

HISPANIC IMPACT

HISPANIC OHIOANS ARE

EVERYDAY HEROES

*During the COVID-19 Pandemic
Going above and beyond to serve*



Santa Maria Community Services is a Cincinnati based non-profit organization providing resources in employment, finance, youth development, and much more. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, they are among some of the true heroes of the community. Determined to empower families through this tough time, meet Santa Maria's Wellness and Immigrant Services Director, Luz Elena.



**CAN YOU SHARE
SOMETHING
ABOUT
YOURSELF AND
WHERE YOU'RE
FROM?**

Shown here:
Luz Elena

I am from Mexico and have been in the U.S for almost 26 years. I moved to Ohio from Indiana about 14 years ago. I have four children, three boys, and one girl. Two of my children are in college, one is in high school, and the other is an 8th grader. I studied my Bachelor's in Economics in Mexico, from The University of the Americas. After that, I studied my Master's in Public Administration at Indiana State University. My husband and I decided to move to Ohio because he got a job in Cincinnati, and my brother lives here. I love Ohio, and Cincinnati is really similar to Indiana. Since we have family here, we said why not?

WHAT MOTIVATED YOU TO TAKE ON YOUR ROLE AS PROGRAM DIRECTOR?

I have been working with the Hispanic community for a long time. When we moved to Cincinnati I was pregnant with my youngest child and decided to stay home until he went to preschool. Then I started working for Santa Maria part-time. I saw that Santa Maria Community Services was hosting a position for Director of the International Welcome Center. It was very close to my house and a part-time position, so I was able to take care of my kids while they were in grade school. When I started, I was working with immigrant communities. We had families from 23 different countries, and I coordinated support groups and English classes. A few years later, there was an opportunity to be the Director of The Wellness Program at Santa Maria. I applied for that and got the position. Later, they decided to merge the Wellness Program with the International Welcome Center, and I have been doing that for six years.

"It's a bit of a funny story because my husband says, "Who in the world get's a job from Facebook?"

WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR FAVORITE MOMENT AS A LEADER IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

When I first started at Santa Maria, we were serving only 20-30% of the Latinos in the community, and now we have reached almost 40%. The number of resources that we offer has increased and I am proud of the amount of people that we are able to serve at Santa Maria. One third of our staff is bilingual so we can connect with many Latinos in the community. Sometimes it is really hard for me to say no and I have a great boss who gives me the opportunity to explore new ways to reach our community members.

"THIS
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HOW HAS COVID-19 PERSONALLY IMPACTED YOU OVER THE LAST FEW MONTHS?

The pandemic has impacted all of us in many ways. I have been lucky that I can work from home and still have my job and serve the community. Personally, it has helped me spend more time with my kids. Before COVID-19, my family calendar was quite full. Practices here, practices there, but this has given us the opportunity to slow down. We were also able to exercise more. We got our bikes out so we could go on rides, and sometimes we would even go for walks in the morning.





HOW HAS THE PANDEMIC IMPACTED YOUR COMMUNITY AND HOW HAS IT CHANGED THE WAY YOU WORK?

Everyone is working from home, and I think it's great that we learned to do this. We used to have three people in one office, now it has to be one person, and we rotate schedules. So we really had to embrace technology throughout this pandemic. Many of our families do not have internet. Since we offer client services in person, and everything is closed, the easiest way is

to do it online. It has brought some good and some bad, but we have given families the tools to navigate COVID-19 and empower them to do these things by themselves. Along with the internet, our families were also heavily impacted by the lack of food, diapers, cleaning supplies, and masks. Luckily, Santa Maria has implemented many outreach projects that help community members find resources.

WHAT PROJECTS HAVE YOU CREATED FOR THIS COMMUNITY SINCE THE WAKE OF THE PANDEMIC?

In April, we noticed a need for food in our community, so we started organizing monthly drive-ins. Once a month, families could come to the building to receive food and other home supplies. They call our phone number and tell us what they need, and we prepare it for them. There are tables and signs marked in the parking lot so that families can drive-up to the office and receive whatever they need. We have so many resources for women who need prenatal care, diapers, fresh produce, PPE, cleaning supplies, masks, and even alcohol for hand sanitizer.

Part of the wellness program has been coordinating food and PPE distributions to families' homes. We pick up around 150 boxes a week from the food bank. We coordinated major monthly food distributions in the Price Hill neighborhood. All together, we have distributed between 600- 1,200 boxes monthly. The meals from the food bank are great, but they are non-perishables like macaroni and soup.

Sometimes our families enjoy receiving their favorite foods, so along with that, we get donation boxes from community members with ethnic food.

Along with food distribution, Santa Maria received funds to help families that were affected by COVID-19. We have been able to assist them with rent and utilities while also giving them gift cards for groceries.

Lastly, we have been the contact organization for pop-up COVID-19 testing. We began providing testing, PPE, and food distribution in April, and most recently in August. There were nearly 700 people that showed up at the last event. We were able to partner with churches and the rec center to facilitate this. Bilingual volunteers also came so everyone could work in English and Spanish. The community and volunteers were so excited, and it was a really great turnout.

