

Community Conversations: NJ's COVID-19 Storytelling Project

Participants 74, 75, & 76: Rosabel, Celmira, and Veronica

Focus Group Transcription

Interviewer: Good morning. I am now recording. Thank you for participating in this project whose goal is to find stories through conversations here in New Jersey about the COVID-19 pandemic. Before starting, I would like to announce that I will be making a few questions just to guide our conversation and we hope that you guys can share your personal stories and your personal perspectives. And of course, it is not mandatory to answer every question that is asked. You guys have every right to not share. And if at any point you are sharing a story and you decide that you no longer want to finish it, you also have that right. Let's start by sharing your names and your favorite dessert. So I'll start, my name is Ana and my favorite dessert is... I don't know actually. I'm going to say cupcakes but I don't really have a favorite. Alright, now Veronica.

Veronica: My name is Veronica and my favorite dessert is torrijas.

I: What? Hm, I don't know what those are.

Celmira: Explain please.

V: Torrijas are a dessert, I'm not sure from what place in Mexico. But, basically what they are--well the process is you start with dry bread that is covered by something sweet that is made with cinnamon and piloncillo. You boil that liquid, cinnamon, and piloncillo, and you get those cut up pieces of bread and you dip them into the sweet mixture. You turn it off and then you let it soak and then you fry them. Then, you can eat those once they've cooled.

I: Wow.

V: And yeah, that's it. You simply get the pot or you prepare them individually. But the interesting part is that you let it soak so that the flavors combine.

C: I would prefer the whole pot.

Rosabel: The interesting thing also is that there are different ways-

V: --to make them.

R: Different versions. Yup.

I: Excellent. How about you Rosabel?

R: Okay well, I'm Rosabel, and my favorite dessert is baked plantains.

I: Alright, and Celmira.

C: I love tiramisu, rice pudding, leche asada, tres leches cake. It's all super yummy. I like desserts a lot.

I: I didn't know that, that's really great. Thank you for sharing. And let's start with a few questions. First, could you all tell me how your life has changed since the COVID-19 pandemic started. If you guys could share, whoever wants to go first can share.

V: Rosabel.

R: Why me? I think my life has changed a lot with COVID. A lot. Especially with school and the kids. With school at home, my life has been chaotic, totally. It has been really, really, difficult. In the beginning no one was prepared, right? So, now, it's like the teachers are preparing a bit more to help guide the kids. But initially, it was really stressful for the kids. They didn't have that interaction with the teachers. They would only post the assignments. It was a lot of work that they did at home. I have a daughter with a reading disability. It was really hard for her because the assignment instructions, well, she can't read them. And so, sometimes my boy had his own things, well, he couldn't help her either. I had to be out [of the home], a lot of times, as a volunteer too. And I couldn't help her, and she would get frustrated because she wanted to do her homework right now. She wanted someone to tell her what was written on there, right now. Right now, at this time, they have another program and the teacher voice records the lessons for them. It is much easier for her that way. And also, since the classes are now through video calls, it is way easier, because she is interacting with the teacher. But that was the thing that was- it was a change, and it was the most difficult thing that happened to me.

I: Thank you so much. Veronica would you like to share?

V: Yes, well, for me, ever since I saw information about how the coronavirus was giving us-- or was moving through other countries, the information makes you anxious, right? When they told us to stay home, well, since it is something unknown--with family it's like you don't know how to protect-- sometimes you forget about yourself if you don't think-- how you are going to protect your own, your kids. So that anxiety that you get,

that you don't know how it is handled or how to protect yourself, it does form a bit of anxiety within the family about what you know. Also like other families, education is an issue-- thinking about how kids will be doing, what the regulations for going back to school will be, how to discuss that with kids, how we have to watch out for them, deciding as parents if we're prepared to handle that anxiety about kids going back to school in person. Also, it affects you economically. This situation has affected all families. It has affected my family by stopping work. It has been frustrating to accumulate debt. That anxiety that you get, it really does affect you. It affects us because we are responsible for others, right? So yeah, learning to manage stress. You can't see it but we have to learn how to control it.

