some of the service roles historically reserved for staff, promotoras have played an inextricable role in helping our program teams address the volume of client needs, and focus on the specialized services that require extensive staff experience. Promotoras have thus provided essential capacity support during a highly stressful period for clients and staff members alike.

“We have to have empathy [with clients]. I’m really happy and thankful that the opportunity to help the community is in my hands. I’m here to serve them.”

Building trust between MEDA and community members. The sheer number of clients seeking help from MEDA during COVID-19 has limited an important element of our direct service model: our program staff’s ability to build rapport and extended relationships with our clients. Sometimes, it takes prolonged engagement between our service staff and community members to create the baseline of confidence and trust for prospective clients to seek services. While promotoras have also faced challenges in meeting the needs of so many clients, they have been able to provide this key relational support. A promotora’s ability to offer emotional comfort and answer a family’s detailed questions can be the deciding factor in helping the family receive much-needed financial relief or health assistance.

100% of promotoras have taken on new roles and responsibilities during the pandemic.

95% of MEDA’s direct service staff feel that the promotoras helping to provide services has been supportive to staff members.
FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE PROMOTORAS PROGRAM

The promotoras have been an indispensable part of our response to the COVID-19 crisis. Despite the many challenges our community has faced, the promotoras program has been a major success for our community, MEDA and the promotoras themselves. The next stage in the evolution of MEDA’s comprehensive service model will depend on the ongoing expansion of the promotoras program and its integration with our services. Looking ahead, we intend to build upon the promotoras’ recent achievements to pursue these promising innovations and initiatives in the years to come:

**Supporting the development of the promotoras team into a workers’ cooperative.** Starting in 2021, MEDA is excited to catalyze the growth of the promotoras program into an independent company under a collective worker-owner model. Under this configuration, the promotoras team will exist as its own business entity able to contract its services with MEDA and other agencies, manage its profits and provide benefits to its members. MEDA will initially help to manage this initiative, and then continue to provide technical assistance and training following the cooperative’s incorporation as a business entity.

This strategy will benefit MEDA, community members and promotoras alike. Our ongoing partnership with the promotoras team will allow us to continue our deep, culturally affirmative engagement with local Latino families. Meanwhile, incubating the development of the promotoras’ cooperative will provide a sustainable foundation for the team members’ professional growth and financial stability, and enable them to apply their talents to new partnerships with fellow community service providers.

**MEDA STAFF MEMBER**

“With MEDA, the promotoras empower themselves in order to empower others.”

**Expanding MEDA’s pandemic response and recovery strategies.** As of the time of writing in December 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic continues rising to unprecedented highs in the Bay Area, and Latino workers and families continue to suffer from the disease disproportionately. Furthermore, thousands of low-income families continue to face intense financial hardships, especially with San Francisco’s eviction moratorium set to expire soon. In 2021, we face the challenge of helping clients keep their homes, recoverate from the virus, obtain basic necessities and/or find reliable sources of income. We anticipate that the promotoras will build upon their achievements as a critical part of MEDA’s multidimensional service model through the remainder of the pandemic.

In addition, promotoras will be essential team members in helping our Latino community members navigate long-term economic recovery post-COVID. MEDA will pivot to meet this challenge, shifting our services and programs to help families, workers and small businesses rebuild. The promotoras’ skills in grassroots outreach and community service will be invaluable to MEDA, helping us develop a deeper understanding of families’ recovery needs and deepening our impact among the Mission’s most underserved Latinos. By grounding our recovery programs in deep engagement with our clients, the promotoras team will help MEDA achieve one of our major goals: a post-pandemic Mission community that has advanced beyond the deep structural disparities hindering our families.
**Strengthening client services through cross-teams collaboration.** As promotoras and MEDA staff have had increasingly overlapping responsibilities during the pandemic, it is crucial that we bring these teams into closer partnership. Regularly convening promotoras and service staff to collaborate will further streamline client referrals, wraparound care and coordination of services across programs. Promotoras have experience providing client support across multiple service domains, and can thus offer valuable insight to MEDA about how to engage marginalized community members, enhance our program integration, and maximize our impact among our low-income Latino clients. Bringing the promotoras deeper into our service coordination will thus be a mutual learning opportunity with staff members, and help ensure that MEDA can provide the most comprehensive level of support for clients.

**Sharing lessons learned and best practices about the promotoras model with community partners.** Over the past four years, promotoras have been at the forefront of MEDA’s community-based efforts, serving as representatives of our organization in their work as outreach workers. The COVID-19 pandemic further cemented the promotoras’ importance to our organization, as team members assumed a wealth of new roles quickly and capably in order to assess community members’ needs and connect families to valuable services and supports. In both the short term and long term, MEDA has identified several lessons learned in promotoras program development, including:

- Recruitment and cultivation of talented, passionate local residents to serve as community liaisons as part of an organization’s broader community engagement strategy
- Engagement of community members in ongoing professional development through a group education model rooted in promotoras’ interests
- Use of culturally affirmative communication to build rapport with community members, encourage families to participate in services and instill confidence in clients
- Innovative and flexible employment practices that provide financial sustainability and career growth trajectories, especially for undocumented residents
- Integration of promotoras into a multi-departmental service model, including delegation of service roles and referral pathways between promotoras and staff
- Engagement with like-minded community organizations to scale the impact of the work across multiple groups of community members

Our goal is to incorporate these lessons learned into our ongoing nationwide coalition-building efforts. Through our Sharing the Model initiative, MEDA supports community agencies to build capacity, enhance programming and expand services. We intend to create a promotoras module for Sharing the Model, designed to help organizations rooted in historically marginalized communities to spark the development of their own outreach worker programs. Given the successes of the promotoras program, we want to make knowledge of this resource accessible to groups that stand to gain from its adoption.

The support from JPMorgan Chase has been integral to elevating the promotoras as an essential community resource during COVID-19. We look forward to growing the promotoras program in 2021, in order to meet the challenges of the pandemic and recovery, deepen our impact with our Latino families and pursue a more equitable future for all community members.
“Despite all the challenges in this country, [at MEDA] I’ve found a safe place to do what I like to do: serve my Latino community.”

PROMOTORAS TEAM MEMBER

ABOUT THE MISSION ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AGENCY

MISSION

Rooted in San Francisco’s Mission District, MEDA is advancing a national equity movement by building Latino prosperity, community ownership and civic power.

VISION

We envision generations of Latino families choosing where to call home, thriving economically, succeeding in learning opportunities, and leading policy and social change toward a more equitable society.

VALUES

Equity + Activation + Audacity + Togetherness + Impact

EXTERNAL SOURCES

2018 American Community Survey, 5-Year Averages
DataSF. “San Francisco COVID-19 Data and Reports” Dashboards