A stark reminder of our current reality is the end of year graduation party we host each year for our Escalera college access high school seniors. The event fills Casa Azafrán’s Flatrock rooms with seniors from Overton, Cane Ridge, and Glenciff High Schools, accompanied by many family members. Families enjoy a delicious meal prepared by one of our Mesa Komal Culinary Incubator food entrepreneurs, pose for pictures at our photo booth, and receive certificates.

To keep this tradition alive during the pandemic, this year we are celebrating seniors in the form of a “drive-up” photo booth at Casa Azafrán. Each student (and up to 4 family members) gets a 10 minute slot to come to Casa Azafrán, and take a picture at our photo booth set up outside at Casa Azafrán. This is our creative way of celebrating these students who are undoubtedly completing a huge milestone for themselves and their families by finishing high school and pursuing secondary education.

The devastating tornadoes in Middle Tennessee and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic have prompted us to shift to the work of now. With skyrocketing unemployment rates, inadequate access to healthcare, food, economic relief, and information, we are stepping up to fill gaps in service so immigrant families in Tennessee can not only endure the hardships surfacing during these unprecedented times, but also continue working to achieve the dreams that brought them to this country.

**Gracias to**

Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation  
First Presbyterian Church of Clarksville, TN  
Dr. Adriana Bialostozky  
The Community Foundation of Middle Tennessee  
Comcast NBCUniversal Foundation  
Community Resource Center  
Joe C. Davis Foundation  
Karli’s Catering  
Lee Initiative  
Masks NOW TN  
Mother to Mother  
NLCAB  
Second Harvest Food Bank of Middle Tennessee  
SFM Facility Management & Maintenance  
STEM Prep Academy  
United Way of Greater Nashville  
United Way of Rutherford and Cannon Counties

**Current Reality**

**NATURAL DISASTERS AND A PANDEMIC**

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The tornadoes activated Conexión Américas’ seasoned rapid response and disaster relief abilities. Within hours of the storm we met with city and law enforcement officials to designate our phone line as the official helpline for Spanish-speaking community members affected by the tornado. In the afternoon, we teamed up with The American Muslim Advisory Council, Councilmember Zulfat Suara, the Murfreesboro Muslim Youth, and Chef Yassin of Knoxville, TN to open up Mesa Komal culinary incubator prepare and deliver 400 meals for tornado victims across the city.

Over the next few days our staff began the hard work of identifying and locating areas of Middle Tennessee where Spanish-speaking immigrants were living hit by the tornado. This effort has required days of multiple in-person site visits to meet and interview families, and gather information about needs. Some of the damage was concentrated in dense areas such as a mobile home park in Lebanon. Homes were completely moved from their foundations. However, we also had to pinpoint less concentrated areas of damage in Lebanon and Hermitage, where there was less attention and less access to relief efforts.

Our staff members provided culturally and linguistically relevant crisis response to immigrant and Latino families whose homes were destroyed by the storms.

Several cases required dedicated and intensive follow-up to ensure families safely recovered. One young pregnant woman found herself at the rescue mission after having to evacuate her home. She very soon had her baby, and was unable to return to the rescue mission because they did not allow newborns. Our staff worked hard to prevent her from experiencing homelessness by securing her a temporary hotel room and vital supplies for her newborn as she found a different place.

Conexión Américas collected donations at Casa Azafrán and provided dozens of families with food boxes, blankets, storage bins, and gift cards. Over time, we met personally with 46 families affected by the tornado. In addition to in-person site visits where we would document needs, we connected with families via a dedicated phone line for tornado relief, and referrals from staff members who had called to check-in on all Conexión Américas program participants the morning after the tornado.

Thanks to support from the Community Foundation of Middle Tennessee and United Way of Rutherford and Cannon Counties, we were able to give direct economic assistance. We were also able to support families from the generous donations of community members, which included food, water, cleaning supplies, and gift cards to grocery stores and home improvement stores.
A week after the tornadoes devastated Middle Tennessee, our office began working remotely, just a few days before local and state orders required non-essential businesses to cease operation until further notice.

Because of the closures, many of our program participants saw their only source of income vanish, leaving them unable to pay bills, rent, or buy groceries. Furthermore, inadequate access to health care and culturally competent resources impedes the flattening of the curve in immigrant communities. This has led to including health policy in Conexión Américas’ policy priorities for the first time.

Conexión Américas is directly addressing the critical food security, health, economic support, and digital inclusion needs of Latino children and families during this challenging time.

**FOOD SECURITY**
- 3,156 fresh produce, cleaning supplies and hygiene items at drive-through distribution
- 400 hot meals from local chefs distributed
- 120 families without transportation referred to Second Harvest to deliver to their homes via a partnership with Amazon

**HEALTH ACCESS**
- 91 social media videos, live broadcasts, and photos with information on COVID-19, testing & public health measures
- 267,333 reach of social media content with COVID19 information

**ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE**
- 1,728 Spanish-speaking families from across Tennessee applied because of job loss and ineligibility for federal assistance
- 320 of these families received financial assistance thanks to funders
- 61% reported losing work in domestic/cleaning, restaurant/food service, or hotel/hospitality industries

**DIGITAL INCLUSION**
- 1,020 Tennessee students & their families received virtual services by phone, text or video
- 10% students in our middle school after school program have access to a computer at home
- 85,000 views of educational content from navigating digital learning to science activities to do at home
Since Conexión Américas’ staff team started working remotely on March 11, 2020, we have moved almost all of Conexión Américas’ ongoing, year-round programming into a distance-learning format, including our school-based education programs, microenterprise development and migrant education services.

**ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY PROGRAMS**

**TAX PREP**
Our team transitioned to online tax preparation for Spanish-speaking families and has helped 76 taxpayers who have received $107,209 in refunds.

**SMALL BUSINESS**
Small business development and online marketplace sales courses completed their sessions via Zoom, and we have begun new summer sessions of each course online.
16 of our 20 culinary incubator members have stopped production—just a small example of how small business owners are hurting today.

**ADULT EDUCATION**
Fully online ESL course launched this month with over 50 students and 5 levels.

**EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

**STUDENT SUCCESS**
Our team’s first step was helping families find resources for immediate needs and evaluating students’ ability to participate in online learning. Since most have limited digital access, we produced Spanish-language educational videos shared 3 times per week, including videos of special guests reading children’s books, and subjects ranging from science to navigating online learning resources.

**COLLEGE ACCESS**
In addition to check-ins and remote one-on-one support for 226 MNPS students and 104 college students, our team has online events on college admission, financial aid counseling, and career exploration.

**MIGRANT EDUCATION PROGRAM**

**IDENTIFY & RECRUIT**
The MEP team has been working remotely to continue to identify migratory students and enroll them in the program when they arrive to Tennessee.

1,320 supplemental educational support services have been held with migratory students via video/phone, with a special focus on literacy. Over 200 students have registered to participate in MEP’s first ever virtual summer camp.

**EDUCATION SERVICES**
Since March the team has worked virtually to provide 1,001 supplemental support services to migrant families, including access to food resources, applying for financial assistance, and understanding school closures and distance learning offered by students’ schools.