

# Montgomery County, PA: Latinx/Latino Information Ecosystem Assessment

**Listening Post  
Collective**

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## About the Listening Post Collective

The Listening Post Collective (LPC) is a U.S.-based project of Internews, an international media support organization that works with local partners in more than 100 countries to strengthen the capacity of media professionals, human rights activists, and information entrepreneurs to deliver quality, local information and independent media.

LPC partners with people and organizations to develop local news and information solutions that help communities thrive.

To do this work, LPC develops civic media and power-building resources for places in the U.S. that have been historically excluded from news and information systems. This work requires trust and time, and we work to listen, build networks, understand information needs, and develop real solutions with community members.



## About This Report

The first step of any project LPC undertakes is to conduct an extensive research process known as an **Information Ecosystem Assessment (IEA)**. The term “information ecosystem” describes the flow of news and information between people, media, and organizations within a community.

We believe that IEAs, such as this one focusing on the Latinx/Latino<sup>1</sup> community in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, are a crucial part of determining how to bolster community-led news efforts, protect residents against misinformation, and ensure equity in media coverage. **Numerous recent studies** have explored the impact of local news coverage on the core qualities of a healthy democracy, such as people’s political knowledge, voting rates, and number of people who run for political office. While nuances exist among them, the studies are fairly unanimous in finding that erosions in local news are tied to drops in civic engagement, which **can be especially detrimental for BIPOC and immigrant communities.**

We are working in Montgomery County in partnership with **Health Spark Foundation**, which invests in non-profit organizations, networks, and coalitions promoting a more just and healthy community, and the **Independence Public Media Foundation**, which supports building and strengthening networks of people who are creating and sharing information, ideas, and stories for change and justice.

Our joint goals for this report are to showcase the supply and demand sides of the local information ecosystem, to highlight real perspectives and experiences from people in the community, and to offer our recommendations for how to activate and inspire a healthier information ecosystem for Montgomery County’s Latinx/Latino community in the future. This document will ideally open a conversation around community news needs and will ideally later lead to some community led ideas and projects to fill important information gaps.

<sup>1</sup> For this assessment we have decided to use the term “Latinx/Latino” when referring to Montgomery County residents whose families originally immigrated from Mexico, Central America, South America, or the Caribbean. Our choice is based on conversations with community members who indicated that they felt it was important to include both words to fully represent how the community refers to itself.



### LPC - Montgomery County Survey (En Español, Community Version)

The Listening Post Collective es una organización nacional que invierte recursos en las comunidades para desarrollar medios de comunicación cívicos + recursos para aunar fuerzas y aumentar nuestro poder.

¡Queremos saber de Usted!  
Cuéntenos sobre cómo usted tiene acceso a las noticias e información locales y cómo cree que la comunidad Latina es representada

## About the Authors

Jesse Hardman is the founder of the Listening Post Collective and focuses on the project's community information needs research around the U.S.

Melissa Ortiz is a Philadelphia-based researcher and community organizer who has been working with Latinx/Latino youth in Montgomery County since 2019.

Silvia Rivera is the Senior Business Strategist at the Listening Post Collective.

## Acknowledgements

A special thanks to the Health Spark Foundation and Independence Public Media Foundation for supporting this important assessment and work.

Additional thanks to the Listening Post Collective's Carolyn Powers and Em Hilberer for contributing to this work, and to all the amazing people in Montgomery County who shared their time, insights, and hopes as part of this research.



## Research Methods

Our assessment is built on a mixture of 18 in-depth community interviews and a 27-question Spanish-language survey that included questions about what kinds of information already exist in English that Latinx/Latino residents would like to see in Spanish, what platforms they are most likely to share information on, and which local topics they wished they had local and timely information about. Respondents received a \$10 gift card for participating in the survey, which took around 20 minutes to complete.

Our survey data was gathered mainly at in-person community events, including forums, festivals, and food banks, where we collaborated with local organizations like **Unides Para Servir Norristown, Centro de Cultura Arte Trabajo y Educacion (CCATE), and Accion Comunal Latino Americana de Montgomery County Inc. (ACLAMO)**. Our goal was to survey a wide swath of Montgomery County, while acknowledging that the community hub, Norristown, would likely account for a good portion of the data we collected.

We also launched a Facebook Ad campaign, observing that Facebook is widely used by local Latinx/Latino residents in Montgomery County. While we were able to see that our ads inviting people to take our survey were successful in terms of clicks,



*Residents fill out LPC surveys at a Mexican Independence Day festival in Norristown photo credit: Alma Flores*

they did not translate into data sharing. We also made signs with QR codes that we shared at community events and spaces, and while people engaged with this content, very few used this method to take our survey. We were told by community collaborators that trust was likely among the reasons these methods were unsuccessful. Residents are worried about being scammed by people they don't know online, and literacy was also a barrier: many residents struggle to read a long survey and understand all the content.

This research is a snapshot of community information flow, and we acknowledge that not all the important local voices in Montgomery County are captured here. This assessment is not an academic study. It is a pairing of quantitative and qualitative data and anecdotal experiences and opinions from our conversations with community leaders and media makers, who have the benefit of years of on-the-ground observation.



# Introduction

A [2022 article](#) in *Mother Jones* magazine gave a first-person account from one of the last staff members at the *Pottstown Mercury*, a newspaper which historically covered parts of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania. The author, *Mercury* reporter Evan Brandt, laments the important things that would inevitably fall by the wayside after the outlet was purchased by the hedge fund Alden Capital, notorious for buying and gutting local newspapers around the U.S. “Although stories about budgets, big expenses, local officials behaving badly are not always the most read stories, they’re what I call constitutional functions for the local press,” he writes.

The unraveling of civic information pillars like the newspaper is no doubt worrisome, but the reality is much of the legacy media in Montgomery County, and the U.S. in general, has rarely served everyone. There aren’t any bilingual or Spanish-language outlets in Montgomery County dedicated local civic news and information.

Local government agencies, area schools, and community resource providers are still catching up to the need to deliver important information in a Spanish or bilingual format too. Kelly Cofrancisco, the Director of Communications for Montgomery County, has been looking at how to create a better two-way conversation between local government and Latinx/Latino resi-



Local newspapers at the Montgomery County regional library photo credit: Jesse Hardman

dents. “We know that our population of Latinx and non-English speakers is growing, like our census numbers tell us that we just got over 56,000 new residents,” she reminded. “What people forget is the county should be serving all of our residents, but also our most vulnerable. And I just think that we’ve had a county that just sort of operated, not thinking about all the different communities,” said Cofrancisco.

Remarkably, Montgomery County’s Latinx/Latino community is far from a news desert, thanks to innovative homegrown information networks from a myriad of local organizations and individuals. Efforts like those made by Tomás Flores who runs the [Champions LowRiders](#) bike club, a community project that gives the growing population of Mexican and Central American immigrants in Montgomery County a space to connect, share their





*Tomas Flores poses with his lowrider bicycle as part of an event for his community organization Champion LowRiders photo credit: Tomas Flores*

voices, and build bicycles. Now he's looking to expand his mission. "Queremos hacer un fuente de información, queremos informar y empoderar a la gente," ("We want to create a flow of news. We want to inform and empower people,") he said.

The reality is, despite the negative outlook swirling around legacy media, it's a good time to be building civic information pathways in spaces like Montgomery County's Latinx/Latino community. There's growing demand and enthusiasm to see news and information that reflects and serves the community on a regular basis.



## Key Takeaways

- Information needs are persistent and growing. The Latinx/Latino community in Montgomery County is growing, diversifying, and spreading out from suburban city hubs like Norristown. As numbers grow, especially from Mexico, Central America, and South America, there is demand on schools, community centers, and key service providers to open accessible communication channels to provide and receive information.
- Multi-channel and offline content are needed. Most Latinx/Latino residents currently living in Montgomery County need information in Spanish, and many of them need it not just in digital formats but also via print, like flyers and posters, and via in-person forums. While the exponential growth of young, digitally native, bilingual Latinx/Latino residents may shift this need over time, many in the older generation, as well as newcomers, still need vital information in Spanish and offline.
- Local matters. Latinx/Latino residents are not satisfied relying on nearby Philadelphia-based media to meet their information needs. Community members want to develop their own bilingual channels to document what's happening, share important local news, and create wholistic narratives that can uplift residents and build civic power.
- Effective communication relies on trust. Language barriers, concerns around immigration status, and mixed experiences with local service providers affect the willingness of the Latinx/Latino community in Montgomery County to engage with various sources of information and information providers. And, while the community relies heavily on Facebook, they can also be victims of and are wary of misinformation and disinformation in that space.
- It's not just about translation. Some county and city agencies, including police departments, hospitals, and schools, have increased their Spanish-language services over the past decade, although many still rely on translation services via phone to fill in the gaps, or don't provide information in Spanish at all. Part of the ongoing need, however, is not just Spanish language services, but having trusted Latinx/Latino community voices included in these professional spaces. There are also few Latinx/Latino elected officials in Montgomery County, which means residents feel like they are not represented by people who understand their unique needs and experiences.
- Community-led organizations hold key connections. Local service organizations partially fill this void. ACLAMO, CCATE, and Unides Para Servir Norristown are experienced in creating trust and collaborating with the community to provide and co-create a diverse array of needed in-person services.