I: What I hear is that stress comes from many different areas. It comes from school, health, not having knowledge about how to handle this, financial issues, relationships with family and friends. So, we are getting stress from multiple places, from different directions. Celmira, would you like to answer that question?

C: Yes, of course.

I: How has your life changed since the beginning of March?

C: Yes, well, I would like to divide it between four different aspects. First, with work. For example, where I work, people-- how everything has changed, right? Before the cafeteria was shared, food was shared, cups were shared for example. We used to sit so close to each other that we could hear the conversation of the person beside us. And well now, all that has changed. In some companies, the rules are followed, and in others, not. But we do see distancing between people. Sometimes if you see it from an outside perspective, not from inside but from outside, you see how things have changed, right? That's from a work aspect. Now, in a financial aspect. For example, through the purchases I make. I used to almost always make purchases in person every month but now I prefer to make them online, even the purchases for the home like food for the refrigerator. I no longer go to grocery stores, I simply do it online to avoid the big crowds. In school life, yes, it has also affected me a little bit because of communication limitations. For example, with the internet, problems with the internet that a lot of students have had, with connection. I was also affected. My kid was not able to get classes for about a week. Then I spoke with his teachers and they accommodated me. They gave him some extra work that covered what he had missed from that whole week of classes. They tried to help me catch up with everything he had missed. Emotionally, it did affect me a lot. Seeing neighbors and friends trying to endure this situation, and in some cases, trying to survive with what one has.

I: Yes, thank you so much Celmira. We see that there are a lot of obstacles and we have to endure them. Like Celmira brought up, there are a lot of aspects that we see through the COVID pandemic. So, how do you guys think we will be able to confront all of this, not only now but also after the pandemic is over? What are some of the obstacles that we will have to confront in the future and what are we confronting right now?

V: Well, for me in particular, how we are going to endure this? Honestly, I have no idea how to guide my family for the future. What we have been conscious of is to maintain certain standards. This whole time, these months, we have developed a discipline about how to take care of ourselves and how to avoid [the virus] because we carry that risk. But, the human being has certain necessities, social and emotional. So, we have to be very careful to be informed as far as we can to navigate this emotionally well. How much we can isolate ourselves too, right? I think that the information that we have and share is another thing, because not everyone has the opportunity to receive information faster than others, right? So that too, sharing the information we have as individuals is important to others or to our community. Personally, economically, well yeah, now we have to avoid what is not necessary because we don't know what will come up in the future. We don't know what changes will come up in our jobs or what issues we will have with our health. If at some point we had or were infected we do not know the consequences that the virus can bring to our bodies. So all that prepares us emotionally as a family, as friends, as a community.

I: Thank you so much, Veronica. And to remind Rosabel and Celmira about the question, we are talking about the way that we address or surpass the challenges of COVID-19 or that we are dealing with right now. What are the goals and obstacles that we think will still be active after the COVID-19 pandemic is over?

R: Well I think one of the obstacles -- well there are plenty, but I think one of them will be jobs, debt. Some people spent a lot of time unemployed. And for example, personally, I got into debt with the electricity bills and other utilities. And so, that time that passed, those three months that you have that debt you can't say "I'm going to work double next month," well it would be triple since it was three months, "to cover those three months." That debt tags along so the obstacle is that jobs were lost and a lot of people could not return to their previous jobs. A lot of people are living day by day. One day they work, one day they don't, and they don't know if they will work the next day. And I think that that is something very stressful for everyone because you don't know what will happen tomorrow. We don't know if we will have to return to another lockdown which is already happening in other countries. And if we already have some debt, that will simply accumulate. So that is the most stressful thing that could be happening. It is one of the obstacles that are really tough. Another obstacle would be the return to schools. There is

no perfect plan to be able to return. We don't know how-- when we will return or what that return will be like. I think this is about living life day by day. We can't make plans for tomorrow because tomorrow things will change completely. So like that, each day. Sometimes, well, for me that is a huge obstacle because things change completely so I can't plan for the next day. Day by day things are changing. The job losses, the utility debts that a lot of people are talking about, the return to schools, not knowing exactly how to handle this situation, it's all really stressful and they are some of the most difficult obstacles that we could be experiencing right now.

