

Op-Ed: How Puerto Ricans fought COVID: Together ^[1]

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Puerto Ricans have approached vaccination as a strategy to protect one another. (Ricardo Arduengo / AFP/Getty Images)

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Two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, and many have yet to learn that the way out of the global emergency is not through individualism and nationalism, but through solidarity.

More than 3 billion people around the world remain unvaccinated ^[4], in part because of vaccine hoarding by wealthy nations like the U.S. Beyond the coronavirus' biology, the main reason COVID-19 continues to rage is such failures of solidarity – in government, public policy, messaging, and civic society.

But it doesn't have to be like this. I have seen firsthand the power of leading with solidarity to blunt the impact of COVID-19 in vulnerable communities in Puerto Rico through my work with Aquí Nos Cuidamos ^[5] (Here We Take Care of Each Other), a project of the nonprofit Ciencia Puerto Rico ^[6], promoting COVID-19 prevention, vaccination and mental health ^[7].

These communities have endured decades of disasters, colonialism, and institutional failures. Grassroots community leaders have had to build support networks ^[8] to meet the needs and priorities of their people. Collective care in communities in Puerto Rico offers important lessons for all of us, not only to get out of this emergency, but to prepare for and manage the ones to come.

Focus on shared values to encourage solidarity. Values transcend specific situations and guide our decisions and actions. During a public health emergency like this pandemic, it's of course important to follow scientific evidence to inform the response. However, people also make decisions based on emotions and ideologies, so finding common ground in shared values offers a way forward.

During the past two years, I've seen community leaders collaborate with politicians, nonprofits, and scientists like me to inoculate thousands of people in Puerto Rico, many of whom would otherwise have been left behind. These sorts of coalitions between groups that seldom collaborate require solidarity to bridge differences.

When the pandemic began, with memories of Hurricane María still fresh, people came together to avoid a collapsed healthcare infrastructure and tens of thousands of deaths. This paid off. Puerto Rico has led in vaccination, far exceeding rates in the states ^[9].

More than 91% of Puerto Rico's population has received at least one dose of a COVID-19 shot ^[10] (as of Feb. 8). Between Dec. 16, 2021, and Jan. 16, 2022, 337 people in the archipelago had died from COVID-19 ^[11], during the record-breaking Omicron surge. If no one had been vaccinated, that number would most likely have been greater than 1,000 ^[12].

Build trust through realistic hope. Communities in Puerto Rico deal with multiple, long-standing problems every day including poverty, violence, unreliable electricity, environmental injustices and of course, COVID-19. This is why Aquí Nos Cuidamos adopted what we call realistic hope, which means we keep sight of the positive but don't sugar coat reality.

For example, our COVID-19 vaccines campaign "Vacúnate, por ti y por mí ^[13]" (Get vaccinated, for you and for me) underscores that vaccination is an act of solidarity that greatly minimizes the risks of COVID-19. However, we have been careful to recognize the dynamic nature of the pandemic and limitations of vaccination. That contrasts with the Biden administration's ^[14] almost single-minded approach of vaccination as the silver bullet to get us out of the emergency, which has led to premature triumphalism ^[15] and undermined the credibility of efforts that followed.

Above all, take care of each other. During the pandemic, collective care has manifested in people in Puerto Rico consistently wearing masks. Collective care has also manifested in the work of community leaders like a public health professional who restored a dilapidated children's park to create a low-risk outdoor space where her community could safely reconnect and a nun who set up a COVID-19 vaccine information table at her local bakery (bakeries are key community gathering places). Others hosted education events for the deaf community or delivered food to elderly people.

What would a more solidary U.S. response look like? Making testing widely and freely available sooner. The Biden administration recently began distributing free antigen tests to U.S. households. In contrast, free antigen testing has been widely available in Puerto Rico since October 2020 ^[16].

U.S. officials could have focused their messaging on shared values. Leaders have repeatedly said this is a “pandemic of the unvaccinated ^[17],” which is inaccurate and can be perceived as an attack on unvaccinated individuals. In May 2021, the CDC announced ^[18] that fully vaccinated people could stop masking indoors. This was arguably premature based on vaccination rates at the time ^[19] and the dynamic and uncertain nature of COVID-19, and it ignored the predictable ways in which this guidance would be interpreted by Republican-leaning audiences. These blunders ^[20] are examples of how U.S. officials continue to disregard important evidence ^[21] that links values like partisan identity ^[22] to mask wearing ^[23], vaccination status ^[24] and other views about COVID-19. They also show how many policy decisions are based on individual risk calculus and not collective care. Recent announcements that several states will lift or let mask mandates expire ^[25] underscore this.

In Puerto Rico, community is central to our culture. We’ve had to become experts in solidarity, because so many times it’s been the only way to survive, heal and thrive.

I am not convinced that decision makers in the U.S. and in other wealthy nations are ready to make such leaps in their thinking. However, if they hope to end the pandemic and be ready for future emergencies, they must lead a shift from individualism and nationalism toward solidarity and collective care.

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