# Information Needs

## County Demographics

Montgomery County is located adjacent to and northwest of Philadelphia. It is geographically diverse, ranging from farms and open land in the extreme north of the county to densely populated suburban neighborhoods in the southern and central portions of the county.

Claritas<sup>2</sup> information paints a picture of a county that is largely white, middle-aged, and more affluent, and well educated than Pennsylvania as a whole.

Out of a population of 854,000 residents countywide, 76.6% are White alone, 9.9% are Black or African American alone, 0.2% are American Indian and Alaska Native, 8.3% are Asian alone. The median householder age is 55, and only 32.5% of households have children under the age of 18.

The area's current estimated Latinx/Latino population is 5.9%. Of this percentage, 39% are of Mexican origin, 30% of Central and South American origin, 28% of Puerto Rican origin, and 4% of Cuban origin.

Currently, it is estimated that 14.9% of the countywide population aged 25 and older in this area earned a master's degree, 4.1% earned a professional school degree, 2.5% earned a doctorate degree and 28.2% earned



Map of Montgomery County image credit: Claritas

a bachelor's degree. Only 1.4% of the Latinx/Latino population has a bachelor's degree or higher.

The countywide average household income is projected to increase over the next five years, from \$140,854 to \$152,709. The median household income, however, is \$100,561. We'd like to point out that if the average household income is greater than the median household income, there is significant income disproportionately affected by the high-income households.

96.1% of residents live at or above the federal poverty line, which ranges from an annual income of \$13,590 for a single person to \$27,750 for a family of four.

For Montgomery County, PA, 96.4% of the labor force is estimated to be employed in 2022. 3.6% of the civilian labor force is unemployed. The occupational classifications for this area are as follows: 14.6% hold blue collar occupations, 72.2% hold white collar occupations, and 13.2% are occupied as service and farm workers.

<sup>2</sup> We used data from Claritas, a data-driven marketing company, to inform our baseline demographic data and information throughout this report.



# Respondent Demographics

50,500 Latinx/Latino residents reside in Montgomery County. The largest concentration of residents, 13,600, live in Norristown. We engaged a sample size of 117 people in our survey. Our survey results present a stark contrast to the affluence and social mobility of the general countywide population.

The majority of our respondents were younger than the general population median household age, most

between 35-44 (36%). The median age for Latinx/Latinos in the county is 27. 83% of respondents reported having at least one child in their household under the age of 18, with 63% of them having between two to four children. 70% are Spanish-only speakers.

48% of respondents listed their gender as female, and 15% of respondents listed their gender as male (37% of respondents did not answer this question). Women in Montgomery County are 47% of the Latinx/Latino population. An important note is that most people we talked to or



## COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

MEXICO  
**76.6%**

CENTRAL OR SOUTH AMERICA  
**23.5%**

PUERTO RICO  
**4%**

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC  
**3%**



## AGES

30%  
**35-44**



## LANGUAGE

Spanish speaking only  
**70%**



## CHILDREN

Have under 18  
**83%**

Have between 2-4 children  
**63%**



## GENDER

FEMALE  
**48%**



## ARRIVAL TO MONTGOMERY COUNTY

55% of respondents arrived between 2000-2010,  
45% between 2016-2022



## INCOME

35% of respondents make \$15,000 or less annual income  
20% make between \$15,000 and \$30,000

were referred to who were doing the on-the-groundwork (either in paid positions or volunteering) of disseminating information to their communities were women

Of the 83 people that responded to our question of when they first arrived in Montgomery County, 55% arrived between 2000-2010, and 45% of respondents arrived between 2016-2022.

More than 90% of survey respondents shared a postal code pertaining to areas in and around Norristown. As we mentioned in our introduction, this in large part reflects the fact that Norristown is the population and resource hub for Latinx/Latinos in Montgomery County. We did make a variety of efforts to connect with another community hub, Pottstown, but were unable to establish any meaningful inroads with the two organizations there that focus on the Latinx/Latino community, ACLAMO and Centro Cultural Latinos Unidos (CCLU).

We did get anecdotal evidence that the Latinx/Latino population is spreading out around Montgomery County. Brandon Trompetta, the executive director of the non-profit Keystone Opportunity Center, told us that his center, based in Souderton, on the northern edge of Montgomery County, has traditionally served the local Vietnamese and African diasporas that settled there. Trompetta said in this past year, “95% of people who came to our ESL classes were Spanish speaking.” “It’s indicative of the need,” he said, “there’s a shift in population, and a shift in needs.”

Other places throughout Montgomery County that were mentioned by interviewees as experiencing a perhaps small, but growing Latinx population were Lansdale, Willows Grove, and Phoenixville. Interviewees also mentioned other surrounding suburban counties that are experiencing a growth in Latinx population, such as Bucks and Lehigh counties, reflecting a national trend of the dispersal of Latinxs outside of major cities in urban areas.

Most respondents were born in Mexico (64.2%), others hail from Central or South America (23.5%), Puerto Rico (4%), Dominican Republic (3%), and other communities in the U.S. (4%).



Community art project at CCATE photo credit: Jesse Hardman

One distinct shift within Montgomery County’s Latinx/Latino population over the past few decades is where residents originate from, shifting from Puerto Rico to predominantly Mexico.



Today, an increasing number of individuals and families are arriving from Central and South American countries as well. We heard anecdotal evidence that more Venezuelans have been arriving, and it is worth noting that **16,000 Venezuelan refugees** have recently been bused from the southern border to New York City and housed in shelters.

While we did not collect employment status or classification in our survey, perhaps the most striking difference between the Latinx/Latino community and the general population countywide was among poverty status. 35% of respondents in our survey said they made around \$15,000 or less annual income. Another 20% said they make between \$15,000 and \$30,000 a year, placing them at or below the national poverty line for US households.

According to 2019 **Pew Foundation statistics** around 170,000 unauthorized immigrants live in Pennsylvania, 21% of them are originally from Mexico, a number that's been declining. Pew also **notes that 83%** of unauthorized immigrants from Mexico have been in the US more than 10 years. This is significant in part because unauthorized immigrants face wage inequities and theft, and generally cannot access government services like Medicare, Medicaid, SNAP and other assistances programs.

There isn't a linear path to improving household income for many Latinxs/Latinos. However, information that

might help families build generational wealth include ensuring that Latinx/Latino immigrants understand how to open bank accounts with a Tax ID Number, or ITIN, and know they can apply for ITIN mortgages. Homeownership positions families to launch businesses, pay for college, or invest in other dreams.

A key to increasing mobility specifically for unauthorized Latinxs/Latinos in Montgomery County is to allow them to become licensed drivers, which could happen if Pennsylvania passes House Bill 279. The bill was introduced in January 2022 and would allow residents of Pennsylvania to obtain a driver's license with an ITIN legally. Driver's Licenses are essential for helping people of any status go to the store, get to work, school, or the doctor.

Finally, with only 1.4% of the Latinx pop having a bachelor's degree, there should be significant investments in children's educational opportunities, so they are in the pipeline for higher learning opportunities. With so many Latinx children in Montgomery County, their access to higher education will soon become the engine for social and economic mobility.