I: Thank you, Rosabel. Celmira, would you like to share something?

C: Well I have observed that one of the obstacles is the access to health care. If we don't have health insurance, whether that is the parents or the kids, we will continue to accumulate more debt like Rosabel mentioned. In fact, we can't even get vaccinated against the flu because \$50 is too much for some families because it's not just one person, it's two or three adults. So that is \$150 in one week which is almost half of a week's pay. And besides that, there are people who have preexisting conditions, that have to take medicine and have to have constant medical visits and for some all that has stopped, it has been hampered. So in the future, I see that our health as a whole will deteriorate, there will be a lot of medical expenses. The government will have to figure out that deficit. In relation to work, well with work, yeah obviously during the winter months work goes down a little. Now with the pandemic, these months will bring uncertainty. We have to go day by day, week by week, living paycheck by paycheck when before you had at least enough to save a little which by now has run out. And let's see how long we will have to go on like this. We have to overcome all of these setbacks. Also, for the families that have been in limbo with documentation in immigration, there's no solution anywhere. Everything has stopped.

I: Yes, thank you. We have discussed how things change in regard to information that we receive. Where do you get your information from about COVID-19 and what have you done after finding these resources and learning about the new information that comes out each day?

V: Well, the program "Hogares Saludables" ["Healthy Homes"] gives me constant updates on information. Also, from Middlesex county, who sets up the protocol on how to handle the pandemic. And we guide ourselves based on everything that is going on in the entire country. I think that's what has helped me stay updated with everything regarding COVID.

I: Okay, so a program and the county's health department. Those are your two sources that provide you information. Okay. Celmira or Rosabel.

R: I have guided myself with the CDC. Going on their website, that's how I have guided myself. Also, with the information that "Hogares Saludables" ["Healthy Homes"] provides us. But, in the beginning, when everything was more chaotic than it is now, I think the CDC helped me a lot.

I: Very good. Celmira?

C: Well, I also use the CDC and also the city's radio show that has a program that shares what is new with New Brunswick. Also, with New Jersey's webpages and through the program "Hogares Saludables" ["Healthy Homes"], who are always posting the schedules for COVID tests and some other resources that are available.

I: Thank you. Now let's change the topic a little bit. We talked about the obstacles that we are experiencing in a family, individual, and community sense. Now I want to know about where you guys get strength and motivation from during this pandemic?

V: Me, personally, from my family and my kids who I have to protect. When someone is responsible for others, I think that's what keeps you going. It motivates you to take in information and to take precautions that as parents we have by nature in order to protect our homes.

R: Well, I am a general practitioner in Mexico and in my training I studied a lot of subjects like when you enter the operating room and what different areas in a hospital are for, lots of information. So, that was something that was a plus for me, having that knowledge. And what I did was analyze the situation. Here is the pandemic and the cases are high, so neither my kids nor my husband left the home. Why? Because when someone isn't knowledgeable it's easier to get infected from a virus from anywhere. If you admit someone into an operating room that has not studied and knows nothing about an operating room, everything is going to get contaminated in an instant. So, that's what I did to protect them. I told them to stay home, the one who would leave was me because I have had training and I know how to take care of myself. I would tell them something, "when you guys leave, pretend everything around you is stained and pretend you are wearing all white and absolutely everything will stain you red. If you grab this, you're stained. If you move like this, you're stained. That's the virus. It is everywhere around you." So, that was complicated. It is complicated. I would put my hair up, I would avoid having too much jewelry on my hands which could let us get contaminated more easily. I took all those precautions. It included wearing long sleeve clothes, how to arrive home, arriving from one specific door and taking off my clothes and shoes upon entering. I took all that, I took it and I assumed it, explaining it to my kids and my husband, and not

throwing them out there. I wasn't selfish, I did not stay home because I was scared. It was safer for me to be the one to leave the house because I have a little more knowledge about how to take care of myself. That is what I did to protect my family and others, I advised them as well.

