

## **Bastrop Community Stories - Lived Experiences Throughout the COVID-19 Pandemic**

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a global shift. There were changes to our lifestyles, our medical systems, our education, our careers, and even our approach to public health, among other things. For many, this was the first pandemic we ever experienced, and it seemed that many sectors were underprepared and uncertain about what the proper response was. As such, the Bastrop County Public Health Department (BCPHD) is interested in better understanding the community's lived experiences throughout the COVID-19 pandemic – especially as it pertains to vaccination access, COVID-19 care, and health equity, among other things – to ensure that if a similar pandemic, endemic, or emergency situation were to occur, the BCPHD is properly informed and equipped to address the situation.

To that end, a BCPHD Infectious Disease Task Force was formed. Within that task force, the Community Stories team was put together, and subsequently tasked with interviewing local community members who were particularly vulnerable or at risk during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to allow the community to shape the narrative surrounding their experiences in Bastrop County and take control of telling their own stories. The interviews were conducted using a script created by the Community Stories team, recorded (with consent obtained from each community member), and transcribed. This document aims to compile and highlight some of the important information gained from community members as a result of these interviews, as well as highlight common themes that emerged. In order to provide some context to the following interviews, the demographic information for the participants has been illustrated below.

### **Demographic Information**

#### Total Number of Participants

Male	1
Female	8

#### Race/Ethnicity

African American/Black	5
Hispanic/Latino	4

#### City of Residence

Bastrop	4
Elgin	4
Smithville	1

**Question 1: Did you want to take a preventive covid vaccine?**

Of those interviewed, only one participant expressed being initially disinterested in obtaining the COVID-19 vaccine. When asked why, Denetria expressed: “No, it really wasn’t enough information and I didn’t know a whole lot about it, so I just said, ‘no, I’m not going to do it.’” She then explained that what made her change her stance was that she “started doing a little more research and talking to different individuals, and they [said], ‘this really helps you’ – because... I was working at the time, and they were like... ‘you’re working with people, and ...you really need to protect yourself.’”

This idea that the community seemed to rally around each other and encourage those around them to get the vaccine was reflected by Mary M as well, who explained “people who you would never thought... would have gotten their vaccines, they got them!... And I think it was because...they knew COVID was real, and...the people that were telling them about it, they were comfortable with those people encouraging them...It’s who you know and who you trust... I didn’t have to call you, but maybe your friend called you, you know what I’m saying? It’s like, ‘oh, she’s calling me, so let me get this vaccine.’ So, it was a beautiful effort.”

This is incredibly important for the BCPHD to note – in future emergency instances, it is imperative that the health department is viewed as an entity that is both *known* and *trusted* by the community. Mary M further elaborates on this sentiment, exclaiming “If you know that there’s something, get out there and meet your community, so you know who they are, and they know who you are, and they know that you’re open and you’re friendly. Get out and do a walk, do a block walk, cut out to those rural areas, and walk and knock on people’s doors and say, ‘hey, there’s a pandemic going on.’”

## **Question 2: Did you know where to go to get a vaccine?**

The responses to this question were mixed. Those who attempted to get the vaccine early on, like William and Valarie, expressed troubles finding where to get the vaccine, with Valarie remarking “It was extremely difficult. And I’m going to say up front that I have a very privileged background. I have income...I don’t have any college education, but I am very educated. I’m very involved in the community in both Travis and Bastrop County. And it was the most difficult thing that I could do – and I wasn’t necessarily wanting the vaccine for myself; more so that I was concerned about my mother-in-law, who was 91 years old -- and it was the hardest thing that I had to do: to find her a vaccine.” Still others – like Denetria, Leslie, and Claudia – shared that by the time they got vaccinated, the vaccine was easily and readily available in places like H-E-B, Walmart, and CVS.

Of note, Judy, Ruby, Mary P, and Mary M all named volunteer Cheryl Reese as the source that informed them where to get the COVID-19 vaccine. The importance of the work that Cheryl Reese and volunteers like her did throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in Bastrop County in order to help vulnerable, marginalized populations receive care cannot be understated.

## **Question 3: Was there any fear around whether the vaccine would work or not?**

All of the participants stated that they were not fearful of the vaccine itself, and most of them shared sentiments like those given by Claudia, who responded “No, no, no. The vaccine was going to help me.” There were some feelings of fear surrounding the side effects of the vaccine, however, with Judy explaining “we were more scared of the side effects of it because it

was still kind of unknown at the time,” but ultimately explaining that she felt the benefits of getting the vaccine outweighed any fears surrounding the side effects.

