



## It takes a village — introducing the Latino Engagement Team

By Roberto Rivera

As a nurse, Clara Barton, the founder of the American Red Cross, provided medical care to Black soldiers and assisted in their attempts to gain freedom — all part of her desire to give aid to everyone in need. Today, the spirit of the “Angel on the Battlefield” endures as the Red Cross provides key support to everyone during wildfires, hurricanes, and a global pandemic ... regardless of citizenship or language barrier.



That doesn't mean that serving the most vulnerable Latino communities — migrant and undocumented farmworkers who continue to put food on our nation's tables during a pandemic — isn't especially challenging during a disaster response.

“Our Latino communities are hesitant to ask for support, especially if they think we are a governmental organization,” says Michele Averill, CEO of the Red Cross' Central Coast Chapter. “It is our responsibility to educate all of our communities that the Red Cross is a neutral organization that makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class, or political opinions. As an organization, we endeavor to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress.”

In 2016, the Red Cross' President of Humanitarian Services, Harvey Johnson, sent Norma Vega from the Los Angeles Region to Hurricane Matthew to assess how the Red Cross delivered services to vulnerable Latino communities. “Harvey wanted me to come back with recommendations for improving and ensuring equitable services to all,” Vega says. “The Latino Engagement Team [LET] evolved through the engagement of

partners and national organizations. Working with April Wood and National Community Partnerships, LET took root.”

In 2017, former Los Angeles Regional CEO Jarrett Barrios and Chicago CEO Celena Roldan formalized the LET initiative, which continues to give voice to the voiceless. In 2018, at the national level, Mark Smith and Kanhong Lin developed the first draft of the program. In time, Anjana Dayal de Prewitt, Pedro Carrera, and Elena Lopez were brought in to provide national support for LET efforts.

More recently, the [wildfires that started in the Northern California Central Region \(NCCR\) in mid-August](#) required a fully activated team response. Carisa Hettich from the Cascades Region, Patty Madera from the Los Angeles Region, and Lety Escobar from the SoCal Region all deployed. According to Carrera, “LET builds on Community Engagement Partnerships service delivery best practices to serve communities in an inclusive manner during disaster operations and steady-state activities. They are community-facing teams that facilitate access to our services, action for building resilience, and build relationships and trust with Latino organizations and populations.”

Hettich, Madera, and Escobar searched for vulnerable populations in the impacted areas. They found pockets of Latino farmworkers who lacked food and water. In partnership with the United Farm Workers (UFW), they learned of a shortage of drinking water, diapers, and toys to entertain children who were at home during the pandemic. The village came together with Red Cross support to deliver eight pallets of water, food, and snacks, which were distributed to 700 UFW members. Additionally, Mary DeWitt-Dia from CEP at National secured diapers from Baby2Baby and children's play kits from Children's Disaster Services.

“The LET epitomizes how trust can be obtained through building relationships in a community, by listening to the needs of our most vulnerable populations, and by delivering on those needs,” Averill says.

To better address the needs during this particular disaster response, a Community Engagement Resource Forum (CERF) was launched to connect the Red Cross with eight local organizations during virtual weekly meetings to provide and receive on-the-ground information. The meetings were considered a success by the community organizations because they were able to learn from one another about gaps in service and how to prepare for the recovery period. They were also informed of LET, which they welcomed to assist in disaster outreach and education. “The American Red Cross has been key in helping us help our community,” says Elizabeth Gonzalez of UFW. The result of the UFW and the CERF meetings was an increase in service delivery and organizational trust-building.

Through the Red Cross fundamental principles, the Latino Engagement Team is here to serve. Clara Barton would be proud.

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