I: Yes and what I'm hearing is that you two used that love you have for your family to get a little bit of control in a situation that can make you feel out of control. And for Rosabel, it was using that knowledge that you have from your training in your field to be able to go outside and do it in the safest way possible. And Celmira, would you like to share something about where you find a source of strength and motivation to get you through the pandemic.

C: Yeah, the engine that keeps me running from day to day is my son and my whole family. So, every day we would sit down to watch the news or hear about what steps to follow to stay safe, how to clean, how to leave and get to your home, and what to do at work when you are exposed to a lot of people. It's important to follow the protocol verbatim without skipping any steps. In the beginning of the pandemic people were treating it as something unknown; we didn't know how deadly the virus was so the fear and the need to go to work obligated us to follow CDC guidelines. The steps I took outside of the home are ones that I used inside of the home because we shared the apartment with one other person. We would advise them on how to stay safe even though they didn't believe in the virus until they heard about the cases where some people died from the virus. From then on, they took it seriously and followed the steps to stay safe. That was how and still is how we are handling the situation, following the protocol.

I: Thank you so much. Could you all share a story about an act of kindness that someone has done for you during this time? If you guys have a story and would like to share, please tell us about that act of kindness.

V: Well, in my case, my husband was anxious. We really don't know if he had or did not have the virus, or if we both had it. At that time, everything was closed, it was a terrible moment when you couldn't demand to be seen. So, I told someone at my job in "Hogares Saludables" ["Healthy Homes"] about what was happening, and they helped me right then and there. They helped me through a program when doctors weren't accessible. There was support that helped my husband, to give him some tranquility. What I was saying to him was not working because his anxiety was taking a hold on him and it was making him think negatively. But that support from the doctor worked like magic. The doctor told him it wasn't the virus, it was anxiety, it's this and that, it was a relief. I think at that moment the doctors contributed a lot with their time and their knowledge especially because at that time no one had time and especially in that field. So, I think

that was a humanistic part, it was moral support and that was something that really impacted me.

I: Thank you so much, Veronica. Also, him being able to breathe and realizing, I imagine also helped your family and your kids.

V: Yes, of course.

I: Rosabel, would you like to share a story about an act of kindness?

R: I think it's feeling the support from my family. Because, since the pandemic started, we teamed up as volunteers distributing food to people who were sick. The support that your family can give you is really important to keep you moving forward. Also, there was a law that the governor passed that stated that all health personnel that had a license in another state could now help. There is always fear because this is a lethal virus, it could kill you. Yeah. But there's always the desire to help, and to know I cannot be selfish. I have medical knowledge and I cannot hide it. If my knowledge serves my community, I will use it and give it to my community. I have my family, I have my children, my husband, and I am asthmatic. I thought, my knowledge is here for the community, but you know we also have to think about our family, right? And I think that one of the greatest acts of kindness from my son was for him to stop and tell me, "Don't worry, we will be fine at home. You have to go and help the community. You know that and you can do it." That gave me a peace of mind. My son is 13 years old. At one point, it was like I had one foot outside to go and one foot inside to stay with my children, right? But when I heard my 13-year-old son tell me, "Don't worry, we'll be fine here at home. Go, because your place is outside helping the community." I think that gave me the greatest strength and gave me peace of mind. And thank God, neither I nor my children have caught [the virus]. They would go into their room every time I arrived. They did not see me, they did not speak to me until I bathed, and changed my clothes. Then they would come out and hug me. I think that was the greatest act of kindness during this pandemic.

I: Thank you very much Rosabel. And Celmira, would you like to share a story?