#### **Question 4: How easy or difficult was it to go to a site to get a vaccine?**

Because the majority of participants had access to transportation and received their vaccines locally, the general consensus was that it was easy for them to reach the vaccination sites once they learned where they were. However, Judy and Valarie both shared that they helped elderly people reach vaccination sites, with Valarie emphasizing that the elderly were having difficulties getting vaccinated, “because the elderly couldn’t drive. There were actually people that I picked up and actually drove them to and from the clinics to get the vaccine.” While William did not personally transport people himself, he mentioned “A lot of seniors couldn’t drive [to the vaccination site], so we had the National Guard come to their house.” It is vital that the county address the issue of transportation for the elderly in case of future emergency situations.

Valarie also had concerns regarding the hours in which the vaccination sites were available, stating “[the clinics] were not easily accessible, especially the hours. You had a clinic that opened from 9:00 to 5:00 or 9:00 to 6:00. Most people, especially Latinos, in Bastrop County, are blue collar, and they are working and traveling to and from Austin. They’re leaving at 5:00 or 6:00 in the morning, and they’re not getting home until 6:00 or 7:00 at night. There was no time for them to go to that clinic. They were having to take off work if they were [getting the vaccine].”

Other participants said that they attempted to help others make sure their appointments fit within their schedule, like Ruby, who shared, “I was very enthused that I could be able to help somebody else to make sure they got the vaccination... Some people don’t get out until 4:00, I thought, ‘okay, they don’t close ‘til 7:00, so I’ll make your appointment [at] 5:30. You get out here in town,’ and I [would] make their appointment at 5:30.”

#### **Question 5: Once a site was identified, tell me how easy or difficult was it to actually get a vaccine?**

The majority of the participants stated that the actual process of getting the vaccine was fairly straightforward once a vaccination location was identified.

#### **Question 6: Was the vaccine helpful?**

The majority of participants expressed that they did not get sick from COVID-19 after getting the vaccine, and as such felt that the vaccine was helpful for them. While one participant, Leslie, did get sick, she explained that she suspected her illness was complicated by her having asthma, and that eventually she “began to feel better” without a need for serious medical intervention.

#### **Question 7: Was language a barrier to your access to the vaccine?**

This question brought to light concerns regarding access for the Spanish-speakers in the community. According to the [United States Census Bureau](#), Bastrop County has a 45.9% Hispanic or Latino population; as such, it is imperative that both services *and* documents be made available in Spanish.

However, Valarie explains that this was not taken into enough consideration during the pandemic, stating, “I am Mexican. I am Latina. I am Hispanic... None of these forms, none of this material was in Spanish. And Bastrop County... is majority of Latinos who speak Spanish as a first language, and none of these forms were found to be in Spanish until months later... They had no [Spanish-speaking] staff. I volunteered so many hours after the vaccine did come out... I was at the vaccine clinics because they had very few people to speak Spanish to people... And I can tell you, when I was volunteering, people were coming to get me. ‘We need a Spanish speaker.’ I was going back and forth, trying to translate...there was a lot of disparity, a *lot* of disparity.”

While some Spanish-speaking members of the community, like Claudia, relied on their family members to translate documents for them, that is not always a reasonable or reliable option. Clearly, it is deeply important that the community members of Bastrop County have access to qualified bilingual professionals or interpreters, as well as the means to fill out forms in the language they are most comfortable and knowledgeable in.

**Question 8: Based on your experience, do you believe you would have gotten better access to the COVID vaccine if you belonged to a different race or ethnic group, lived somewhere else (i.e., not in a rural community), or were more fluent in English?**

The response to this was a resounding ‘no,’ largely due to the way the community was able to rally together to help each other access COVID vaccinations precisely because of Bastrop County’s “rural” nature. Several participants recounted the ways in which they helped their fellow community members in Bastrop a county get vaccinated.

Ruby recalled, “Well, [living in a rural community] was helpful. Because even I got people to go! I signed them up, I told them exactly where to go... I even signed up... I think I did maybe over a hundred-something- odd people... They didn’t have internet access, I got them on the phone, had them fill [their forms] out, and I put it in their computer for them. I used my computer at home and did all the paperwork and told them where to go.”

Mary M discussed her experience, stating, “With us being in a ‘out in the country’ setting in Bastrop County, I was able to help people in Cedar Creek, in Shiloh and Hills Prairie, just all over, get their vaccines. And they were *excited* to get their vaccines!...But I think the promoting... worked a lot with the faith community and the churches and just people we know. And the community... took COVID serious, and they came out to get their vaccines, and were grateful to get their vaccines. And it was just a beautiful effort. And that’s when I saw our community working together, our churches work together... And I found that we had a lot of people in... the black community... that are excellent at marketing skills...They didn’t use the Internet. They didn’t use flyers. They used word of mouth. And they used people skills to communicate and get the word out. They didn’t have to talk about how important it was to get a vaccine, just said, ‘hey, COVID, vaccines are available. You can go get them. There’s no cost to you.’ And it moved. We got lots of people. I’ve even been able to get some people from Austin vaccines.”

