



Elkhart County Health Department

## Health Officer

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
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### **Elkhart County launches initiative to reduce COVID-19 cases among Latinos**

Responding to a sharp increase in COVID-19 cases among Latinos, the Elkhart County Health Department has engaged Goshen College to lead an initiative to enhance health and safety and reduce the spread of the virus by partnering with Latino leaders throughout the community.

The goals of the Elkhart County Latino Pandemic Initiative include advocating for the concerns of the Latino community to responsible local health and civic organizations, building awareness of the importance of following COVID-19 safeguards and precautions, increasing the testing of Latinos, and educating people about and increasing options for isolation for those suffering from the virus and quarantine for those exposed to it.

Melanie Sizemore, Division Manager for the Elkhart County Health Department, said similar initiatives are being planned to slow COVID-19 cases among the African-American and Amish communities and will be announced in the coming days.

Sizemore said she is hopeful the Latino-led initiative will help slow the spread of COVID-19 in the short term and improve health outcomes in the Latino community in the long term.

“It’s heartening to see so many people come together so quickly for the health of Elkhart County. It takes involvement of the whole community to control the spread of the coronavirus, and make sure accurate information and appropriate resources are available to everyone. I believe this group’s leadership and dedication will be one of the keys to lowering the spread of the virus” state Dr. Lydia Mertz, Health Officer for Elkhart County.

Sizemore said that Goshen College was asked to lead the initiative, which is composed of a wide range of local Latino leaders and organizations, because of its bilingual/bicultural and convening expertise and its connections to Latino groups throughout the community.

Goshen College President Rebecca J. Stoltzfus said she is hopeful the Elkhart County Latino Pandemic Initiative will have an immediate impact in increasing the county’s engagement with the Latino community and reducing the spread of COVID-19 throughout the summer and fall.

“It is essential that our county work together to control the current surge, which threatens our health and our economic recovery,” Stoltzfus said. “Goshen College is pleased to help lead the initiative because of our intercultural and health expertise, our shared stake in positive outcomes, and our trusted community relationships and partnerships.”

The Elkhart County Health Department initiative will be led by Goshen College Vice President for Student Life and Dean of Students Gilberto Pérez Jr. and Community Impact Coordinator Richard R. Aguirre, with assistance from Director of Community Engagement and Adult Outreach Rocio Diaz.

Pérez said he and Aguirre have already convened two gatherings of Latino leaders and believe there is a

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strong consensus for quickly developing community-based strategies to slow the spread of COVID-19 among Latinos.

“Bringing together Latino leaders from Elkhart County to offer counsel on culturally responsive messaging and engagement is key to reducing the surge of COVID-19 in the Latino community,” Pérez said.

Pérez said the health department’s engagement and resources will help the Elkhart County Latino Pandemic Initiative reach more people, especially in work places, schools and churches. Pérez also said that in the long term, he believes the initiative will increase awareness of the importance of preventive health care, including regular flu shots and vaccinations, as well as increase Latino community engagement with local government.

“Engaging Latinos in Elkhart County on issues of health, education, business and health means more diverse opinions, ideas and ways of doing community,” Pérez said. “This is what a welcoming community looks like. This is what Elkhart County looks like.”

Dr. Rose M. Gillin, a Goshen physician, the Latinos who have joined the initiative share the same culture and understand the lifestyle, beliefs, traditions, concerns, and priorities of Latinos. Because of this, she said, they are uniquely suited to reach the rest of the community.

“Latino leaders are part of the Latino community and, as such, already have relationships and networks in place. The ability to join to work together and share resources will help to strengthen all the initiatives that are already taking place,” Gillin said. “Meeting together and brainstorming also opens up the possibility of creating initiatives that can help during this time.”

Aguirre said Latinos in Elkhart County, like those throughout the nation and Indiana, are contracting COVID-19 in greater numbers than their share of the population. As of June 11, Latinos comprised 11.8 percent of Hoosiers testing positive for COVID-19 even though they make up 7.1 percent of the state’s residents. Aguirre said Latinos make up as many as half of recent positive cases in Elkhart County.

Aguirre said there are many reasons Latinos have higher rates of COVID-19 than other racial and ethnic groups, including suffering from such pre-existing chronic health conditions as diabetes and high blood pressure, less access to health care and lower insurance rates and a greater number of Latinos designated as essential workers who have had more exposure to COVID-19. Other factors include jobs and work conditions that don’t always allow for physical distancing, less access to testing and multi-generation and extended family living situations that make COVID-19 transmission a greater risk, Aguirre said.

“I’m grateful that the health department wants to reach out to the Latino community and seek our leadership and assistance in addressing this urgent health crisis,” Aguirre said. “I believe we will be able to have a positive impact in reducing COVID-19 cases and this will set the stage for future collaborative initiatives that will benefit our entire community.”

Although organized just days ago, the Elkhart County Latino Pandemic Initiative already has gained the engagement and support of Latino leaders from the following organizations, businesses and churches:

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Rose M. Gillin Family Medicine; the Northern Indiana Hispanic Health Coalition; the Minority Health Coalition; the Center for Healing & Hope; the City of Goshen; Goshen Community Schools; Goshen College, El Puente News; La Raza Radio; Radio Horizonte; Yolo Vox, Comunidad Cristiana Adulam of Goshen and Iglesia Bautista El Refugio of Elkhart.

Liliana Quintero, executive director of the Northern Indiana Hispanic Health Coalition, said the Latino leaders who are part of the initiative have the expertise to identify critical health care needs and build trustworthy relationships with Latino community members as well as advocate for the needs.

“COVID-19 is here, and it does not discriminate based on ethnicity, religion, or gender,” Quintero said. “We recognize that our collective health as a county depends upon the health of all of us. Unfortunately, we are facing the rapid spread of the virus among Latinos, a fast-growing group that is vital to our economic future. We have a responsibility to take action now to improve the health outcomes of all.”

To learn more about the Elkhart County Latino Pandemic Initiative, please contact Goshen College Community Impact Coordinator Richard R. Aguirre at [rraguirre@goshen.edu](mailto:rraguirre@goshen.edu) or (574) 535-7571.

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