C: Yes, in my case, for example, I was struck by how a group of people could help a single person. I mean, well, I'm going to tell you all the story so that you can understand me. I was at work and as I mentioned, it is a place where there are 150 to 200 people in a single shift. So, they call me and tell me, "You have to come to this area because a lady cannot breathe and she is on the floor." And obviously, I had to go to see what had happened-- whether it was an accident, see if something had been dropped or what was wrong. So when I went there, the person who came to notify me of the incident told me,

“Look, I think she has COVID because she was outside and she was coughing and could not breathe, so now, no one wants to approach her.” So I hoped it was not a plague, I hoped not. With so much fear no one wanted to help. But then we got to that area and indeed the lady was on the floor struggling to breathe and we didn't know what to do. A lady came out saying, “No, she's my friend, please help me! We have to get her out of here, let's go!” People were armed with courage, apart from that fear of the unknown, of being infected perhaps, right? At that moment they said, “No, we have to help her. She is the mother of a family just like any of us.” So, I grabbed the lady and we took her out of the area and then the ambulance came and took her. So, maybe we didn't do much because we don't have knowledge of medicine or first aid, but at least we tried to get the woman an ambulance so that medical staff could take control of the situation. Then, later, when we saw that the ambulance was leaving, we looked at each other with a face like “My God, look, we did it. You did not have to do it alone.” There were four of us who had the courage to save someone at that moment. What if the lady could no longer breathe and stayed there? So that caught my attention, because there are always groups or people who are going to put in more than they should and sometimes they will risk their lives to be able to save another person's life and also the lives of children, right? Because whenever you see someone you always have to see that that person obviously has children or has a family behind them.

I: Yes, that is very true. Thank you very much, Celmira. And to continue on the theme of kindness. Well kind of similar. Now I would like you all to share a story or even better, if you could tell me about where you find happiness. How can you get there? What do you do at home with your family? How do you find a place or something, an activity, that makes you happy?

V: Well, without a doubt, it is the home. Being with your children and being with family because that brings you peace of mind and it brings you happiness. But also, I really enjoy gardening. Yes. Also, something that one begins to enjoy when their children grow up is going out for a walk, sharing, cooking, although sometimes one gains weight but it also makes one happy, right? Well, it is those little things that one has to foster.

I: Thank you, Veronica.

R: What makes me happy? Serving and helping makes me happy. Serving my children and helping my children makes me happy. Serving and helping my community makes me happy. I think that's it. I can feel happy when I know that I was able to help someone. Seeing a smile or seeing that something is solved makes me happy. That moment, I enjoy it a lot. And also, just being with my children and helping my children, taking care of them. That changed a lot with COVID because where I went, they would with me but now with COVID I can't take them everywhere. So, when I go home, being with them

makes me happy. But also helping and knowing I did something, even if it was something small. It made a change in a person's life and seeing a smile from that person because their issue was solved is great. And if it was not resolved, at least listening to that person is good. Knowing that that person calmed down by telling me or talking to me about their problem, that makes me happy. I enjoy those moments.

I: Thank you so much. Celmira, would like to share?

C: Yes.

A: A source, or what?

C: Happiness. Well, I am happy when I see all the members of my family happy. I am happy when I see that each one of them meets their goals, that the day ended well and that they are without problems. I am happy when I see a child playing in the street next to his parents without any problems and with a clean, safe home. I am happy when the day ends and I can thank God by saying, "Thank you, God. I finished the day, my day was victorious, and I know that tomorrow it will be the same. If there is a family or a person who is in need of help in some way, somehow, in that way so mysterious that you like to work my God, put me in touch with that person so that perhaps with the little knowledge that I may have, I can shine light on the problem they have."

I: Thank you very much, Celmira and everyone. Now, if you could give me your opinion: Do you think that all communities were treated equally during the COVID pandemic? Maybe you think that there were populations that were less favored than others. And, if you think that there was inequality, could you tell us why?