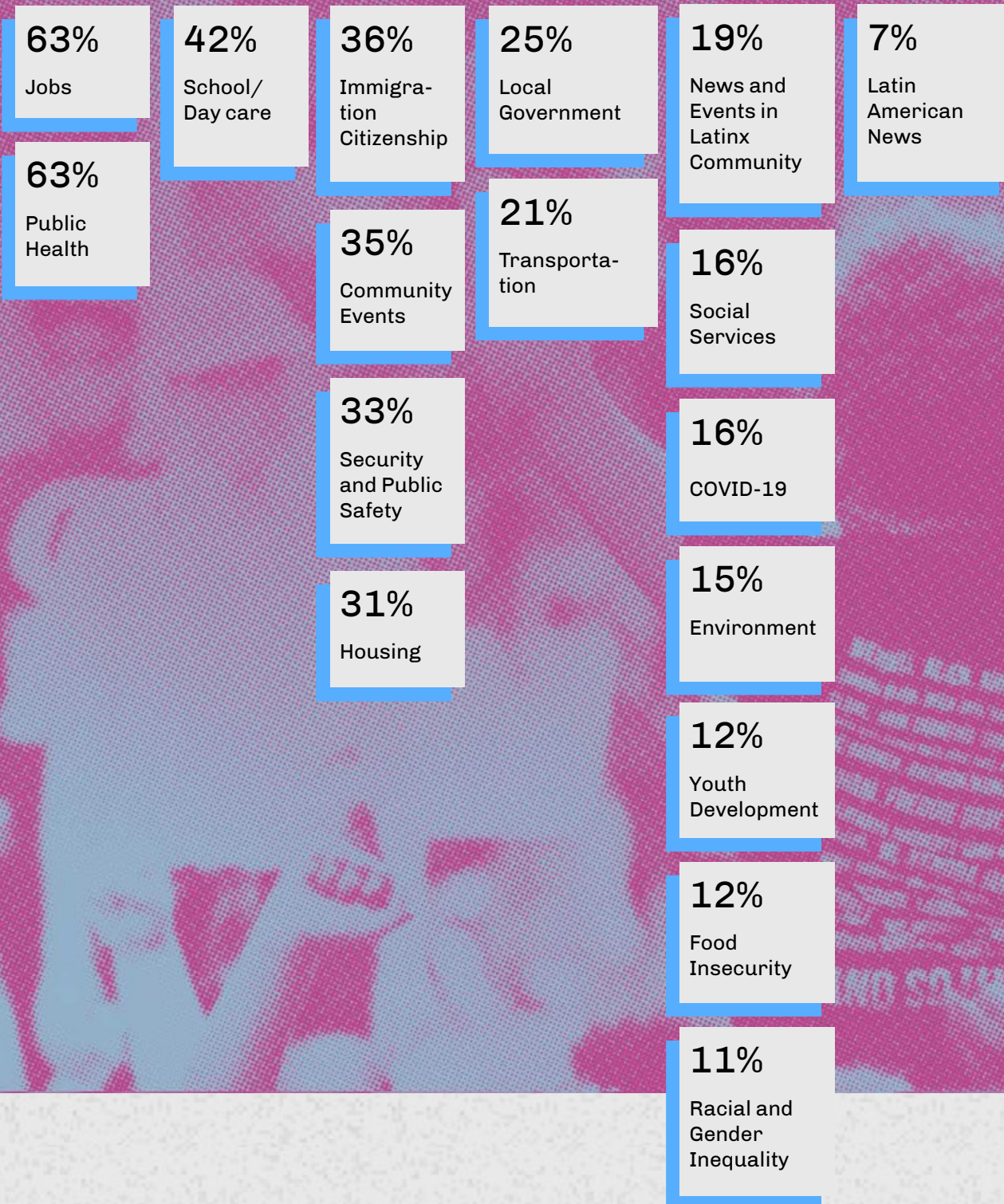
Undoubtedly, the Latinx/Latino community is highly vulnerable compared to people in the county at large, and it follows that community access to information and resources is imperative to the quality of life, health, and safety of this community.



# Information Needs

When we asked respondents to select up to three local issues they wanted more information about, several themes emerged. We clustered them into categories showing the prevalence of concerns:

Category One	Category Two	Category Three	Category Four	Category Five	Category Six
	40%+	30% +	20%+	10%+	1%+





The following are key insights that contextualize why these local issues are important to the Latinx/Latino community in Montgomery County.

**Category One:**

## Jobs and Public Health

Latinxs/Latinos are the fastest-growing ethnic population in Pennsylvania. With over a quarter-million Latinxs/Latinos calling Pennsylvania home, health equity for minority groups is a concern. One community member told us, “lots of Latinos don’t have a primary care doctor. But there’s all these public health issues going on, and there’s very little information about where to go, what to do.” While there may be Spanish-speaking clinicians and resources for the Latinx community around Montgomery County, there is still a demand and need to present public health information from a trusted source.

Though we didn’t explicitly ask about access to healthcare or immigration status, legal barriers on top of language barriers make accessing healthcare difficult and sometimes impenetrable for the Latinx/Latino community.

George Fernandez is the Founder and CEO of Latino Connection, a group that organized the 2022 Pennsylvania State of The Union on Latino Health around



Public health social media banner from CCATE

the theme How To build a Radically Inclusive Policy Agenda to Guarantee Health in Our Communities. Fernandez **writes**:

*Pennsylvania faces major gaps in health equity exasperated by the pandemic. For months, hospitals didn't do elective surgeries, preventive care was placed on the back burner, and mental health concerns went from a slow burn to a rapid boil with dire consequences that have spread further than we ever could have imagined.*

Some of the takeaways from the Latino Connection summit, as shared by **an attendee**, were:

- "...lack of health insurance, language barriers, lack of transportation, isolation, and invisibility, prevent Latinxs/Latinos from acquiring competent health care."
- "Mandar el macho pal carajo," "ask for help, go and see a doctor." "Poor health literacy and machismo are hazards to the health of Hispanic men."
- "Racism is a barrier to health equity, is a public health crisis."
- "Leadership is empathy."

With so many barriers to health care, it's important to highlight that in Montgomery County, 96.4% of the labor force is estimated to be employed for the current year. Given the high poverty rate among our respondents, we believe that many Latinxs/Latinos in Montgomery County are out of the formal job market (experiencing underemployment/unemployment) and that access to healthcare is out of reach.

Montgomery County also suffers a huge inequity in health insurance rates: Latinx/Latino residents are nearly seven times as likely as white residents to be **uninsured**. Access to public health information is clearly critical to this group of respondents. CCATE has partnered with the Chester County Community Volunteers in Medicine program, members have expressed a desire to have these sort of resources in Norristown, as they can't always travel to Chester County.



## Category Two:

# Schools and Daycare

When Nelly Olea was growing up in Montgomery County, nobody from her school district tried to reach out to her parents, who only spoke Spanish. Now she's a middle school teacher in Montgomery County's Upper Merion Township, and she says things aren't that different. Olea said her school shares important information via recorded phone calls that are often only in English. She's sometimes asked to help translate on virtual parent forums, but not always given the space to fully summarize key information in Spanish. She said the result is that Spanish-speaking parents are often left out of important conversations around extracurricular activities, tutoring, schedules, and even high school and college preparation.

Olea said that in Norristown, which has the county's largest concentration of Latinx/Latino parents, schools have developed better strategies to share important news in both English and Spanish. She said making personal calls to parents to share information in Spanish is key, and that emails, which many schools rely on, are rarely a successful strategy.

As reported above, 63% of our survey respondents said they had between two to four children. It follows that respondents consistently highlighted issues like daycare access. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, about one quarter of all child care centers in Montgomery County have closed their doors for good, **part of a statewide trend.**

### Category Three:

## Housing, Public Safety, and Local Government

**ACLAMO reports** that homelessness disproportionately affects the Latinx/Latino community due to factors like housing affordability, wage gaps, overcrowded homes, and substandard housing conditions. Many Montgomery County families are also rent burdened, paying more than 30% of their income towards rent.

A 2021 national housing study showed that in Montgomery County, the average rent for a two-bedroom house is around \$1,260 a month, which requires a base salary of at least \$24 an hour. Our respondents living below the poverty line would be unable to afford average rents in the area. Two of our interviewees who work for the county shared that Hurricane Ida left several families displaced even a year later, and the County did not have enough resources in Spanish, leaving many families lost in navigating the aid they needed.

Another major concern is that **lead paint exposure** for Montgomery County kids ranks the 6th highest in Pennsylvania, with Pottstown, Lansdale, Norristown, and Abington communities most affected. The threat is especially prevalent in houses built before 1978. According to the Pennsylvania Lead Surveillance Report in 2020, in Montgomery County, non-Hispanic Black children are almost four times more likely than



Residents line up for a food distribution at ACLAMO in Norristown photo credit: Melissa Ortiz

non-Hispanic White children to have an elevated lead blood level, and Latinx/Latino children are more than eight times more likely.

Montgomery County received a 1.8 million dollar federal grant to address the issue, and is partnering with a variety of community actors, including **ACLAMO**, to help residents get their properties checked out and potentially apply for funding to repair problematic properties.

CCATE has been **running community listening sessions** and working with environmental researchers to estab-



lish clearer information and guidance for residents. According to one source we spoke with, despite these efforts, there remains a lack of information about lead paint exposure for Latinx/Latino residents, its impact, and how to deal with it, as well as a real fear by some residents of getting evicted if they bring this serious issue up with their landlords in order to make their homes safer.

Public safety was also mentioned anecdotally and in survey data as an essential topic Latinx/Latino community members would like more information on. Rosy Calderon, Community Relations Liaison with the Norristown Police, said victimization is high in the community, and Latinx/Latino residents are easily targeted, afraid of the police in general, and often don't share crimes that happen to them even though local police are not likely to ask about immigration status. Elderly Latinx/Latino residents are particularly vulnerable to attacks, including carjackings.

