



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Youngsters share their artwork at Chesapeake Multicultural Resource Center in Easton on March 12, before the Maryland stay-at-home order. Local groups are reaching out to the immigrant community which is “disproportionately affected” by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Helping the vulnerable

Talbot immigrant communities ‘disproportionately affected’ by coronavirus pandemic

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EASTON — Local organizations are working to ensure that the underserved communities of Talbot County aren’t forgotten during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Groups like Chesapeake Multicultural Resource Center, Choptank Community Health System and Talbot Mentors discussed the challenges these communities face during a private-sector conference call at noon Tuesday, April 28, with Talbot County Emergency Operations Center representatives and local businesses.

The topic of the call, hosted by TalbotWorks.org, was “Is COVID-19 Dis-

proportionately Affecting Talbot County’s Underserved Communities?” The subtitle supplied the answer discussed by the panelists: “(Hint: The answer is yes!)”

Chesapeake Multicultural Resource Center Executive Director Matthew Peters and the center staff have been continuing to serve the immigrant community of Talbot County, even though the center remains closed. They’re still working with immigration and health insurance, because those programs have expiration dates that, if missed, could impact the economic situation of the families they serve even more.

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Though the immigrant community has weathered economic storms before — Peters pointed to the recession in 2008 and 2009 — the extended family was able to pull together and continue to support each other even if one or two people were out of work, he said.

“It helps to reinforce times that are difficult to get through economically,” he said. “So if one person loses a job, there are usually two or three other people in the household that kind of help with well-paying jobs and put everything together to keep their family afloat.”

The difficulties facing these families during the pandemic are unique. Many within the immigrant community work primarily in housecleaning, landscaping, construction and food service jobs.

“By continuing to work every day — whether that’s in a restaurant setting or a housecleaning setting or a construction, landscape, chicken factory, you name it — we kind of see that that risk — the health risk is increasing,” Peters said. “It’s really come close to home here in Easton now. The families we work with that have tested positive, we know very intimately.”

“That resilience they had of having so many people working — even though it is low income — we’re now asking them ‘Everyone has to stop working and stay at home,’” he added. “And that really cuts off all the lifelines.”

Together with partner agencies, ChesMRC is helping those hard-hit families follow the self-quarantine guidelines while ensuring that their basic needs are met during this time.

Choptank Community Health System Senior Vice President and Chief Operating Officer Jonathan Forte spoke about the ways his company is helping underserved communities in the region. One of the primary goals has been education outreach, especially to members in the essential businesses.

The company has developed audio, video and written messaging in Spanish, Haitian Creole and English to provide outreach and education to many people who may not have access to the same information sources as many within the community. Landscape nurseries, crab houses, the poultry industry and many other businesses throughout the Delmarva Peninsula rely heavily on the immigrant community, and informing the workforce plays a vital role in keeping the industries themselves healthy.

“We know that a healthy workforce is a productive workforce and it’s an econom-

ic driver, especially within this region,” Forte said. “So we’re working closely — as the health care provider — with owners and operators of those institutions to provide that education and outreach.”

He said the company is working with Caroline County officials to bring a large-scale testing site to the Federalsburg area, which they hope to have running in two weeks.

There were 31 cases in the Federalsburg zipcode on April 28, according to <https://coronavirus.maryland.gov/>.

Talbot Mentors Executive Director Gerson Martinez provided information about how the organization is working with the students they regularly mentor to identify an issues that their families are facing. The children in their program are students that qualify for the free and reduced meals programs, and many of them come from single parent homes. They surveyed the parents as part of an outreach effort.

“About 20 percent of the parents of our children have lost their jobs,” Martinez said. “The remaining 80 percent, by and large, remain employed because they are essential workers.”

In the survey, they asked families what major difficulties they faced. Martinez said the majority of the responses centered around their economic stability during these times. Families also responded that they were concerned about what distance learning means for them.

“Many of our students live in a single parent home where that parent is either continuing to work and thus not at home all day, or potentially they’re unemployed and aren’t producing income,” he said. “A lot of our parents expressed significant concern around what this period of school closure will do in terms of their children’s ability to keep up with school work, with their educational trajectory.”

Half of the families surveyed have either no access to the internet or no access to technological tools, and the families are worried about how their children will manage the educational requirements. Martinez added that the survey was conducted before Talbot County Public Schools began distributing equipment, but the families still face insufficient internet access.

Talbot County Health Officer Dr. Fredia Wadley spoke about the important work these organizations are doing, both in getting the messages communicated to the immigrant population and also in ensuring their needs are being met during this time.

Talbot County officials and the organization will continue to work together so that no one within the county is overlooked in the effort to educate the community and keep everyone safe.