R: Definitely, like with everything, there are inequalities. Belonging to a community of minorities which are of the most mistreated, makes us recognize that. For example, Celmira touched on this topic just now. Many of us do not have access to a free flu shot and much less so to health insurance which is a great inequality. This virus is still not over. Until when? Until there is a vaccine. We know that we do not have access to a free flu shot and when that [COVID] vaccine comes out, obviously we will not have access to the vaccine as quickly as other groups. The flu was an issue and yet at this point we still do not have free vaccines for the most affected, the poorest communities. Well now imagine the access we are going to have to [COVID] vaccines. Our community will always be the most affected. The most battered communities and the poorest communities are the ones who are paying the price in this pandemic and for all that it entails. Many times, even though we were afraid, we had to go out to work. Why? Because if we don't work one day, then it's a day that we don't eat and that we don't pay

rent. That is why many people in the community got sick. I believe that more than 50% of the Hispanic community did not have access to a hospital. Therefore, the statistics are not clear. If we really counted all those people who stayed at home and did not go to the hospital because they did not have health insurance and because they were afraid to pay a bill, only then would we really see that we were a very affected population. We know that New York found many people dead in their homes. Why? For this same reason, because they do not have access to medical attention. Many times, the bill that is going to come scares you more than what may happen to you if you get sick. So there is always going to be that inequality. We have to live with that inequality. We have to learn to fight against that inequality because what is coming will bring more challenging times with new infections, reinfections, and families dragging debt along. We do not know when there will be a vaccine and what is most probable is that due to these inequalities, we will not have quick access to that vaccine.

I: Thank you. What about you, Veronica?

V: Well, apart from everything that has already been mentioned, it has been statistically proven that progress has not been on a par with other ethnic groups. Now, how this inequality is going to affect us as a community? Well, we see it in housing and in how our families have limitations in the health sector. It also depends on who you ask, when we talk about whether or not progress against inequality has been made, right? It depends on each human being, how they see it. But difficult challenges are coming for our community because when creating a vaccine, I believe that they are not taking us into account in terms of the creation. How well will that vaccine serve us as migrants? How effective is it going to be for us? -- Sorry, the lights went off. -- So that is a concern for me. How much it will serve us? Because the tests, well, they tend to other ethnic groups that genetically we could not be compatible with. So how effective will it be, I repeat, for our community? So, it is worrying. We are going to see how accessible this vaccine is going to be. How much inequality will be seen at that point? Then it will be more evident, right? In other words, look at the deaths that have occurred because it is a total inequality. You cannot cover your eyes and say that it does not exist. Our community has lived it firsthand and cried because of it, right? So in these circumstances, inequality is more marked. It's in these misfortunes, in these occasions, when we don't know how to advance equally, right? Regardless of other things, ethnicity and economic status, there are many things that despite the pandemic well, there is still a lot of inequality.

C: Could you repeat the question? I did not catch the question. Please.

I: No worries. The question was, do you think that there were communities that were treated differently during the pandemic? Were there populations or communities that were treated differently than others, perhaps more favorably?

C: Well, I, based on what I heard in the news and the information that government organizations have been giving out, groups have always been mentioned and even in the vaccine research, Latino groups have been more affected and other American groups too, but not whites. So, what are those results due to? So, there have been more deaths in this group, right? Also, something else that has been brought up is the group of essential workers and how we have to give them the most help because they do a job that is indispensable. Nevertheless, help has not been provided and that has always been seen, the abuse from employers towards them, making them work without adequate protection. So, if at some point, later on, the vaccine comes out, well we are also going to see which group is the most favored. That is, which group is going to receive the vaccine first, which group they are going to give a placebo to or if a vaccine is even going to come about. I don't know. I ask myself so many things that I would honestly prefer to get the vaccine after having seen if it worked or did not work. Hearing that from a neighbor or a coworker then yes, okay, perfect, only then would I want to get the vaccine. But it has been seen and a lot has been heard about the groups with which researchers work to be able to investigate a disease or give a solution to that disease. Yes, that's how it is.