Local resident Tomas Flores, who lives in the Montgomery County town of Collegeville, shared a story from 2006 when his father-in-law was on the family porch and was assaulted. "Me di cuenta que teníamos que hacer el reporte. La policía no habla español, yo no hablaba mucho inglés," ("I realized that we had to file a report, but the police didn't speak Spanish and I didn't speak English,") said Flores. He said his family was also worried about their immigration status being an issue.

Public safety also extends to climate events, said Unides Para Servir Norris-

town's Denisse Arguto. She recounted the unique impact of devastating flooding from 2021's Hurricane Ida on the local Latinx/Latino community. She said there wasn't a lot of emergency information available before, during, or after the storm, to help people prepare, be safe, and recover. "Hay personas que todavía están sufriendo las cosas en lo que puede la inundación," ("There are people still suffering from those floods,") Arguto said. "La gente no tiene claro qué es lo que tenían que hacer," ("People still aren't sure what they have to do to get back on their feet"), she said.

One of the more universal anecdotes we encountered from people we spoke to and saw in the data we gathered was the lack of translated content and translation services from government agencies, especially considering the growing population of Latinx/Latino residents in Montgomery County, many of them newcomers to the U.S. One survey respondent wrote, "Mucha gente de habla Hispana necesita tener mayor acceso a interpretes." ("A lot of Spanish speakers need more access to interpreters.")

Elizabeth Di'Arcangelo, who works in the Office of Community Connections at Montgomery County's Health Department, told us that if they get a referral from the Latinx/Latino population and there's a language barrier or a complex problem, they refer them to ACLAMO.

Other specific topics mentioned included more bilingual resources, translators at government offices, more ESL opportunities, and better access to bilingual legal assistance.

#### Category Four:

## Transportation

According to data from **Claritas**, 77.7% of Montgomery County residents travel to work by driving and 6.8% by carpool. One of our interviewees who works for **Community Connections** at the county said that transportation was a top issue around which residents called. Survey and interview respondents communicated several different issues around transportation in their community.

For example, some interviewees mentioned that they wish they had more information around street closures and construction. For example, a busy intersection on Main Street near a train station has been under construction since early 2020, and there is no clear timeline for completion of the project. This has caused traffic delays and disrupted businesses, and while there is information **online** about the construction project, none of it is translated into Spanish. Another example of unclear information around transportation is a lack of advanced notice on street closures and parking restrictions, especially in the wintertime, was mentioned by a few interview respondents.

The need for information around transportation may also include knowing about affordable transportation options; the **Southeastern Pennsylvania Community Health Needs Assessment (2022)** has several respondent anecdotes that suggest that this is the case.

It is important to note that Pennsylvania is one of many states that do not grant driver's licenses to unauthorized immigrants. Thus, economic and legal factors force many Latinxs/Latinos to rely on public transit or carpooling to go to work and carry out daily activities.



Category Five:

## COVID-19 and Food Insecurity

Accurate Spanish-language Information about safety measures and mass media campaigns about mask use and testing and vaccination sites are still important during this stage of the pandemic. ACLAMO and CCATE continue to run **flu and COVID vaccination** clinics with 100+ participants, meaning that relatively simple health services are still in high demand from the Latinx community, and they prefer to go to places they trust.

One of the lingering impacts of COVID-19 has been food security, according to interviews with several community organizations. Milena Oberti-Lanz, Executive Director of the Maternal and Child Health Consortium in nearby Chester County, with additional offices and programs in Montgomery County, said her organization had to expand its services during the pandemic to include food distribution because so many Latinx/Latino families needed that resource. Local non-profits like ACLAMO also stepped up the frequency of food drives (every Friday while demand was high), and CCATE began expanding its food accessibility services, including weekly food distributions for the first several months of the pandemic and creating a community garden from which residents could get fresh produce.

Category Six:

## Latin American News

There weren't any significant takeaways from this category. Our goal was to gauge people's interest in getting information from their countries of origin.



Community safety event banner hosted by Norristown Police and Unides Para Servir Norristown



# Access to Information in Spanish

Survey participants were asked, "What information that currently exists in English would you like in Spanish (select all that apply).," The categories shifted slightly.

Category One	Category Two	Category Three	Category Four	Category Five
70%+	50%+	40% +	30%+	20%+

71%

Jobs

51%

Security and Public Safety

49%

Immigration Citizenship

36%

COVID-19

29%

Youth Development

68%

Public Health

44%

Community Events

34%

Local News and Events in Latinx Community

29%

Food Access

49%

School/ Day care

35%

Business and Local Economy

15%

Environmental Issues

What was noteworthy was that almost every category was listed by at least 30% of the respondents, supporting the notion that there is both a great demand for bilingual and Spanish-specific information about key topics that enable Latinx/Latino families to participate civically, and there is very little supply of that information coming from local institutions in Montgomery County.

40%

Housing

34%

Social Services

24%

Latin American News

40%

Local Government

33%

Transportation

30%

Racial and Gender I nequality



## Information Landscape

This section contains an overview of people and organizations who contribute to the local information ecosystem.



Sign at CCATE office in Norristown advertising a COVID-19 vaccine clinic photo credit: Jesse Hardman

Reflected in our analysis are the diverse channels and methodologies required to reach Latinx/Latino residents, some offline, some online, all of them important to anyone serious about informing a representational sample of the community. For example, **WhatsApp** is the most popular instant messaging app among Latinx/Latino residents in the United States. Proof of this came during the COVID-19 pandemic when it became one of the main mechanisms to keep communication

alive during the lockdown. Yet we heard just as often from community members about the need for more printed information. People routinely asked for things like “más volantes” (more flyers) and “boletines impresos en papel” (printed bulletins).

In terms of access to getting important local information via digital devices, 99% of respondents say they regularly use their cell phones for technological purposes. 14% of respondents also said they use laptops, 13% said they use a desktop, and 12% said they use a tablet.

According to FCC data, Montgomery County has 98.5% broadband access, and an internet adoption rate of high-speed internet that's around 87%. Our data showed that respondents connect to the Internet in a variety of ways at-home Wi-Fi (78%), data plan (50%) work Wi-Fi (20%) and 9% said they use business' Wi-Fi to connect to the internet. We also had many community members tell us not to assume everyone in the Latinx/Latino community has internet access. A common refrain was reflected by this comment one survey respondent shared, “necesitamos propaganda escrita algunas personas no tienen acceso a internet” (we need printed information that's accessible, some people don't have internet access).

The reality is it takes a collaborative strategy to keep any community informed these days, and Latinx/Latino residents are no exception.

# Our Data

As part of our community survey, we asked people three main information landscape questions:

*When something that matters to you or your community happens, where do you hear about it first?*

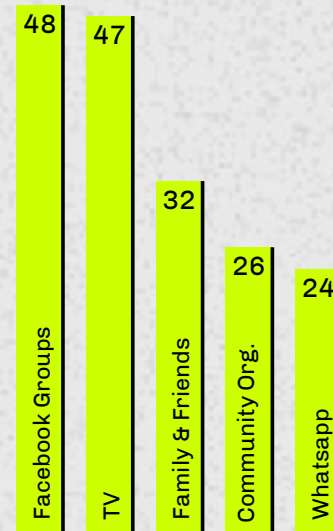
We asked respondents to pick three spaces they rely on **“when something happens that matters to you or your community.”** The top selections included **Facebook Groups (48%), TV (47%), family and friends (32%), community organizations (26%), and WhatsApp (24%).**

*What is the easiest way to deliver news and information about your community to you?*

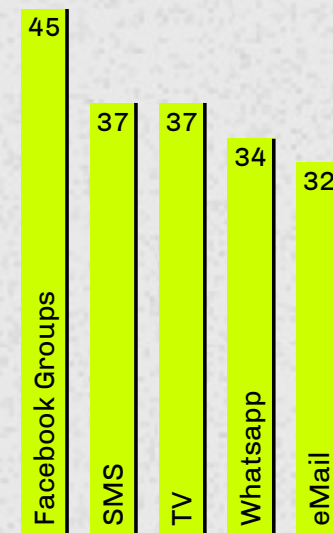
Survey respondents were provided with a list and asked **Which media do you get your news from?** to choose the **easiest way to deliver news and information.** These were their top five choices: **Facebook (45%), Text/SMS (37%), TV (37%), WhatsApp (34%), and e-mail (32%).**

*Which media do you get your news from?*

Lastly, we shared a list of existing media outlets potentially serving Montgomery County and asked them to choose all the ones that they relied on. The top five selections were: Telemundo (67%), Al Día (23%), Impacto (19%), La Rumba 100.5 FM (7%), and Univision (6% of respondents wrote this channel in).



spaces respondents rely on when something happens that matters to them or their community.



