



**United  
Way**



**United Way  
of Southern Cameron County**

## **A TALE OF TWO DISTRICTS**

Supporting Educators During COVID-19





# Table of Contents

---

The Community Responds 2

A Comprehensive Support Plan  
For District Employees 5

Sustainability 7

Lessons Learned 8



“

“The presentation was much needed, and I am glad that our district leaders understand we are struggling. As teachers, most of us “get it done no matter what,” but that often means sacrificing something from ourselves. . . our mental, emotional or physical health. “

- *Session Participant*

”

## THE COMMUNITY RESPONDS

In the fall of 2020, a unique opportunity arose to respond to the mental health needs of the community. The United Way of Southern Cameron County, the Los Fresnos Consolidated Independent School District, the Point Isabel Independent School District and The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley Department of Counseling joined forces to provide a novel framework for addressing the unprecedented mental health and wellness challenges being experienced by the school districts and by extension, our communities.

As we learned from meeting with teachers and staff, teachers were expected to hit the ground running and care for their students. However, they were also dealing with personal stressors. Teachers and staff frequently reported feeling guilty if they took time for themselves, but were able to acknowledge that not doing so put them at high risk for burn-out.





“I have never experienced such amazing support in a work environment, and I am so grateful to finally be working somewhere where all employees are cared for. Also, amazing mental health professionals! You all have great high energy and are making a difference. Keep up the great work.”

- *Session Participant*



Public school districts were hit especially hard by the COVID-19 pandemic as lock-downs went into effect and remote learning was mandated. In addition to the widespread inexperience with distance learning and deficiencies in connectivity and hardware, the community was simultaneously dealing with loss and grief; loss of income and accompanying food and electric power insecurity; lack of childcare; and virus exposure for the many community members considered to be essential workers.



Dr. Gonzalo Salazar, Superintendent of Schools, Los Fresnos Independent School District



“Thank you for all of the support that was provided to our staff, our students and our families. Through everyone’s help, everyone’s cooperation, our staff members have not only endured, but as a result of this pandemic and all the support provided to them throughout this year, they are stronger than ever.”

- Theresa Ann Capistran, Superintendent of Schools, Point Isabel Independent School District



## A COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORT PLAN FOR DISTRICT EMPLOYEES

The framework was developed to approximate the comprehensive developmental guidance plan used by the school districts which goes from the broadest contact to individual services.



The **top tier** of the framework consisted of live Zoom webinars on topics such as managing chronic stress, coping with anxiety, and creating a wellness plan. Local counseling professionals were recruited to provide the webinars, which were recorded and offered on-demand for all school district employees.

“Absolutely loved the resources and the presenter for sharing her personal experiences. I am glad I attended this webinar. It was well worth my time and now I need to put into practice the many techniques available to me for coping with my anxiety. “ - *Session Participant*

The **second tier** was intended to provide more personal opportunities for individuals who watched the webinar and recognized that they needed additional help. Small group support was offered by the university interns in the UTRGV master’s counseling program.







“

(My counselor) is very receptive and always up for assisting me with what’s going on. I brought up a new issue today and she was all on board with helping me with it and finding resources/ activities to work on.

- *Session Participant*

”

The **final tier** was individual counseling, also provided by the counseling students. The individual counseling services were open to families as well. Interested individuals accessed an electronic self-referral system embedded on the school district’s website, and were subsequently contacted by a student counselor.

“Loved the session as always. Great exercises and (my counselor) is always so nice and understanding. She also gave me some new resources to explore and some activities that got me to think and express myself through writing.” - *Session Participant*





## SUSTAINABILITY

The grant funds provided compensation for the webinars, the group counseling protocols, and the website infrastructure to house the resources for the community.

The website will continue to be housed within the school district websites to ensure that the resources continue to be available for as long as they are needed.

The Department will continue to maintain the website, as it provides an additional site for counselors in training to get practice in the final semesters of their master's degree.



In last spring of 2021, as school district employees were vaccinated and started returning to campus, an additional element of the project was presented.

Campus self-care kits were presented to each campus, consisting of items promoting wellness to be used on-site. Self-care books for educators, essential oils, ... The school counselor for each campus took the responsibility of finding an appropriate area for the kit and ensuring that all staff had access to it.



## LESSONS LEARNED



While some of the webinars were mandatory by the school district, others were not. We were surprised that the participation wasn't as high for the voluntary webinars, since there was great interest for more in the mandatory webinars and there was a robust response to the needs assessment.

What we learned anecdotally was that 1) employees were exhausted and didn't want to extend their day on Zoom. We heard frequently about Zoom fatigue and the desire to get out from behind their computer screens. In hindsight, it might have been more effective to ask district leaders to allow for some time during the work day to participate in webinars.

There was almost no response for the support groups. The topics were identified

in the Needs Assessment, so we felt that the topics were appropriate. Again, we asked the school counselors to ask their campus staff about this. Confidentiality was the response most given. People felt that they could use the support, but in two districts that are relatively small, didn't feel that they would be psychologically safe.

In addition, there were questions about whether participants' names would be shared with district administrators. Both of these concerns represent the persistent stigma of mental health services.

The school counselors at one of the school districts are actively addressing this topic, and we hope to continue making counseling as acceptable as physical health and wellness.

“Thank you for the support and for reminding us that we cannot do it all and that it's ok to say no and ask for help. We must take care of ourselves before we can take care of others. Can't wait for the following session.” - *Session Participant*

# THANK YOU TO OUR COLLABORATORS



**RGV FOCUS**  
a COLLABORATION with EDUCATE TEXAS

**BILL & MELINDA**  
**GATES** *foundation*

**The University of Texas**  
**Rio Grande Valley**  
.....  
*Department of Counseling*

## CONTACT US

Traci Wickett, President and CEO  
United Way Southern Cameron County  
[traci.wickett@unitedwayrgv.org](mailto:traci.wickett@unitedwayrgv.org)

Katherine Diaz, Deputy Director  
RGV FOCUS  
[kdiaz@cftexas.org](mailto:kdiaz@cftexas.org)

Selma d. Yznaga, UWSCC Wellness Project Coordinator  
Associate Professor/Program Coordinator  
Department of Counseling  
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley  
[selma.yznaga@utrgv.edu](mailto:selma.yznaga@utrgv.edu)



634 East Levee Street  
Brownsville, TX 78520  
(956) 548-5880

**UnitedWayRGV.org**