I: Thank you very much. Do you all think that there were communities that were left out of New Jersey's COVID-19 emergency program? And if those communities did not include them in the response or in the emergency action against the COVID pandemic, why were they left out of this plan?

R: Well, our immigrant people are the ones that are left out of the plan, right? Because the plan had financial assistance but it was only for people with legal status. We know that most of our community does not have that status and so they left us out. It has happened since that point.

I: Yes, would anyone else like to share? Who was left out of the New Jersey emergency plan?

V: Well, that issue is very difficult because look at the communities that are outside, rural communities, those that live far from the cities where they can get COVID tests. I think that that population was ignored, right? They did not receive those resources and who are those who work in those rural areas in terms of raising livestock and in terms of crops? It was immigrants. That is, many people are left out of any resource that the state has provided. As Rosabel said, immigrants, we are affected by that sort of stuff from everything like low wages, lack of medical insurance, and adequate housing. They forget

to look at the details, we were not considered, and we did not receive fair help even though we all pay taxes, right? So, there you see inequality. And, despite the fact that we contribute to the state, we contribute to the country, we are still not taken into account in these emergency circumstances and yes, we are left out.

I: Thank you. Celmira, would you like to share something?

C: I also agree that immigrants have not been adequately supported financially. Also, with medical insurance, they have not been given due care. I have a story, for example. When my brother was ill with COVID, I took him to the hospital and, because he does not have health insurance, although we arrived first, he was the last to be called. My brother was coughing loudly and another man arrived behind him like 15 minutes later and he was not in much visible pain, but nevertheless when he got to the hospital they asked him if he had health insurance and he said yes so he was allowed to pass first and my brother was left until the end. Then you see those cases and one thinks, help is definitely not the same for everyone, especially for those people who don't have health insurance.

I: Thank you very much for sharing and talking about all of this. What do you all think that the state of New Jersey can improve on? Or what could we have done better?

V: Well, “could have” no longer exists, so let's talk about tomorrow. I believe in improving access to health care, health insurance, right? Doing so fairly. I think it would help our community a lot. Because there are times when we can afford health insurance. But there are also times when the high cost of insurance is so excessive, and with the salaries we have, not even the minimum policy for health insurance can be covered. I think that that is something the state should consider, right? How to help our community by providing affordable health insurance. That's what I think.

I: Very well. Celmira?

C: Well, by improving the health service and by having a health insurance plan that we could all qualify for. One with equal access and one that provides enough medical visits. That is, in the case of a woman, for example, annually at least two or three medical visits, which currently some of these plans don't do. And also, to have qualified personnel that are more humanitarian with the treatment and with the people who are looking for help. They need to be more humanitarian and more considerate with people, not just treat them like “Oh, this person is looking for help so they are less than me” or things like that. So, yeah, basically that.

I: Thank you, Celmira. Rosabel, what could the state of New Jersey change? What could they improve on?

R: Well, I think we have to learn from what we have just gone through. I think they should definitely invest more funds towards vulnerable communities and more funds for health as my peers said. They should provide accessible insurance because it really is better for someone to have affordable insurance and be able to pay for it than to have large bills because we cannot pay them. Resources definitely have to be put towards prevention. A portion of our community believes the virus is over. They believe this is over and they have let their guard down but now recently we are seeing a rise in cases across New Jersey. Definitely, the state has to put money towards prevention, so that people stay informed and so that information is accessible to all communities.

I: Thank you so much. We have 10 minutes left. Are there any questions or would you like to share something that has not yet been discussed today?

V: Well, I think that some issues that should not be left out, apart from what has already been discussed, is developing programs and taking into account that less fortunate families will take longer to recover. Yes, because there are families that are responsible for family members that are suffering consequences after having been infected. So I think that the state should take these cases seriously in order to get the state, the people, and our communities out faster because otherwise we will all take longer to recover since this is basically a chain. So, we have to support the less fortunate, right? And we should not forget that we could also be in those circumstances because this is serious. So, I think that it would be important for those in charge to take this into account a little bit.