The easiest way to deliver news and information.



## Facebook

It was not surprising to see Facebook listed high here; according to 2021 [Pew Foundation research](#) 72% of people who identify as Hispanic use the platform, along with 74% of people who identify as Black and 67% of those who identify as White. When we dug into the specifics of the pages available to Latinx/Latinos in Montgomery County, we saw a more complicated picture. In our review of Montgomery County Facebook groups, we found at least fourteen bilingual or Spanish-language Facebook pages and groups (a mixture of public and private) specific to Montgomery County (there are no doubt more). Here's a [link](#) to a spreadsheet with the ones we identified, including some Instagram pages as well.

There are two main categories for these groups and pages: community service (namely local non-profits, special interest groups, and government agencies serving the community), and swap meets (mostly groups dedicated to buying and selling goods and services).

The three main Latinx/Latino-serving non-profits in Montgomery County, [Unides Para Servir Norristown](#), [CCATE](#), and [ACLAMO](#), all have dedicated Facebook pages that focus on sharing information about things like [health fairs](#), [community programming](#), and [women's empowerment](#) groups. The Facebook pages for these organizations have around 1,000–3,000 followers each. The impact of their information sharing on Facebook was clear from the many anecdotes community members shared with us. Interviewees and survey respondents shared that when they first moved to Montgomery County, they received information and services such as English classes and legal services from ACLAMO. Another interviewee shared that she first found out about CCATE through a Facebook post that promoted evening ESL reading classes that allowed her to participate after work. She attended her first class seven years ago and has been part of the CCATE community ever since.

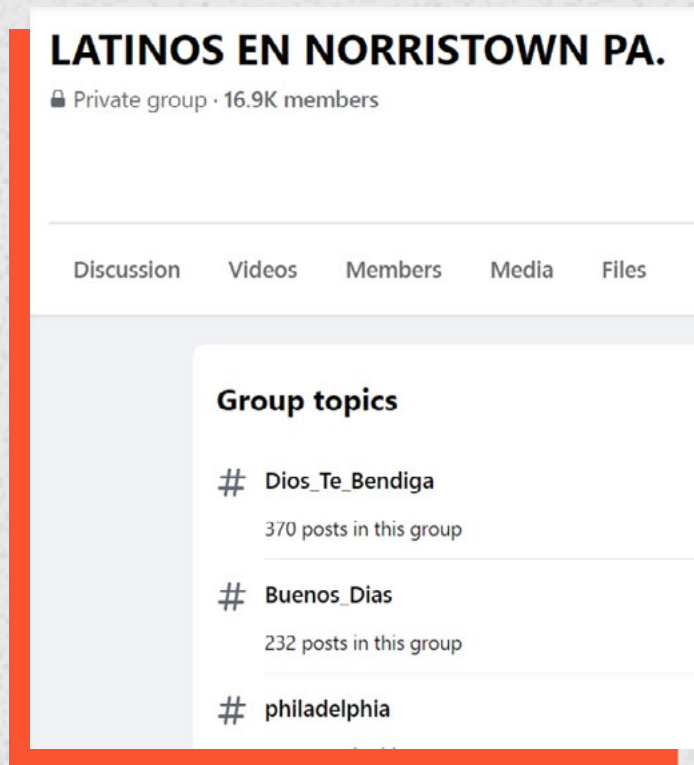


One of the more active special interest Facebook efforts we found was a group run by **Champions LowRiders**, a local bike aficionado group that caters to Latinx/Latino residents and hosts community events around Montgomery County. Champions founder Tomas Ramirez said he has used his growing group as a way to connect and support immigrants from Mexico, Central America, and South America in a fun space.

Most local government agencies that have information useful to Latinx/Latino residents have Facebook pages, but very few include information in Spanish. One Facebook page that does is

the Norristown Police Department, which translates some of its **civic alerts** into Spanish and posts them on their Facebook page. What we do know, based on our survey questions around what topics matter most to people, is that information around safety and security, public health, and education are extremely important to the local Latinx/Latino community, yet the agencies that oversee these issues often do not prioritize sharing information in Spanish.

The larger Latinx/Latino Facebook audiences in Montgomery County are drawn by the other category, swap meet groups, which accounted for the five highest memberships of all the pages and groups we identified. The Facebook Group **Latinos en Norristown and Ciudades Cercanas** for example, has more than 13,000 members, and has posts that focus on things like dubious **land deals** back in countries of origin, and recruiting people to get **dental work**. The group we were told is most used locally is **Latinos en Norristown, PA**, which is a closed group with around 17,000 members. It's described as mostly people buying and selling things like furniture and food, and also people posting and looking for jobs. There is certainly the potential for more valuable information to be shared in swap meet style Facebook groups. While conducting an **assessment**



LATINOS EN NORRISTOWN, PA. is one of the most popular Facebook groups for the local Latinx/Latino community in Montgomery County



of Latinx/Latino communities impacted by 2017 wildfires in Northern California, we learned that Spanish-language swap meet groups were integral in getting emergency information to people and connecting them to needed resources.

When we asked people how they began finding the information they needed to get acclimated when they first arrived in Montgomery County, they primarily brought up local Spanish-language Facebook groups and pages. One important anecdote a respondent shared was that while they valued the information that they were able to get from their school district, the local Facebook pages were off-putting and made them not want to interact with the community. While they did not specify examples, this is consistent with other “community trust” issues that surfaced in our research, and that we will go into more depth with later in this section.

## Television

TV was the second highest rated information source in our survey. When we asked respondents to list specific local media that they get news from, 68% listed the local **Telemundo** affiliate, part of a network that does some local programming but focuses mostly on national and international news. Obed

Arango, the founder of CCATE, hosted a local-issues TV show called *Bandera* for Philadelphia’s Telemundo affiliate around a decade ago. “The idea was to produce news for the community,” he said. “A show that was useful to the community and gave them solutions,” said Arango. The show didn’t last beyond a short series and Arango said he hasn’t seen that sort of local Spanish-language programming since. The Philadelphia based **Univision affiliate**, WUPV, was listed by some survey takers too, although it also provides little if any Montgomery County news, focusing on Philadelphia, and Pennsylvania.



Telemundo's Philadelphia based affiliate is the most popular Spanish-language news outlet for Latinx/Latino residents in Montgomery County according to LPC survey data photo credit: Jesse Hardman

When TV engages the community, it has the power to bring together groups to address pressing issues. That was the case when local Telemundo anchor Iris Delgado moderated a community COVID-19 conversation in Spanish that wasn’t even televised. Her presence helped bring out local health care and community leaders, and many local residents for a forum about COVID-19 vaccines. “This is where the healthy discussion starts, where we discuss how to improve Latino access to the COVID-19 vaccine,” Delgado said in her opening remarks.



## Family and Friends/ Word of Mouth

Whether information is transmitted digitally, via broadcast, or offline is often less important than who the messenger is, which explains why friends and family were also mentioned often as a primary source of important community information. In interviews and our survey many people referred to “boca a boca,” (word of mouth), or “vecinos” (neighbors), as relied-upon information sources in Montgomery County.



Row housing in a predominantly Latinx/Latino neighborhood of Norristown photo credit: Jesse Hardman

Nicole Mejia has worked as a career coach for high school students in Montgomery County and partnered in the past with the local non-profit ACLAMO. Mejia says residents tend to find out about her services via word of mouth, from parents recommending her work who “serve as ambassadors.” She says referrals even come in from other counties because Spanish-language resources for parents are so sparse. Mejia says word of mouth also makes sense because of disparities in education levels for parents, even when services are offered in their native language. “Some people can speak Spanish, but they may not necessarily know how to write or read it given their education level,” Mejia said. “You have to make communications simple, colloquial, and to the point,” she said.

Norristown School Board member Chris Jaramillo is one of the only Latinx/Latino elected officials in Montgomery County. He said when he strategizes how to reach Latinx/Latino residents, he’s focused on things like door knocking. “I think it goes well beyond social media, goes well beyond emails, it goes well beyond broadcasting,” said Jaramillo. “Because there’s still so many individuals who are not being reached,” he said.

Whether it is a trust issue or more related to access, many people shared anecdotes in our survey and in interviews that government agencies in particular need to visit and address the Latinx/Latino community in person much more often. People shared things like, “Que vengan más personas del estado a dar información en persona (‘More people from the state should come and share information in person)’ and ‘organizar foros informativos’ (‘organize information forums’).



## Community Organizations

The relationship building, engagement, and information sharing that happens offline is critical to the community. Interviewees and survey respondents said they receive community news and information through flyers distributed by community centers and churches. St. Patrick's Catholic church in Norristown regularly offers community information via digital and print flyers, and as a part of their Spanish-language religious services.

