

The Covid-19 Pivot

The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on La Casa de Don Pedro and the community it serves.



Like every organization across the globe, La Casa de Don Pedro, and its greater Newark community has been deeply impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. While plenty of challenges abounded, by and large, La Casa prevailed. It acquired new resources and partnerships to maintain its programming while keeping the community and staff safe, implemented new initiatives to address emerging needs, and managed through financial uncertainty.

This report highlights some of those challenges, examples of La Casa pivoted its programs and operations to address emerging needs, lists key funding partners, and shares its outlook for 2021 and beyond.

Phase I: Emergency 911



La Casa de Don Pedro closed its doors for staff and community on Friday, March 13, 2020. Its leadership team worked quickly to determine technology needs to transition all programs to operate virtually. Its communications team developed a plan to share immediate news on La Casa's closures and information about the coronavirus, starting with a

About La Casa de Don Pedro

Since its inception in 1972, La Casa de Don Pedro emerged during a period of social awakening in Newark, New Jersey as an activist, community-based, grassroots nonprofit organization committed to empowering the Puerto Rican and Latinx communities. Named in honor of Puerto Rican nationalist, Don Pedro Albizu Campos who advocated for the twin virtues of self-sufficiency and empowerment, La Casa was born out of a collective and unifying effort to reverse the social, cultural, political, and economic dislocations and marginalization of Newark's Latinx and Black children, families, and neighborhoods.

La Casa de Don Pedro's values are driven by a **mission to foster self-sufficiency, empowerment, and neighborhood revitalization** and a deep-rooted shared history and experience. Recognizing the community's adversity, we emphasize, celebrate, and nurture core values of advocacy, personal responsibility, and creativity in a culturally sensitive and caring environment.

Learn more at
www.lacasanwk.org.

permanent page on its website: www.lacasanwk.org/coronavirus, and the staff leadership quickly pivoted to fundraise for immediate infrastructural and community needs.

La Casa successfully acquired a Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loan totaling \$1,071,505 with Valley Bank, enabling La Casa to sustain virtually 100% of all staff.

The PPP loan was coupled with immediate fundraising to cover essential technology upgrades and expenses, such as providing laptops and cell phones for staff to work remotely, upgrading La Casa's server, and an annual subscription to the essential Zoom video conferencing system.

Phase II: Rollout of Virtual Programs & Emergency Assistance

La Casa's substantial fundraising efforts resulted in private foundations, corporations, small businesses, and individuals coming together to contribute \$2.088M by December 31, 2020 to address pandemic related needs. This does not include hundreds of thousands of dollars of in-kind food donations. Funds raised allowed La Casa to undertake new initiatives and address emerging pandemic related needs.



Figure 1 La Casa launched an online giving campaign to fundraise for emerging community needs. Collectively individuals donated more than \$28,000 from April 2020 – September 2020.

Addressing Food Insecurity

LA CASA DE DON PEDRO
EMPOWER AND REVITALIZE

**OUR IMPACT:
COVID-19 RELIEF YTD**

\$85K WORTH OF SUPERMARKET GIFT CARDS DISTRIBUTED

8 TONS OF PRODUCE DISTRIBUTED

6,160 HOT MEALS PROVIDED

Visit www.lacasanwk.org/givingtuesday to make a real impact in our communities this giving season.

#GIVINGTUESDAY
GIVE JOY | SPREAD LOVE | INSPIRE HOPE

La Casa expanded its weekly fresh food distribution that was already in place in partnership with Table to Table to reach even more families facing food insecurity. The fresh produce has now been coupled with 189 hot meals delivered two times a week to families in need through a partnership with Newark Working Kitchens/World Central Kitchen. Fresh produce and hot meal distributions has been supplemented with \$100 supermarket gifts cards that were purchased through La Casa's fundraising efforts along with support from Newark Public Schools to provide such cards to families enrolled in La Casa's Early Childhood Education programs.

Building a Virtual Community with the Family Success Center on Facebook Live

La Casa's Family Success Centers, a statewide family engagement program in partnership with the New Jersey Department of Children and Families transitioned its calendar of programs from its centers at 23 Broadway and 282 First Avenue to Facebook live. Daily programs not only educate English and Spanish speakers on a range of informative, serious, and entertaining topics, the format brings people together during an isolating and difficult time.