I: Yes, thank you, Veronica. Would anyone else like to share something that we have not discussed or shared. Any topic or question?

C: I would like to mention something about the psychological impact that people or all of us who have been in confinement have experienced, even children who until now are still in the house without being able to leave. At one point the New Brunswick Police Department had reported an increase in calls for domestic violence. That topic has not been touched on until now, or it has been touched on but not in depth. Like I said to a mother when I was talking to her about this topic, one does not know how children are doing inside their homes right now. At least when they go to school the teachers see if they have any bruises on their bodies, at least they are trained to recognize an abused child. But now children are locked up all the time and there is no third person who is watching them to recognize those signs that they are being abused, if they are eating on time or if they are not eating at all. So, I would also like to know what is happening with

those people who are having these kinds of problems and what support can be given to them.

I: Thank you so much, and that is very true Celmira. Rosabel?

R: One of the topics like Celmira said is violence, and she also said mental health. I believe that all these issues should be emphasized for security reasons and so to not to fall into this. Even children although young can experience stress and often differently than us as adults. So, we do have to emphasize that. Now, also another thing that we have not touched on, is the help that is available. I would like it to be more accessible to the people in our community. We know about the pandemic, we know that you cannot go in person often to ask for help but sometimes even calls are not answered and that causes more stress for families. So, right now we need a lot of empathy and a lot of human warmth. Companies and the state should pay close attention to how they are treating our community. Because if you are going to knock on a door and it is closed physically, literally speaking, it is very frustrating, it is very stressful. There are families who are living very, very, delicate situations, who have nothing to eat. There are families who are in need of COVID testing-- "because my friend so-and-so told me that they came out positive and I want the test." They know that the county has availability once a week, but many people say they cannot wait until Thursday, that is when you realize the height of the problem that they are going through. Mentally that person may not be in a good state. At the beginning of the pandemic, we heard of people who committed suicide. They told them they were positive for COVID and so, people, that is, that the burden was so huge for families here in New Brunswick, in the United States, in Mexico, and in many places, and so, yes, there were people who committed suicide. We have not paid attention to the mental health of our people and the resources that are available are very limited. In other words, the state or the country, I don't know, they have to provide more resources for health. They have to make these resources easier to obtain as a minority group because groups that have purchasing power do not mind making an appointment in a place that is far away. For example, in a county that is only open on Thursdays like here in New Brunswick, that person who has a car can go to Piscataway on Mondays or Tuesdays when they open there. We have to focus on the people who cannot pay for a taxi to Piscataway or they cannot pay for a test here. They need those tests to be reassured, to be safe. The stress is very difficult to manage. We have to be very careful about how we follow up on people who are not managing it. A person who goes to the hospital and they are told, "Oh you have pneumonia, you have COVID," – well, now everything is lost for them. This is a real issue, then the wife and the children are very worried. They need to take a test and so do the kids, but there's too many of them and in some places the tests are \$140. How much will be spent for the whole family? Yeah. So, we continue to see how the balance is not in our favor, in the favor of our minority groups. Imagine if today

is Thursday and today they tell me that my husband has COVID, I would have to wait until the next Thursday to get tested. How am I going to be during those six days, emotionally and mentally? How is my whole family, my children, going to be if I do not have the money to take the test and to pay \$140? So those are little details, they are things that you say, "Oh, but they are doing the tests for free." Well yes, but only on Thursdays? At least make it two days a week. "Yes, but there are no funds." Then we have to ask for funds because these are things that are necessary. You don't know that woman, how she will be feeling after those 6 days, so pressured that she considers committing suicide which has already happened, right? So, we have to see all those points and try to improve them to be more empathetic human beings. If we lose empathy, we lose the desire to help and everything will fall apart again. In other words, okay, I can pay for my test and I don't care who can't pay for theirs.

I: Yes, we must think beyond ourselves. Well, Rosabel, Veronica, and Celmira, we are out of time but thank you very much for sharing your opinions. Thank you very much for sharing all that.