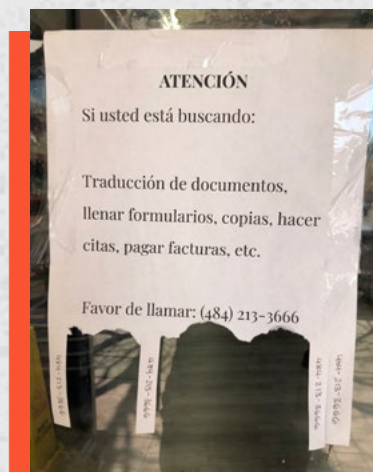
All three of the main Latinx/Latino community centers have either their foyer or a front table dedicated to flyers advertising services, English classes, cultural events, and other information specific for the Latinx/Latino community. Store windows along Norristown's main Latinx/Latino business corridor, Marshall Street, are also full of Spanish-language signs and flyers. A few survey respondents and an interviewee shared that they would like to see more informative flyers translated into Spanish.

Additionally, many survey participants made a point to share that we should not assume that everyone has access to the Internet and thus flyers and print material are extremely important to this community, along with events. One comment that highlighted this in our survey, said: "necesitamos propaganda escrita algunas personas no tienen acceso al internet" ("we need printed information that's accessible, some people don't have internet access").

One of the reasons that door knocking might still be necessary is that many of the Spanish-language traditional media outlets (TV/radio/print) struggle to engage with and conduct outreach to the local Latinx/Latino community in any meaningful way, despite the number of resources they may have. While Spanish-language traditional media outlets do serve Philadelphia and these mediums do reach the surrounding areas, such as Montgomery County, they still fail to provide more local and relevant news to the Latinx/Latino community outside of Philadelphia proper. It is important to note that the suburbs surrounding Philadelphia, like many inner-ring suburbs throughout the country, are seeing a large increase in their Latinx population, yet many services and resources have yet to catch up.



Unides Para Servir Norristown hosts a variety of community information workshops, including this conversation with the LPC around local information needs photo credit: Denisse Arguto



Translation services flyer hangs in a storefront window in Montgomery County photo credit: Jesse Hardman



# County and Municipal Agencies

When it comes to creating information access for Latinx/Latino residents in Spanish, we found most local government agencies provide translation via a phone service that people can access when they need something specific. One exception was the Norristown Police Department's Community Relations Liaison Rossy Calderon, who is one of the only bilingual local law enforcement staff members. She regularly stops by Unides Para Servir Norristown to meet with community members and check in on security issues. She mentioned a recent rise in carjackings of older Latinx/Latino community members as being an issue she's trying to get and share better information about. Calderon said she feels like language is a huge barrier to public safety in Norristown and thinks almost all local public services aren't sufficiently provided in Spanish.



Norristown Police flyer for a community coffee and chat

Montgomery County Director of Communications Kelly Cofrancisco said her office is exploring how to improve their Spanish language offerings. "We're trying to reframe it at the county level and say we need to hire more people with language skills," said Cofrancisco. "We need to think about institutionalizing translation and language access and also making sure people understand what resources are available," she said. She echoed a few different local agencies in saying that historically local government has relied on community organizations like ACLAMO to get the word out about important issues, although there's a growing awareness that's not enough of a strategy.

Holly Parker from the [TriCounty Community Network](#) told us about a Pottstown hospital that's working to hire Spanish-speaking staff rather than relying on phone services for translation. She said COVID-19 exacerbated the need for better communication strategies to address physical and mental health issues in Montgomery County's Latinx/Latino community.

Unides Para Servir Norristown's Denisse Agurto says one of the reasons there isn't more urgency to make civic information more accessible in Spanish has been the fact that the local Latinx/Latino community hasn't had much political power. "Nosotros no tenemos realmente representantes," ("We don't have representation,") said Agurto. There needs to be recognition from politicians that "me representas, que yo sé que eso es mi comunidad" ("you're representing me too, and I know this is also my community,") she said.



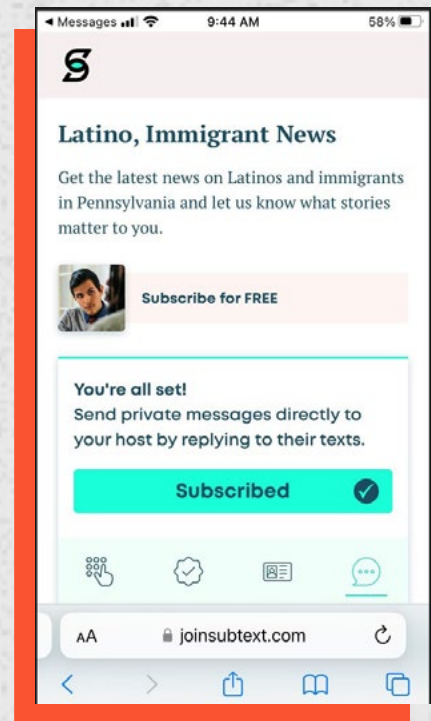
# WhatsApp/ Messenger/SMS

Local Latinx/Latino-focused organizations and special interest groups have been developing outreach strategies focused on newer technologies, including WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and SMS. These initiatives are focused on accessibility, namely smartphones, the device most residents have, and the fact that the fastest-growing group within the local Latinx/Latino population is age 20 or younger and already communicating in these channels.

CCATE has more than 40 separate Facebook Messenger groups that align with different programming they offer the community, everything from yoga circles to writer's groups. CCATE founder Obed Arango said Messenger helps him digitally decentralize his mission and give the community ownership over these activities. CCATE also uses WhatsApp and SMS to connect with youth participants in its programming. They create digital flyers to invite students to study groups and community discussions.

Nicole Mejia, an ACLAMO career coach who works with local Latinx/Latino high school students, told us she communicates with parents via text or WhatsApp, and mostly text messages with youth. Unides Para Servir Norristown runs a variety of WhatsApp groups to let community members know about events and opportunities, and text message with teens around programming specific to them. Champions LowRiders use a variety of platforms to share what they're doing with the outside world, but internally they keep in touch with members via a private WhatsApp chat.

In other parts of Pennsylvania with growing Latinx/Latino populations there are innovative information projects developing around texting and WhatsApp. The Gettysburg Connection, an English-language digital news site in Adams County, partnered with Latinx/Latino community organizations to launch an SMS/WhatsApp news service called **Pasa La Voz**. Subscribers receive news, resources, and information on health, housing, education, emergency preparedness, and immigration each week. Community members can also share their questions, concerns, and stories on the issues that concern them. WITF public media, based in Pennsylvania's capitol, Harrisburg, also recently launched a texting service aimed at covering issues about the Latinx/Latino population, but less directed at the community itself.



Advertisement for an SMS service offered by local public media focused on Pennsylvania's Latinx/Latino community



## Print/Digital News

Another local media site that surfaced as a go-to news source was the bilingual print, digital and events-focused Philadelphia outlet *Al Día*, which was referenced by 24% of respondents. The third choice was the Spanish-language digital and print outlet *Impacto*, also based in Philadelphia.

Norristown-based community organization CCATE recently launched a quarterly bilingual digital magazine called **Revarte** with the stated goal to “recover the authorship of our stories ... [in] a medium that links diverse communities and voices of the immigrant and Latinx/Latino community of southeastern Pennsylvania.” The initial edition includes multi-platform content produced through CCATE programming including video, short stories, and even research about the growing presence of Latinx/Latino children in **suburban school districts**, and the lack of preparation to serve them.



Yesenia Zavala speaking from the living room of her house in Norristown (Emma Restrepo — For MediaNews Group)

Like many young people, Zavala-Jimenez also recognizes quality in tech when she sees it: “In Upper Merion, we had MacBooks; we had iPads in middle school. In Norristown, I had a Chromebook. I didn’t even know Chromebook existed.”

Bilingual reporter Emma Restrepo has been one of the only journalists in the area covering important topics not just about but also for the local Latinx/Latino community. In 2022 Restrepo participated in the “**disParities Media Series**” funded by the Pennsylvania non-profit Children First. She focused her reporting on issues related to Black and Latinx/Latino youth in Montgomery County. Restrepo also launched a Spanish-language regional multi-platform outlet called **DosPuntos** and plans to recruit media makers in Montgomery County.

Excerpt from a series done by local reporter Emma Restrepo about education disparities for minority communities in Montgomery County



## Radio/Livestreaming

While radio did not rank high for news and information in our community survey, anecdotally people told us that this result does not reflect its true importance. Denisse Agurto from Unides Para Servir Norristown told us, “todavía hay muchas personas que todavía sobreviven por ahí (“there’s still a lot of people who survive on listening”).