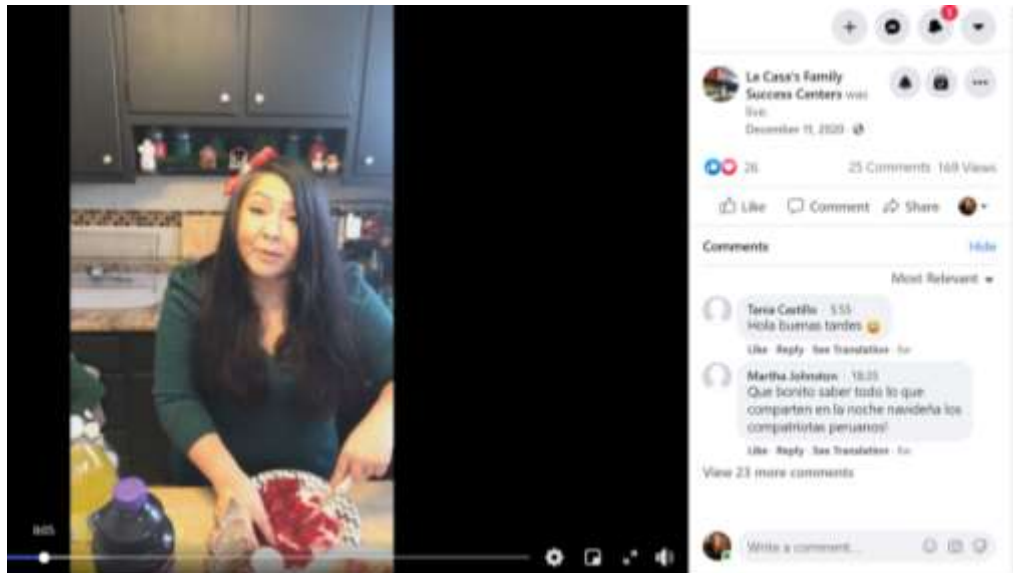


Figure 2 Examples of daily live programming from La Casa's Family Success Centers on Facebook Live.

Adult Education Programs in high demand due to virtual accessibility

La Casa's range of formal educational programs for adults create pathways for educational advancement and professional development. All La Casa's adult education programs transitioned to virtual programming during the pandemic. This includes English as a Second Language, High School Equivalency classes in English and



Spanish, Career Training programs, and Alternative High School for Our of School Youth. Immigration services have remained virtual with limited in-person meetings starting back up in December. High School Equivalency Testing was re-initiated in the summer because it requires in-person testing. Demand for adult education programs have been high due to increased accessibility given that they are offered virtually. However, access to computers and internet remains a challenge for the community and many students take

English as a Second Language classes and adult basic education using their cell phones.

Figure 3 Adult education instructor teacher his class to students virtually.



"I very much appreciate La Casa de Don Pedro for the opportunity that they gave me. I was able to achieve my dream of getting my high school diploma, and I was able to do so without any cost. La Casa offers you all the school materials at no cost and everyone who works there are extraordinary. My teacher, Jose Miguel taught me very well. I passed all of the high school equivalency exams the first time. Thank you! I hope that many more people have the opportunity to study like I did."

- Erica Romero, Hispanic Women's Resource Center Program Participant

Early Childhood Education Programs Sustained, Albeit Virtually

At the beginning of 2020, La Casa's Early Childhood Education programs, which offered daily in person educational programs to more than 20 expecting mothers, 100 infant toddlers, and more than 560 preschoolers was in the midst of its fourth year of Head Start and Early Head Start program expansion.



Figure 4 Four year olds at La Casa's 45 Elizabeth Avenue Head Start Center in Newark's South Ward enjoy an art lesson in March 2020.

Early Childhood programs immediately switched to 100% virtual instruction at the onset of the pandemic. Funding from Newark Public Schools allowed La Casa to provide a Chromebook to each child and family in the program. Chromebooks have not only permitted the students to participate in daily virtual sessions with their teachers, but have assisted in regular communication between educators, family workers, and parents/caregivers.



Figure 5 (L) 48 infants and toddlers enjoyed La Casa's Early Head Start Dewey Street temporary school before it closed its doors due to the pandemic.

Figure 6 (R) New construction on the Early Head Start permanent location, in partnership with Clinton Hill Community & Early Childhood Center on Demarest Street in Newark's South Ward, however, continues.



Figure 7 (L) Early Childhood staff distributed 400 Chromebooks to its students and families.