Also, on October 11, I am coordinating a Health Fair that will offer free COVID testing, flu shots, food boxes, PPE and mammograms.

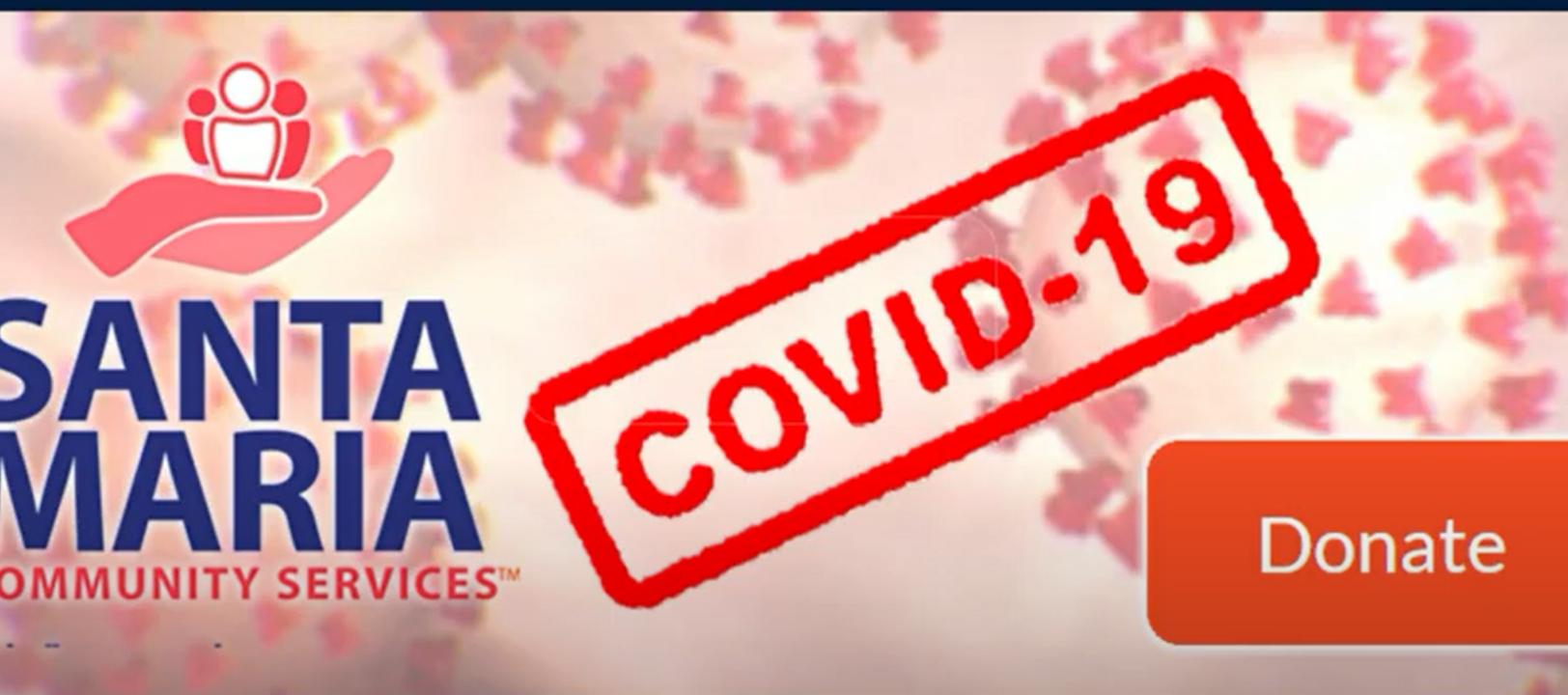
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CAN YOU DESCRIBE FOR US THE RESILIENCE YOU SAW IN THE COMMUNITY DURING THESE TIMES?

I see how families have gone through so much during this time; in everyday life and confronting everyday barriers. I'm happy that the number of cases has decreased, and I think that has a lot to do with the outreach projects the wellness program has done. Families have really learned to take care of themselves during these times. The community is beginning to go back to their regular events, like our women's group that we've held for the last 12 years. In this group, we offer therapy, and I'm excited that these women are using this resource to empower themselves through the pandemic. You asked me how the pandemic has changed me, but I am in a pretty comfortable situation. It's hard, and people are stressed, but I can't compare myself to the families who show resilience by continuing to build and grow.



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[Click on the photo to see Santa Maria's response to Covid-19](#)

WOULD YOU LIKE TO SHARE A MESSAGE OF HOPE FOR YOUR COMMUNITY?

I think we are all in this together. It may be at different levels, but it is affecting every one. This pandemic is not over, but we will get there. I hope that we can stay strong and continue to deal with certain

conditions COVID-19 has brought us and I'm excited to continue to create projects for the community. I hope everyone understands the importance of public health and how we need to take care of ourselves. Having the resources to work with the community has been very rewarding, and I am grateful that these families continue to work hard and rely on us for services.