

Research and Best Practices: Outreach to Latinx and Spanish-Speaking Communities Throughout the U.S.

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A note on language: This report uses the term *Latinx* when discussing Latin American or Hispanic identifying community members, to be inclusive of all genders, with the understanding that this label may not best fit all community members in this group. An exception to this is in the use of Census data, with the terms “Hispanic / Latin American by race” or “by origin.” We have retained the original Census terms when discussing Census data.

Introduction

As part of its Project Accelerator initiative, WaterNow Alliance partnered with Santa Rosa Water to research water use efficiency program activities’ frequency and saturation levels across Latinx communities, and to identify best practices to enhance outreach and increase water use efficiency program uptake in these communities.

The City of Santa Rosa, California has a strong commitment to water use efficiency, with programs ranging from rebates to water audits. While 32 percent of Santa Rosa residents identify as Latinx, it was unclear whether water use efficiency programs had been appropriately marketed to and if they were being fully utilized by the city’s Latinx community. WaterNow Alliance worked with Santa Rosa Water to assess whether water use efficiency program activities have occurred at the same frequency and saturation levels in Spanish-speaking and Latinx communities as in English-speaking communities – and to identify the water savings gains that could be achieved by closing this participation gap. Informational interviews with

utilities and local community groups helped identify best practices and concrete suggestions to enhance outreach and increase water use efficiency program uptake in Latinx communities.

As part of this project, and to inform the utility's outreach, WaterNow conducted research to identify best practices, lessons learned, and potential outreach and engagement strategies employed by similar utility programs conducting outreach to Latinx and Spanish-speaking communities. Through desk research, we identified nine national programs that exhibited strong community outreach to their Spanish-speaking residents, relating to their water use efficiency programs, and conducted more in-depth informational interviews with two of these organizations, in order to learn about their outreach program implementation strategies and glean best practices. WaterNow also drew on staff insights and desk research to compose a list of 19 local organizations working with Latinx and Spanish-speaking communities within the service area and conducted more in-depth information interviews with two of these organizations, in order to gather their suggestions for engaging with community members and increasing participation in water use efficiency programs.

The following memo details the findings from these conversations with water utilities and local community organizations and is organized as follows: (1) key takeaways; (2) brief descriptions of the community organizations and utilities we engaged in conversation; (3) best practices, challenges, and lessons learned across these conversations; and (4) next steps and additional resources.

Key Takeaways

These conversations highlighted a number of consistent suggestions and insights, summarized below and described in more detail throughout the following sections.

- The messenger matters:
 - Several organizations found success by partnering with local organizations (including schools, faith-based institutions, community organizations, and local community representatives) and publications to share their messaging.
 - Outreach campaigns that included images and examples that reflected the communities they were trying to engage also helped increase participation.
 - Many respondents suggested harnessing a range of different types of outreach methods, in particular Spanish-speaking publications, newsletters, and radio stations. While the success of social media strategies was mixed, creating outreach kits that partners could share on their platforms may increase their impact in the community.
- Several core themes emerged around messaging:
 - Several interviews recommended focusing on basic and clear information on water conservation and actions one can take to save water and money.
 - Several examples and interviews emphasized presenting this information in creative, fun, and culturally relevant ways (e.g., a radio message presented as

though listeners were eavesdropping on a conversation, or Telenovelas, replete with numerous plot twists and dramatic exchanges).

- Connecting messaging strategies with data analysis can help outreach target communities with lower participation rates.
- In many interviews, the conversations focused on meeting people where they are, by:
 - Holding events and partnering with organizations working in communities the organization is trying to reach (e.g., including informational flyers in backpack giveaways).
 - Sharing information in spaces the community engages with in their day-to-day lives (e.g., going to grocery stores that serve Mexican, Central and South American style foods to set up informational tables, post flyers, or play pre-taped music or videos).
 - Using students and youth groups as an avenue to share information with families.
- Multiple conversations highlighted the importance of allocating a consistent and dedicated budget to conducting outreach to the Latinx community.