Valarie discussed her experience, saying, “The other thing that I started doing is, once I found out that you could sign up to get the vaccine... I asked my daughter and my husband, ..., and... two and three other friends, if they would go with me and sign people up after church services. I asked my priest if I could just do a grassroots effort. [I said] that I would bring my own electronic devices, and we would sign people up for the vaccine. Because these people, in

Bastrop County, in Elgin, Texas, do not have Internet that's readily available. You had to sign up via Internet. So I literally – either I paid my girl friends to do it, which most of them did not take money because they were doing it as part of community service– but we took my own devices: ipads, laptops, pins, papers, and we signed up people after church services.” Valarie also noted that it was important for the spaces she created were safe for Latinos, so that they would not fear facing deportation or discrimination in the process of signing up for the vaccine.

William also reflected on his role during the pandemic, saying, “When [vaccination] first happened, I informed my community where the location was. I was actually volunteering, helping out. At times I actually got them signed up to come and get their shots, help them with the forms and all that stuff... I [also] had the COVID shots [provided] at my church.”

In the face of so much uncertainty and difficulty obtaining services and information, the community of Bastrop County came together to help each other. In future instances, it will be imperative for the health department to work with churches as well as well-trusted and connected community members in order to reach and serve as many people as possible.

***The responses to Questions 9-11 have been illustrated in the table below.***

**Question 9: How do you receive health information and news?**

Television	3
Social Media/Facebook	5
Word of Mouth	4
Bastrop County Cares	2
Email	2
Phone call	1

**Question 10: How would you like to receive health information and news?**

Text messages	7
Email	1
Social Media	4
Word of Mouth	2

**Question 11: How do you receive emergency (i.e. fire, flash flood, hurricane) information and news?**

Television	2
Social Media	1
Text Message/Alert	7

## **Question 12: Is there anything else you would like to share?**

This last question was asked in order to make sure that any other important messages or takeaways from the participants would be elevated and shared with others. Those who had further comments were as follows:

### **Judy**

I'm glad that Miss Cheryl Reese was able to open up the little center and make it available for people to come and get vaccines, because some didn't have a ride to Bastrop, or some couldn't get off of work on time. She had it open more than once at one time... she made it possible... if you needed a ride, all you had to do was ask. Miss Reese would make sure to find a ride for you, and get you there and take you back. So I wish we had more people like Miss Reese... I'm one of her biggest fans. And I trust everything she says, and she does. I'm kind of committed to her... And the same goes for... Miss Valarie Neidig... She's up there with Miss Cheryl Reese.

### **Mary M**

I just think that we all worked together. And we came together. There were some people, you know, that are going to not get vaccines or anything, but I think the majority of the people from the African American world got them. The majority of people got them, and they didn't have to think about them. And I think that it probably saved a lot of complications and a lot of things. And I just think it was a beautiful thing. And it was my first time, to my knowledge, going through a pandemic. And so it was just beautiful to see people to go to try to prevent [others] from being ill. And my big thing was not only for me, but it was for protecting my 87 year old mother... You know, it was hard. We didn't want to experience that. But, you know, we were able to adapt and cope with it because we have vaccines accessible to us. But one last thing that I want to add for our public health department, it's just good for them to know that we need people who are going to actually do the work. We need the work done. We've been to a lot of clinics where we have to take a number, where we get the worst of services because we don't have insurance, or because we don't have that. So I'm hoping that those people that are less fortunate will be put ahead, at the head of the list; that the public health department can help them to make their health better, mentally, physically and spiritually.

### **Mary P**

I think they did a very wonderful job, a great job of getting the information out and getting people to different areas because they had testing and information at the churches, the community center. I mean, you name it, we had it, we had it here everywhere. And I really appreciate everybody and everything they did. We have all that testing, and CVS texts me every now and then, they've stopped now, but they were giving out home testing kits.

### **Valarie**

I just think, the thing for me is just the disparity that I saw. So visible; it just made my stomach churn. Like I would literally be volunteering at the PAC, and could count the number of brown and black people that would come in and get shots. And it shouldn't be that way, especially when— it just should not.

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, none of this insightful work could have been done without the help of the community. The Bastrop County Public Health Department sincerely thanks the community members who took the time to share their stories and experiences with us. We hope to use the information here to lift the voices of our community members and better serve everyone in our community moving forward.