

Ante la pandemia y la inseguridad Apoyo-mutuo y solidaridad

EPILOGUE

It's noon on the first day of July, and Chicago is a picture postcard: 85-degrees, low humidity, no clouds, and a light westerly breeze. Staring into the piercing blue sky above the city's Southwest side, precisely halfway through 2020, it's easy to think, at least for a minute or two, that everything is right in the world today.

Dan Fulwiler, Esperanza's President and Chief Executive Officer for the last 12 years, would probably rather nap than rhapsodize over the weather. He's got virtual meetings stacked back to back all afternoon. That's been par for the course over the past four months. Before today's barrage begins, he's claiming a few idle minutes by stretching out on the sofa in his Ukrainian Village apartment, his Maltese mix Bruno sacked out by his side.

"It's not really fatigue," he says, looking, well, fatigued. "It's *decision* fatigue. Since COVID began, we've been making like 15 decisions a day. Big decisions, the kind we would usually take a few weeks to talk through. But time has just been *compressed*. I mean, we decided *one night* we had to do drive-through testing, when no one else down here was doing it. But we knew we had to. So just like that, we're *all in*, come hell or high water."

Bruno stretches and repositions himself into a more compact curl of fluff. "And then from that decision, a whole cascade of other decisions follows," Fulwiler continues. "It's been a little crazy."

As Fulwiler and his tight-knit crew guided a multi-site community health center through the beginnings of an unprecedented public health emergency, perhaps no skill became more important than improvisation. Yet that's a word you're unlikely to find enshrined in any organization's strategic plan. "The truth is, nobody could have put a plan in place for an FQHC to get through COVID," he explains. "Sure, we have our emergency response plans, and we think through all sorts of disasters when we're putting them together. And we have our long-range plans. But when something like this happens, you can't possibly imagine all the contingencies ahead of time. You just can't."

So what's kept Esperanza on course, when it could easily have spun haphazardly from one breaking point to another? "We've tried to guide ourselves by what we believe we *have* to do, rather than what we believe we *can* do. If someone last year had said, 'I'll give you two days to make telehealth available to all of Esperanza's patients,' I probably would have said we can't possibly do that. But then we had to. So we did."

The past four months have also taught Fulwiler the importance of self-reliance. "When it came to putting together guidance, direction, a *strategy* for our community, we had no one to rely on *except* the community," he says. "We didn't get it from the CDC. We didn't get it from the president. They didn't show us a way forward. So what did we do? We talked with dozens of community organizations around the Southwest side, ones we've already been working with for years, to get their advice, their suggestions, their priorities. And they sought out ours. That's how we charted a course."

Throughout, Fulwiler has leaned especially heavily on his Chief Operations Officer, Carmen Vergara. "She has been so steady," he says, his voice softened with astonished admiration. "She's almost preternaturally poised no matter what, and it was no different with this crisis. So as we moved forward, she would not only implement the big decisions but all the hundred other details that came after."

"And her voice has been so important. I mean, she grew up right here in Little Village, lived here almost her entire adult life. And she's a nurse. *And* she's got a master's in public health. So she knows the science, she knows the community, she knows

healthcare administration. She's the triple threat. The communities here don't need to hear me talk about how to care for themselves and their families. They need to hear her. And her speaking out on the radio, on television, on the mayor's Racial Equity Rapid Response Team, it's been invaluable."

Across the many soul-stirring days since the pandemic erupted, when Fulwiler has had to be at the center of so much activity, he's been paradoxically gratified to learn that often he's entirely unnecessary. "In the early weeks of the crisis, I made sure I was on-site at the clinics a lot," he says. "We knew so little about the virus, about how effective PPE really was, and I thought if the staff are going to be literally risking their lives, I need to be there, too. So I'd go in a clinic, bring donuts, and people would say a quick, 'Hi, Dan' and keep right on going. They were focused on what they knew they had to do, what they were *committed* to doing. I made no difference to anybody. I was irrelevant.

"Because here's the thing," he says with sudden vigor, sitting up on the edge of the couch. "Their commitment is what's relevant. Our culture is what got us through. Not me. Not senior leadership." He stops and then lets out a sheepish grin. "I'm going to sound like a talking Annual Report, but what are Esperanza's values? Caring, Quality, Family. That's our culture. That's what got us through."

It's almost time for his meeting, so he rouses himself from the sofa. Bruno, meanwhile, sleeps on. "We're facing so many uncertainties," he says with a sigh. "I have no idea where things will be in six months. But I do know we're over the starting line of the marathon. That's something. So off we go."

DAY 115

JULY 1, 2020

Total # of SARS-COV-2, NAA
Ordered to Date

6,808

Tested Negative to Date

4,306

Confirmed Cases to Date

2,502

Deceased

12

#Discharged from E.D.

78

#Discharged from Hospital

51

14-Day Positivity Rate on 7/1/20

8%

*This page and previous: Message
on Pilsen doorway. Artist unknown.
July 20, 2020*