Elements of Success

Messaging

Several key points about messaging emerged through the conversations with both national utilities and community groups:

- A recent statewide survey found that over 90% of Latinx respondents cared about water and climate change, exceeding the support found in the general voting public.¹
- Representing the diversity of one's community through any digital or print ads featuring people was recommended. Using models with different ethnicities to represent their diverse service area population is one way to achieve this.
- When it comes to landscape turf conversions, many utilities struggle to convince their residents that drought tolerant landscaping can be attractive. Highlighting the beauty of water-wise plants helped customers at one utility see these landscapes in another light, instead of being underwatered and unattractive.
- Messaging and outreach strategies should be continually evaluated for effectiveness in reaching customers. One way to do this is by employing focus groups with diverse groups of participants that allows utilities to test their messaging for specific campaigns, to gauge the ease of participating in conservation programs, as well as elicit responses on how to improve conservation programs, etc.

¹ While the exact survey was not named in our interview, WaterNow identified the Hispanic Access Foundation's Survey of Latino Voters which found that 92% of Latinx respondents believe investments should still be made to protect California's land, water, and wildlife. The poll also found Latino voter support for proposals to help achieve these investments and address the climate crisis outpaced that of the overall voting public. Additional details are available at: <https://www.hispanicaccess.org/news-resources/news-releases/item/1174-california-latinos-show-overwhelming-support-for-protecting-public-lands-and-addressing-climate-change>

- Context of the moment has been an important driver for participation, with drought conditions and service wide restrictions incentivizing participation in conservation programs. Additionally, climate change is being incorporated into the thinking of utilities as they shift from talking about water conservation during times of drought to water conservation as a way of life in an increasingly arid climate.
- Creative, fun, and culturally relevant methods of community engagement are valuable. Through their grants program, [one utility and partnering nonprofit organization](#) provided a novel delivery of water use efficiency messaging and engagement in the form of live productions called [Telenovelas in the Parks](#). Starting in 2015, the Telenovelas in the park theater troupe began presenting water conservation and sustainability messaging in the tradition of Telenovelas, replete with numerous plot twists and dramatic exchanges. This initiative had the dual benefit of bringing live theater to an audience that often-lacked access to the performing arts and was popularly received.
- For messaging that is tailored for radio airwaves, it is recommended that messaging contain basic and clear information on water conservation and actions one can take. Examples of effective messaging included designing programs that mimic eavesdropping on a conversation between friends or adopting messaging that was used around observing safety protocols advised by health experts during the pandemic, framed as protecting one's grandparents. Generally, taking cues from Spanish-language radio stations is suggested; for example, one interviewee mentioned radio station based in the Mexican City of León Guanajuato that often features ad campaigns that play water conservation messaging multiple times an hour and have messaging that feels like a conversation where you are sitting at the table or in the living room having a dialogue.
- For stations that attract a younger demographic, messaging should be tailored to that audience and be delivered by someone that is similar in age.
- Additionally, digital messaging, such as through newsletters and targeted outreach regarding programs should make links and desired actions in emails clear. It is advised for the text to have straightforward language that stresses program eligibility and particulars for program participation to prevent applicants from misunderstanding how programs function.
- For water conservation programs that are intended for low-income populations, interviewees recommended focusing on the cost savings benefits of participating in outreach messaging.
- Along with messaging, one organization advised that giveaways tended to be popular. For example, there are many opportunities for disseminating information along with Back-to-School events, such as backpack giveaways and annual lotteries for bicycles and helmets. These giveaways are predominantly given to low-income families and provide an opportunity to include informational collateral in the backpacks which are full of school supplies and other informational literature.

Meet People Where They Are: Community Events

In-person outreach in the community is an important strategy for engaging many Spanish-language speakers and we repeatedly heard the importance of meeting your residents where they are from community groups and utilities we spoke with. One organization cautioned that for the most part, the community will not come to the utility, but rather the utility has to go to the community. That relationship and trust building would be vital to the uptake of their services and programs in the Spanish-speaking community.