Around 10% of respondents to our survey listed radio as a go-to news source. Radio La Rumba 100.5 FM (WLAN) (7%) was the most mentioned radio station, even though it is a Spanish tropical music format. WLAN is a commercial AM radio station based in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, which has a population that’s 39% Latinx/Latino. The station is owned by iHeart-Media and most of the programming is syndicated. Their website delivers celebrity gossip, and their community calendar is empty, so there’s little to no actual community information shared.

The Philadelphia region’s public radio station WHYY-FM 90.9 was listed by 3% of our survey respondents. WHYY has offered **limited Spanish-language programming** in the past, but it is often tied to grant funding, and only lasts for the duration of a given grant.

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**UN MEDICO MUERTO NO Salva vidas**

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Web banner for a chat on livestream radio outlet Philatinos about safety and security for social service



The only full-time community Spanish language station serving Pennsylvania is WLCH 91.3 FM in Lancaster, which dates back to the 1980s and is tied to the local [Spanish American Civic Association](#) (SACA). WLCH is an important vehicle for bridging communities across ethnic, social, economic, cultural, and language barriers. Much of its news programming focuses on workforce development, human services, behavioral health, affordable housing, and community development. Unfortunately, the terrestrial signal does not reach Montgomery County, but its format is something to research when considering the creation of a dedicated information outlet there.

One signal, or stream rather, that does reach Montgomery County is the Philadelphia-based digital radio station Philatinos launched a decade ago by Edgar Ramirez. "There was only one radio station back then, and a newspaper in Spanish," Ramirez said. He saw a growing number of Latinx/Latino residents getting smartphones and had an idea: "It occurred to us that it would be easier to start a livestreaming radio station, especially since it was easier to get a smartphone than a computer."

Ramirez launched Philatinos with a focus on public health information and music and trying to serve the growing Mexican immigrant population in the area. More than 160,000 people follow the Philatinos [Facebook page](#), where the outlet shares additional information about their programming and community news. Several Montgomery County Latinx/Latino residents mentioned Philatinos as both something they listened to and something they aspired to develop somewhere like Norristown. A few community members said they'd even been in touch with Edgar Ramirez to see if he'd help them get started.

## E-Mail

We were surprised that e-mail was listed as an easy way to deliver news and information by 32% of respondents, leaving open the possibility that this could be an important way to connect.

There is one [bilingual newsletter](#) we are aware of dedicated to Montgomery County's Latinx/Latino community. CCATE launched their subscription-based newsletter in 2021 to share their work with residents, supporters, and community partners. They have almost 400 subscribers to date.



# Misinformation

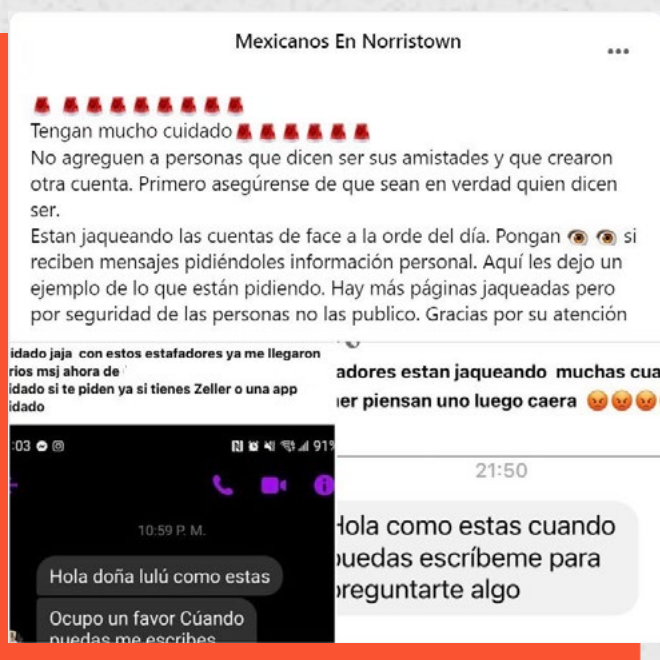
One of the most memorable anecdotes shared with in our survey respondent reflected on the impact of misinformation on the Latinx/Latino community. “En esta época de ‘spams,’ telemarketing y hacking, muchas veces no contestamos llamadas por el temor de tener virus or hacking en nuestros teléfonos celulares y se pierde la oportunidad de uno enterarse de algo importante” (“In this age of ‘spam’ and hacking, a lot of times we don’t respond on our phones for fear of getting a virus or hacked, and we wind up missing opportunities that might be important”).

The spam, misinformation, and disinformation that thrives in these spaces is alarming. There are several recent research studies that contextualize this concern, for example, a [Nielsen report](#) last year found that Latinxs/Latinos in the U.S., more than other groups, are susceptible both to exposure to misinformation and to sharing it. Another study by [Equis Research](#) found that Facebook, YouTube and other platforms aren’t doing enough to combat Spanish-language misinformation. **Facebook has paid little or no attention to stopping disinformation in Spanish.**

This is why it is especially critical to have trusted messengers at the helm of information sharing. By that we don’t mean simply any information source that’s in Spanish. Even mainstream Spanish language media, like Telemundo and Univision don’t necessarily have trust within the Latinx/Latino community in Montgomery County. One respondent shared anecdotally, “Prefiero ver las noticias en Inglés, es español están distorsionadas,” (“I prefer my news in English, because the Spanish language news isn’t reliable”).

While we did not document any examples of misinformation from these affiliates or get any specific examples of “distortion” from respondents, re-

searchers from the University of Houston recently (Feb 2022) released a [Latino Misinformation study](#) that found that respondents who got their political information on Spanish-language outlets were more likely to believe in conspiracy theories, with that likelihood increasing almost two-thirds of a point on a seven-point “conspiracy belief” scale as the respondent went from, for example, consuming Spanish-language media “not that often” to “somewhat often.”



A post in a local Facebook group meant to warn and educate Latinx/Latino residents about online misinformation





## Community information sharer profiles

Community reporter Emma Restrepo interviews a source photo credit: Eugenio Salas

### **Emma Restrepo: Regional reporter and podcaster**

A recent article in the *Pottstown Mercury* looked at the alarming amount of lead paint exposure in Montgomery County, specifically for children. One estimate said 63% of all houses were affected. What's noteworthy about this article, beyond the numbers, is that it goes on to zoom in on the growing Latinx/Latino population in the area. "They say they do worry about their children's health but are afraid that if they contact county health authorities to get them tested, they risk having their children taken."

The author, Emma Restrepo, notes in the story that "Latinos often don't feel comfortable talking with outsiders about problems they face in their communities." Restrepo would know; she's likely the only bilingual journalist covering Montgomery County's Latinx/Latino community and making sure they are represented and heard in mainstream media. While it's important that those voices reach decision makers, namely English-speaking audiences, Restrepo's concerned key information about things like lead paint exposure aren't getting out in Spanish too. "I didn't find information in supermarkets or in offices or in or in cafes, or in restaurants about lead poisoning. And that seems to me outrageous, with all the consequences," Restrepo said when we spoke to her about her coverage.





Denisse Agurto(seated far left) and her staff at Unides Para Servir Norristown  
photo credit: Jesse Hardman

**Denisse Agurto:**  
**Founder, Vice President, Unides Para Servir Norristown**

From her perch on Marshall Street in Norristown, Denisse Agurto sees firsthand how a dearth of basic information impacts her Latinx/Latino community. She points to signs in English that indicate emergency routes when it snows. If you're a Spanish speaker "you're not going to be reading those signs or get that information," Agurto said. "Every winter lots of Latinx/Latino families get their cars towed," she said. It's just one of many examples of how the growing Latinx/Latino community in Montgomery County isn't being considered. "There aren't any Latinx/Latino people in a position of power here," said Agurto. "There's nobody that can be that rock in the shoe of the local government, [making sure] we don't get left out."

Agurto's organization Unides Para Servir Norristown launched in 2021 is trying to be that rock by empowering local Latinx/Latino families to be informed and speak up. It's created a physical and digital space to consolidate some of the information and services that the community needs. It hosts informational events on topics like how to get a driver's license, the process for starting a business, and even **leadership workshops** for local women. Unides staff also find ways to grow their outreach by hosting cultural events on Marshall Street like a Mexican Independence Day festival and a 4th of July party that draw thousands of local Latinx/Latino residents.

**Diana Lugo:**

**Community organizer, artist, and mother of two**

When Diana Lugo moved to Montgomery County in 2004, she felt she needed to learn English to navigate her new home, unlike her community in Houston where she could get by entirely in Spanish. She initially started to take English classes at ACLAMO, but after a few months, her work schedule prevented her from attending. While she was able to get help from ACLAMO to fill out legal forms, such as applying for Medicaid, she found that when it was time to go process these forms at a county office, there were no bilingual staff. She soon learned that there was an interpreter available once a week, so she had to move her schedule around to make an appointment with them. She experienced similar challenges in trying to get involved with her children's schools—she was only able to attend school events and parent-teacher conferences if there was an interpreter available and if she was able to take off work during that time.