Figure 8 (R) Although in-person schooling is suspended, outreach activities such as Flu vaccine clinics have continued. This parent is screened before receiving their vaccine.



“I was looking for PreK for my daughter. I was pregnant then, too. I tried to put her in a school. I found one but I would have had to pay \$522/week. I was like “How will I get that money?” So one day I was calling my friends, saying that I’m tired of staying with this girl at home because she is brilliant and I want her to be somewhere so she can keep growing. She’s so smart and I don’t want to keep that talent in my room. One of my friends said “Oh, there’s one school on Elizabeth Avenue.”

Since then my daughter, who is now four years old, has been amazing. I like the teacher. Whenever she doesn’t seem want to go to school, she says “Mommy, I’m not tired I need to go to school. I want to see Miss Brown. I want to see Miss Evelyn. So whenever the school closes at 3pm, she says “Mommy, I like my class, I like my teacher!” I say, “Oh, that’s good!”

- Aminat Moshood, parent of Head Start student

Facility Preparation

With a new La Casa Facilities Manager hired at the start of 2020, thanks to funding acquired from several foundations, La Casa was well positioned to address the health and safety needs to prepare La Casa’s centers for in-person programming. Plexiglass barriers, hand sanitizer dispensers, and clearly marked social distancing signs, markings, and posters were installed and the City of Newark inspected the centers and certified them ready for in-person programming once again. With trained custodians to deal with indispensable sanitation needs, La Casa is equipped with cleaning supplies, PPE, and is working to ensure all centers have adequate filtration systems in place that meet or exceed CDC guidelines.

Small Business Assistance

La Casa received a grant to assist small businesses in its targeted Lower Broadway neighborhood. With a grant from the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs Neighborhood Revitalization Tax COVID Relief Program, La Casa disbursed \$164,542 to 12 small businesses facing financial distress due to the pandemic. Each grantee went through a rigorous application process that required documentation for their loss in income. The grant provided relief in costs such as rent, utilities, inventory loss, and allowed them to create protective barriers and other safety precautions to keep their stores open during the pandemic. Grantees were restaurants, delis, hair salons, discount supply store and a refrigeration company. The funding also allowed La Casa to purchase and disburse \$22,000 worth of

Protective Personal Equipment (face masks, hand sanitizer, cleaning supplies, and gloves) that staff distributed to over 900 local households.

"I am very grateful first to God and secondly for the work team of La Casa de Don Pedro, for all the help and always being willing to answer our concerns, especially to Rommie for her patience and cordial response. That has helped us a lot during this stressful time that we are living as a result of the lack of resources available to pay for our bills and keep moving forward."

- *Richard Almonte, A&G Deli, Small Business Grant Recipient*



"I'm eternally thankful to La Casa de Don Pedro and Dante for their efforts in making sure I meet the deadlines that this program demanded so I can be able to receive this benefit. Thanks to this monetary help I can keep my business open after being hit with a huge decrease in revenue during this pandemic in which we all are suffering. Thanks again."

- *Pedro Julio Montesinos, JC Barber Shop, Small Business Grant Recipient*



The Transition to Virtual Events

The pandemic hit just as La Casa was preparing to launch its annual spring fundraiser, [La Casa es su Casa](#) with the theme "In the Company of Young Children" Fortunately, almost all supporters who had previously committed to sponsoring the event stayed the course while the event transitioned into a video and e-magazine format.

The virtual event celebrated La Casa de Don Pedro's entry into infant and toddler care. Hosted by **Dr. Beverly Lynn**, CEO of Programs for Parents, [the short film](#) featured honorees **The Maher Charitable Foundation, Samantha Lott-Velez**, and **Robert L. Johnson, MD, FAAP**. La Casa's Board President, Arcelio Aponte, Executive Director, Raymond Ocasio, and



Director of Early Childhood Education, and Yun Shin shared their perspectives about La Casa's new impact in infant and toddler care through Early Head Start. Finally, the film shared voices of families benefitting from the program and La Casa's young children in action.



Figure 9 Celebrity Chef Jesse Jones prepares his signature burger at the Burgers and Brew virtual kick off.