Just as important as meeting people where they are in terms of physical location, is proceeding with cultural awareness and sensitivity. One organization recommended providing a welcoming and culturally appropriate environment to ensure that people feel safe, likening this to how you would want to make visitors feel in your home, with the expression “mi casa es su casa”; people are from different walks of life and may have different perspectives and values that you do not understand or agree with, but the embodiment of that proverbial mantra should be omnipresent. It is also essential to retain awareness of the methods of community engagement that are utilized by the demographic you are serving, as well as being mindful of what immigrant communities have experienced. This includes understanding that many in a community have very limited time and work a lot, which restricts their ability to participate in recurring community meetings, etc. Being cognizant of their schedules and cultural practices, one organization advised that Sundays are perhaps the best time to reach folks, since many go to church, lunch, do their shopping, and are at home. And in reference to partnering with local communities, one organization said, “bring [them] in as you would bring in a friend to meet the family,” and that actions and messaging from utilities should be sincere and committed.

Whether outreach is done through larger events or provided through a more regular presence at central locations within the target communities, on-the-ground promotion was cited as key to spreading awareness about services and programs, as well as building trust with the community. Along with trusted outreach partners serving the community (see *Partnerships and Collaborations* below), the utility could continue to build on its current practices of identifying popular and safe community spaces and myriad Latinx-focused events and provide outreach and information there.

When trying to engage with the community at frequented hangouts, one interviewee recommended that the utility provide regular appearances through a mobile unit to do pop-ups and disseminate information and resources near popular food truck locations. This interview also noted that sharing information at specific times, when people are likely to congregate and when other organizations offer other services like non-medical treatments, increases outreach to the community. For landscapers, setting up informational tables at big box retailers, nurseries, and garden supply facilities with a large portion of clientele speaking Spanish could help increase awareness and support recruitment into efficiency programs.

For larger events, such as popular fairs and festivals that are taking place in parts of the community with large Latinx populations, many organizations frequently set up informational booths. And for Latinx-focused events, the community organizations we spoke with encouraged

tabling whenever it was permitted by the organizers, such as at the annual Cinco de Mayo event, voter registration drives, or during community center performances—asking host venues to allow a quick presentation before the main speaker or entertainer. Additionally, if the main event is going to be a film presentation, the organization could create filmed ads that are 30-45 seconds long and played like previews/ads in movie theaters.

Additional locations to engage the Spanish-speaking community include going to grocery stores that serve Mexican, Central and South American style foods and setting up informational tables near the entrances and leaving flyers on store notice boards. Authentic Latinx grocery stores also tend to play pre-taped music or videos where the organization might be able to place advertisements.

Meet People Where They Are: Engaging Schools

Getting school-aged children involved to aid in reaching the decision makers in their families was also recommended by two organizations. One way to do this is through partnering with any English Learners Advisory Committees (ELACs) or similar organizations at schools and giving a 5–7-minute informational presentation; any presentations and collateral sent home with children should be something that families can take and apply in their lives. This collateral will likely need to be approved by the school district prior to distribution.

Reaching Spanish-Speaking Audiences

When it comes to reaching those who may primarily speak Spanish, it is fundamentally important for utilities to engage with these residents in Spanish, such as through the utility's conservation webpage and when performing outreach. That may mean having multiple languages present on one webpage – for instance, by having the option to toggle to another language; by providing brochures in multiple languages; or by sending targeted hardcopy outreach materials to Spanish-speaking homes. For any materials mailed directly to participants, including an indication that the materials inside are in Spanish on the outside of the envelope can help increase open rates (otherwise, recipients may assume the envelope's contents are in English). For in-person outreach, it is also crucial to have Spanish-speaking, bilingual staff present, including at events that reach the general population.