Diana didn't want other Latinx/Latino new arrivals to Montgomery County to feel the same isolation she did, so she started getting involved as a community organizer, and became part of the Artivistas, a women's art collective at the Centro de Cultura, Arte, Trabajo, y Educacion (CCATE). Lugo's bigger goal is to make sure other Latinx/Latina women in the area have the information they need to thrive. She now utilizes Facebook messenger to disseminate information to her fellow Artivistas members and CCATE's families, sending voice notes and messages on a weekly basis. She sends information and announcements that include Latinx cultural events within the five-county region around Philadelphia, COVID-19 vaccine clinics, opportunities to showcase the Artivistas's work, volunteering opportunities, meetings, and more. Her goal is to create a safe space where people feel free to ask for help on general topics without having to navigate the complex local government systems. She wants to use the lessons learned from her challenges and confidence gained in navigating her new life in Montgomery County to help others who are currently in the same position she once was.





Papeles picados in the colors of the Mexican flag photo credit: Jesse Hardman

## Recommendations

This section is meant to reflect solutions for the local news and information gaps that we learned of while listening to the Latinx/Latino community during our assessment. It includes both anecdotes people shared during in-depth interviews, and responses to our survey question: “¿Hay alguna otra idea que desee compartir con nosotros sobre la necesidad de poder tener acceso a las noticias e información sobre su comunidad?” (“Are there other ideas you want to share with us about improving information access in your community?”). These collective recommendations fit into three main categories: potential collaborations, startups, and existing strategies that need to be reconsidered or eliminated. Several would require new funding; others could emerge from existing collaborations or entities.

These recommendations address immediate needs, considering the vast majority of community members are parents in their 30s and 40s and the younger Latinx population is expected to grow. Thus, we also aim to consider ideas that might grow in impact as younger generations, become adults and have different linguistic, technological, and content preferences and needs.

Lastly, these recommendations are meant to be, above all, collaborative in nature. While one idea might be hosted by a local agency or non-profit, the goal is that peer organizations and community members in general are included and incentivized to participate. The community benefits most when all these important and trusted entities work together and support each other, as they all share a similar mission and serve the same communities.



- 1. Establish a “community editor” to aggregate and distribute important civic information.** The editor would gather information from existing community organization and government agency websites and social media feeds and share them regularly in the most popular swap meet-style Facebook groups. This idea is meant to meet people in the places they already spend time digitally, with the information they need. This position could be housed at one of the three Latinx/Latino community organizations, be a part of a local government agency’s community outreach efforts or be based at a local non-profit or foundation serving Montgomery County.
- 2. Turn smartphones into tools for two-way communication.** Similar “community editor” content could be fed into a Spanish-language WhatsApp group and/or SMS service to share information aggregated from government agencies, schools, non-profits, and local businesses, as well as respond to community questions in a timely manner.<sup>3</sup> This idea could be run as a collaboration with a local media outlet, similarly to the Pasa La Voz project in Gettysburg, be a shared resource run by staff at CCATE, ACLAMO, and Unides Para Servir Norristown, or a new stand-alone startup.
- 3. Hold regular in-person forums.** It was clear in our data and our community conversations that people want and need in-person information opportunities about important local topics and civic resources. Live, monthly community information forums hosted by already-trusted community leaders, local Latinx/Latino serving non-profits, could be grant-funded to cover the cost of advertising, translation, staffing, food, space, and other needed services. Based on our assessment, topics of interest would include employment, public health, schools, immigration, safety and security, and housing.

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3 Three LPC partners have pioneered using SMS and WhatsApp as civic information tools in Latinx/Latino communities, and could provide helpful models or consultancies.

**Documented** is a New York City based immigrant serving outlet that created a “news you can use” **Spanish-language WhatsApp group** for immigrants.

**El Tímpano** reaches hundreds of Spanish speaking immigrants in Oakland via an SMS service that focuses on topics of importance shared by the community.

**Conecta Arizona** started as a pandemic-focused public health information service on WhatsApp serving audiences from Phoenix all the way to the Mexico border. It has grown into a daily “Cafecito” chat group where community members can discuss important local issues and get timely information and feedback in Spanish.



- 4. Empower community radio.** While radio did not rate high in terms of existing information sources by Latinx/Latino residents, it was mentioned by a variety of community leaders and survey respondents as something they'd like to bring to Montgomery County.

Tomas Ramirez of the Champions LowRiders community bicycle group said a couple of his members want to launch a community radio station in Montgomery County. "Queremos hacer una fuente de informacion," ("We want to create a new information source,") he told us. "Queremos informar, empoderar a la gente," ("We want to inform and empower people,") he said. Ramirez's words echo several survey respondents who said they'd like to see "una emisora de la comunidad," (a radio station run by the community), or "una estación de radio local en español," (a local radio station in Spanish).

Ramirez and Denisse Agurto of Unides Para Servir Norristown have spoken with Philatinos, the Philadelphia-based livestream radio station, about creating a show or possibly an entire livestreaming station dedicated to just Montgomery County. Creating a livestream, which only requires buying a web domain (hundreds of dollars) instead of trying to afford a terrestrial signal (potentially hundreds of thousands) is affordable and accessible. Most people have a cell phone and internet access, which would enable them to listen to the station. A livestream could also create a new, go-to information source provided by trusted voices, helping to alleviate some of the misinformation concerns in spaces like Facebook. Based on their existing interest, this resource could be based at Unides Para Servir Norristown, but the people being trained to create programming could also draw from ACLAMO, CCATE and residents at large, making it a true community resource.

- 5. Embrace TV and explore localization.** Acknowledging the influence TV continues to have, especially with Latinx/Latino residents 35 and older, it would be smart to develop local programming around Montgomery County-specific issues. This could include partnering with Philadelphia's Telemundo and/or Univision affiliates to produce a public affairs program geared towards parents with school aged children. Another way to reach people would be establishing Spanish-language PSAs around important Montgomery County Latinx/Latino community events and topics to be broadcast by Telemundo and Univision.
- 6. Streamline translation in government services.** The patchwork system of phone services, referrals to other organizations, and occasional translated statements from government agencies is not working. One of the more universal anecdotes we encountered from people we spoke

to and in the data we gathered was the lack of translated content and translation services from government agencies. One survey respondent wrote, “much a gente de habla Hispana necesita tener mayor acceso a interpretes,” (“a lot of Spanish speakers need more access to interpreters”).

We recommend a workshop or new collaboration between communication leads from government agencies and the main Latinx/Latino serving community organizations, to develop a streamlined strategy for translation services. They could create a system-wide guide for what should get translated, the staffing and effort required to do so, how to incorporate it in agency budgets in an ongoing way, and how best to share new policies around translation with the community. Grants could be provided to agencies to implement the strategies that come out of this initial workshop to establish a new standard of operation.

- 7. Compile and share information in print.** Despite access to smartphones and the internet, people in Montgomery County’s Latinx/Latino population clearly still want civic information in Spanish printed and out in the community. We received lots of feedback similar to these comments: “poner boletines informativos en español” (“put informational bulletins in Spanish”) and “diario en español (periodico)” (“create a newspaper in Spanish”).

One community member proposed creating a monthly printed civic information bulletin directed at parents that reflects their questions and concerns, and key topics like schools, jobs, safety, legal, or public health) as well as profiles of Latinx/Latino community businesses and community members.

The local organization CCATE already has a number of community courses that work with youth and parents to learn more about writing, photography, and documentary filmmaking and podcasting. They recently launched a digital magazine, RevArte to highlight what people are producing. Grant funding could be used to recruit expanded participation in this as well as media programming from Unides Para Servir Norristown, ACLAMO, and the community at large, with the expressed goal of producing a monthly community print “news you can use” bulletin. This information could also be shared digitally (e-mail or SMS/WhatsApp) via the systems mapped out in recommendations 1 and 2.



## Conclusions

As stated at the top of this assessment, it's important to acknowledge the now decades-long trend in Montgomery County of not adequately serving a steadily growing Latinx/Latino population with key civic information in Spanish. It's also important to consider the amazing opportunity at hand to create a new collaborative and holistic strategy that will both meet immediate community information needs as well as develop strategies that are flexible and reflective of the growing Latinx/Latino youth population in the area.

We are grateful to all the community leaders who shared their time and insights with us over the course of our research, as well as the many residents who took the time to share their experiences and ideas. This document is meant to reflect what we heard in the process of listening for six months, and the goals and solutions Montgomery County's Latinx/Latino community has for creating better access to the information that will help it thrive and establish the civic power that it deserves.

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