As summer turned to fall, La Casa de Don Pedro transitioned its in person **Burgers and Brew** event to a week-long celebration to support local and black-owned restaurants, breweries, and wineries while raising funds for its COVID-19 relief efforts. The **[Burgers and Brew Week](#)** message was simple: buy local and buy black given the difficulties these establishments face due to the pandemic. The week promoted 21 local and black owned establishments located throughout New Jersey, shared exclusive cooking videos with celebrity Chef Jesse Jones and local personalities, behind-the-scenes footage from Black-owned Montclair Brewery and The Fox & Falcon and more.

The annual **Project Backpack** campaign to collect and share school supplies to Newark children also needed to transition from its traditional distribution during the annual Festival de la Familia community festival as it had to be cancelled. Instead, donors raised funds to provide learning materials for La Casa's preschool students while they learn virtually within their homes. A smaller number of backpacks and school supplies collected were distributed to La Casa's students who participate in after school enrichment programs.

Affordable Homeownership Development



The pandemic did not halt construction continued on two affordable housing units in Newark's Lower Broadway neighborhood. The homes are projected to be sold in 2021.

Figure 6 This two family home at 282 Broad Street, Newark nears construction. It will be sold to a moderate income family for about \$200,000.

Phase III: Hybrid Model

As the pandemic passed into a period of semi-stabilization period in Newark, in late summer, La Casa slowly and cautiously opened up some of its doors to offer essential programs that require in-person activity.

Key programs that opened for limited in-person programming in 2020 were in person school day childcare, family counseling, emergency housing assistance, and home energy assistance.

Child Care Program

An in person full day child care for school age children supports 25 children daily while they attend virtual school. With capacity for more than 50, La Casa is prepared to support additional working families who need a safe space, with strict health and safety standards for their children to go to school while they work. Casa is working hard to support working families while their children participate in virtual school.



Figure 10 In Person Child Care for School Age Children supports working Newark families by providing their children with a safe and internet connected space to go to virtual school.

Home Energy Assistance and Conservation



Figure 11 La Casa assists a home energy assistance client in its Home Energy Center outfitted with plastic shields.

During the 2019-2020 energy season, La Casa helped more than 14,000 low-income Essex County households with their utility bill, helping keep their homes warm. La Casa provided energy conservation measures to 146 low-income Essex County households, providing more than \$830,000 in weatherization benefits, and removed the lead and prevented the threat of lead poisoning in 30 Essex County households, implementing more than \$160,000 in lead reduction measures.

The pandemic brought plenty of challenges to this work. Being forced to close in-person home energy assistance and rely on supporting residents with their application online or via telephone has made the application process burdensome and inefficient for both clients and staff. While La Casa re-opened its home energy assistance center in the summer to better address client needs, it has had close at times to manage contamination and high risk periods in which the City of Newark closed its doors given its location as one of the highest concentrations of the Covid-19 outbreak. Nonetheless, La Casa continues to persevere and strive to provide critical assistance to as many qualified families as possible.



Figure 11 Weatherization Tech experts audit a home to determine its energy conservation needs.

Rental Relief

La Casa received \$1,468,000 from three private foundations to devise a Rental Relief Program for households negatively impacted financially by COVID. The program covers unpaid back rent for Newark households who lost income due to Covid-19 but are now back at work and financially sustainable to cover rent moving forward. All clients receive financial education counseling in addition to rental relief. Two new staff members were added to La Casa's housing counseling team with one-on-one Rental/Financial counseling provided by La Casa's existing HUD Certified Housing Counselors.

Phase IV 2021 and Beyond

The impact of Covid-19 has longstanding implications across the globe, but especially for black and brown communities like La Casa's due to longstanding systemic racism that has only exacerbated the inequitable impact of the pandemic. Moving forward it will be critical for La Casa to continue to sustain its virtual programming because the pandemic is far from over. While the eviction moratorium in New Jersey persists, we anticipate a new housing crisis, unemployment crisis, challenges in the rollout of the Covid-19 vaccine, and the need for critical

services such as health care, food assistance, mental health, and supporting students during this year plus of less than less than optimal educational services will be future priorities.

2020 closed out with an announcement of the retirement of La Casa de Don Pedro's Executive Director, Raymond Ocasio, with a tentative retirement date for September 2021. It also ended with the retirement of Chief Financial Officer, Raquel D. Merlino. La Casa will find itself approaching its 50th anniversary in 2022 with new leadership, and continued inspiration to move the needle forward in order to foster self-sufficiency, empowerment, and neighborhood revitalization in Greater Newark's communities.

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