Outreach Mediums

From our conversations, we heard about a suite of outreach mediums that have been successfully deployed to engage the Spanish-speaking community and to reach the decision makers in the home. Key take-aways included:

- Deploying different outreach mediums strategically
 - Outreach messaging should come from a diverse array of mediums and should not rely on any one strategy. This approach can also help target or avoid overlooking key demographics (for instance, to focus direct mail on senior residents, and social media to engage younger audiences).

- Some mediums, such as bill inserts, magazines, and newspapers, tend to be biased towards reaching those that are more affluent, and may not be inclusive to other income groups. On the other hand, one organization has found that mail inserts work well to reach older clients and the low-income population for one of their programs and sees sizable increases through inquiries and applications for water bill support when they conduct outreach pushes. This has been especially true during economic downturns such as during the pandemic.
- **Harnessing the Popularity of Radio**
 - Local Spanish-language radio stations were repeatedly mentioned as an outreach medium that would likely reach many in the Spanish-speaking community. For example, one utility employs 30-second ads in both English and Spanish when they are doing marketing campaigns for drought awareness and their water conservation and efficiency programs.
 - It is recommended that prior to buying ad time, the utility researches the target audience of each radio station, given the multitude of stations that play different music and attract different demographics in age, socioeconomic characteristics, and occupation. Ads should not just be placed on one station, but across multiple stations that attract different audiences.
- **Suggestions for New Partners in Print Media**
 - Newspapers and print media retain prominence when conducting outreach to the Spanish-speaking community, and one organization recommended that this medium be saturated with ads. Recommendations include popular local and national bilingual newspapers.
- **Taking Advantage of Television**
 - While television ads and household television subscriptions are both expensive, local broadcasts of channels like Telemundo and Univision are potentially strong mediums to place ads through. These stations feature in-depth coverage on immigration issues, etc., that are neglected by other stations, and exclusively draw a Spanish-speaking audience. Using television ads and partnering with local news stations was cited in our conversations with multiple organizations as a key part of their ability to connect with Spanish-speaking residents through marketing campaigns.
- **Social Media Strategies**
 - While not everyone interviewed found success with engaging the Spanish-speaking community when using social media such as Facebook or Twitter, one utility spoke positively about this medium and was able to translate views to registrations in their programs.

- It may also be effective to provide and share content that other community organizations – which may have more robust or engaged followings than official City channels – can share across their own platforms.
- **Additional Outreach Methods**
 - One organization has also effectively used phone trees to reach community members, which rely on a few individuals in their network to call numbers from a database.
 - Additionally, one organization has found that word-of-mouth has been incredibly effective at engaging the local Spanish-speaking community, which they believe is built on trust of the messenger.

Centering Equity

The informational interviews highlighted and flagged the following suggestions for centering equity as part of outreach and engagement strategies:

- Provide training to support Spanish-speaking employees and volunteers to ensure that those with more traditional experience and background would not be further marginalized. For example, one utility developed a Certificate Program² which was a vocational training program consisting of nine classes and offered free of charge in Spanish, as well as English, to professional landscapers and gardeners encouraging them to switch to water smart practices. The utility was careful as they tailored these courses to a Spanish-speaking audience and had a schedule that accommodated working hours.
- Ask how actions that the organization/utility takes will be equitable for the entire community and how to move forward when access and privilege are not a given.
- If the organization has the bandwidth to do so, maintain an equity matrix map, which uses GIS to plot participation in water use efficiency programs to identify where people are and are not participating; analyze why they might not be participating; and assess whether their outreach efforts seem to be reaching these areas.

Official Planning Processes and Allocating a Dedicated Budget for Outreach

Multiple conversations highlighted the importance of allocating a consistent and dedicated budget to conducting outreach to the Latinx community:

- For example, one city recommended a significant investment in outreach overall, and for dedicating a specific percentage of this to outreach budget to support communication materials and outreach in languages commonly spoken in the community.
- Drought planning as well as other master planning efforts were recommended as a strategy to not only secure general funding for conservation programs, but also as avenues to outline specific outreach and promotion goals to different demographic

² <https://theodorepayne.org/learn/landscaper-certification/>

communities. One city recommended advocating for and creating a separate water conservation budget with dedicated line items for outreach.

