



Imperial Valley

# Uncharted Territory: Home Health Care in a Pandemic

Stacey Garcia ('20) has been a registered nurse for nine years. She spent the first two on the surgical floor of a hospital before landing a job with Dallas-based Accent-Care, Inc., the Imperial Valley's largest home health care provider.

The patients she helps are among the most underserved in California. Often low income and primarily Latinx, their most frequent diagnoses include hypertension, renal failure, diabetes, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), and asthma.

These are the illnesses Garcia regularly encountered visiting patients in their homes, first as a case manager, then as a clinical supervisor before her promotion to executive director in 2018. The new job came with a new set of responsibilities.

"I was no longer responsible for six people, I was responsible for 70 employees," Garcia said in a recent phone interview. "It was a whole different focus," yet she welcomed the opportunity.

## Justified Precaution

Staffing and budgets became part of Garcia's learning curve. She expected that, but then COVID-19 arrived with its own challenges as the Imperial Valley, early on, was among the areas of California hardest hit by the novel coronavirus.

As her company enacted new protocols to ensure staff and patient safety, Garcia's role was to make sure they were followed. From ordering personal protective equipment to implementing training procedures for its proper use, she had to adapt quickly to fight the spreading illness.

"It's very challenging because sometimes the community and even the clinicians work out of fear," Garcia said. "They are scared because this is uncharted territory and it takes work to reassure them that we are going to keep them safe."

Although a relatively low percentage of



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the patients her company treats have tested positive for COVID-19, according to Garcia, precaution is justified. Home care nurses and clinicians often enter locations unaware of whether their patients have family members who may be infected or how strictly the household observes proper precautions against illness. Conversely, wary family members have, on occasion, requested a nurse or clinician to conduct an "in-home" visit outdoors in a region where summer temperatures regularly hit triple digits. Appointments once considered routine are now anything but ordinary.

## Helping Her Community

In May, Garcia graduated from SDSU Imperial Valley with a Master of Science degree with an emphasis in nursing leadership and health care systems. Her College

of Health and Human Services studies coincided with her professional promotion, so she was able to relate her course work to her job.

Stacey Garcia ('20) is executive director of the Imperial Valley's largest home health care provider.

"I got to learn as I was learning in my new role," Garcia said. "As we discussed budgets, networking, or how to research evidence-based articles, I was able to apply that (at work) and it helped me a lot.

Through SDSU, she also made friends and connections with other Imperial Valley health care professionals whom she feels comfortable contacting for advice or assistance. Her professors, she said, were exceptionally knowledgeable regarding the specific needs of Imperial Valley residents and the economic and social factors that influence their well-being.

"I can't stress that enough," Garcia said. "They knew our community and the population we were dealing with, which helped us tremendously because we were all there to help the Imperial Valley."

Helping the Imperial Valley is important to Garcia because it's where she grew up. "My grandparents, my mother, my father, my brothers—this is where they live," she said. "To be very honest, it wasn't until I started my master's program that I really realized how much I wanted to help my community."

Beset as that community is by COVID-19, Garcia now feels there is much she can contribute to its recovery. "I have grown a lot. I've learned a lot more about myself. I have failed many times, but I learned now what I can do – what I need to do – and I can accomplish anything," she said.

"I hope this ends quickly, although that may not be what's going to happen. But in the Imperial Valley we are doing OK. We are getting through it."