Partnerships and Collaborations

Partnerships and collaborations with stakeholders invested in water conservation and reaching the Latinx and Spanish-speaking community can be a strong asset. Reaching out early and often is critical for nurturing relationships. Some other key takeaways for building strong relationships with partners include:

- Identifying key points of contact within each organization/partner and stay consistent with points of contact.
- Using the mayor's office as a way to network and promote water conservation programs and events.
- Hosting annual events in collaboration with partners.
- Partnerships and collaborations with Community Based Organizations (CBOs) that engage and have built trust with members of the Latinx, and Spanish-speaking community are also some of the most important relationships that utilities can build as they work to connect with this community.
- CBOs often facilitate their clients' enrollment in water conservation programming by registering those working in the landscaping trade for Spanish-language landscaping workshops.
- Connecting with faith-based organizations and churches can potentially lead to giving presentations during masses and services about water conservation programs.

Internal Staff Capacities and Diversity

As many utilities strive to hire and retain staff that reflect the diversity of their communities including those that speak other languages including Spanish, we repeatedly heard from interviewees at utilities and community organizations how important it was for utilities to build a workforce that reflects the ethnic diversity of their communities. This diversity is vital to bringing in the perspectives that reflect community values and culture, and for inclusivity of messages and messengers that reflect the diversity of the community.

Additionally, it is important to retain customer service staff fluent in Spanish answering phones, or available to have calls routed to them from Spanish-speaking customers. One organization strongly recommended that the conservation team collaborate with existing staff who have experience with the community and organizations that serve the Latinx and Spanish-speaking population and are knowledgeable about upcoming events that will be opportunities for engagement.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

While many of the best practices detailed above are also linked to challenges with engaging the Spanish-speaking community, a few key themes emerged through these conversations and are summarized below:

The Digital Divide

- Multiple interviewees, from both the utility and community organizations, stressed that many people are affected by the digital divide, whether that is due to not having no or limited access to the internet and/or not being digitally fluent. In particular, the difficulty and frustration many experience when navigating government websites, which often don't feel user friendly or intuitive. For some, the pandemic further exacerbated the difficulty of accessing digital resources, such as those that might have been using publicly available computers at libraries, which were shuttered throughout the pandemic until recently. Therefore, while the shift to virtual offerings ensued, many were left out that did not have access to the internet in their homes.

Creating Messaging and Ad Campaigns That Resonate in Spanish

- While the importance of translating outreach and informational materials to Spanish is paramount, it is important to assess whether the imagery and messaging used makes sense as intended for Spanish-speaking audiences (particularly if the translation is conducted automatically, via a service such as Google Translate).
- A growing number of utilities offer translation into multiple languages directly on their website through Google translation services. However, it is not entirely reliable, and some portions of the site need to be translated by an expert to ensure accuracy of the messaging, particularly for legal language and technical terms. In the meantime, including a disclaimer on the page for anything translated by Google is a helpful practice.

Lack of Spanish Speaking Staff

As was echoed in the recommendation to build a water conservation and customer service staff that can speak Spanish, it can be a particular challenge for utilities to hire staff that are bilingual. One city, for example, requires bilingual staff to be officially tested, and even for native Spanish speakers, the Spanish language test includes many terms that are unfamiliar, technical, or esoteric, making it more difficult for them to pass the exam and be designated as staff able to provide Spanish bilingual support.

Engaging Renters

One organization also highlighted the barriers present to participating in some water use efficiency programs for renters that may want to participate but need approval from their landlords. While not specific to Latinx communities, this remains an important consideration when designing outreach strategies and materials.