



Jerry Lara / Staff photographer

Henry Rodriguez, 76, with LULAC, left, goes on air Thursday with KEDA's Leroy "Sha Na Na" Reyes to encourage Hispanics to participate in COVID-19 research studies.

More San Antonio Hispanics are needed for COVID vaccine trials

By Laura Garcia

STAFF WRITER

Civil rights activist Henry Rodriguez arrived at the conjunto radio station with a few paper fliers in hand.

DJ Leroy "Sha Na Na" Reyes pushed the microphone closer when it was time to go on air. There was no script, but Rodriguez didn't hesitate as he spoke with urgency, describing the health crisis devastating the community.

In English, then in Spanish, he told listeners to sign up for CO-

VID-19 vaccine research studies to help.

"I'm encouraging everyone to get involved. If Hispanics are affected the most, it makes sense to help. Here's an opportunity to find a cure for COVID-19, the coronavirus. Call 210-934-0755."

The number was to get more information about a clinical research study at Endeavor Clinical Trials on Wurzbach Road – one of nine sites in San Antonio actively recruiting adults over the next few weeks to try out vaccines.

Participants enrolled in the

study get paid for medical appointments and phone check-ins earning up to \$1,575. People in the study will either get the vaccine or the placebo.

One of the biggest challenges in research studies is attracting applicants from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, said Dr. Sherwyn Schwartz, an endocrinologist who specializes in treating people with diabetes and a consultant for Endeavor.

If a vaccine is studied only in Anglo people or healthy 30-some-

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things, the discovery of possible adverse side effects or that it might be less effective in other populations could be delayed.

When clinical trials focus on high-risk groups, such as Latinos who are overweight or have a chronic medical condition, it allows vaccine makers to show that the vaccine can protect anyone against the disease. Or it could point to flaws that need to be corrected.

“These communities are getting clobbered,” Schwartz said. “I don’t think Latinos are brought up in the national news enough. I want to see the people who I’ve treated my whole life get the opportunity to take the vaccine.”

Schwartz says his goal is to recruit 1,000 people in San Antonio, a majority-minority city with 1.2 million – that’s 61 percent – of the population identifying as Hispanic in recent census data.

The trial at Endeavor is part of “Operation Warp Speed,” a national initiative to accelerate the development, production and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, therapeutics and diagnostics.

Rodriguez, who serves as executive director of LULAC Concilio Zapatista 4383, visited KEDA on Wednesday because he hoped to reach Hispanic area residents, particularly Mexican Americans, about the coronavirus crisis.

He’s been at the radio station many times over the past five decades to talk about politics or resources available or needed for the West Side, but he says this might be the most challenging campaign he’s done.

Normally, he’d be out at community events shaking hands, getting coffee with residents or visiting pastors at churches to get out his message, but the coronavirus pandemic has made in-person outreach almost impossible for the 76-year-old.

By taking to the airwaves, however, his words went



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LULAC’s Henry Rodriguez has been on the air many times over political issues but says the vaccine campaign is his most challenging yet.

out to listeners in 22 South Texas counties on 99.9 FM and 1540 AM.

It’s needed reassurance, he said. He knows that area Latinos have a history of mistrusting the medical profession.

“You cannot blame them

for being skeptical,” he said, noting there’s long been a lack of access to good medical care.

He grew up on the West Side of San Antonio, which has been one of the most economically segregated parts of the city.

He’s vouching for Schwartz, who once operated a medical clinic at the Las Palmas Shopping Center that gave away free services. Over the years, they organized several health fairs with free screenings for chronic diseases.

At that same shopping center on Friday, some people wearing face masks said that, while they’re tired of the pandemic’s restrictions, they’re still leery of taking a vaccine to protect against the virus.

But Mary Martinez, 19, said her initial response was that she would take the vaccine. She trusts the science.

Martinez said she and her mother had just seen a local news story about enrolling in clinical trials for the coronavirus vaccine. Because her younger brother has asthma, the family has quarantined much of the time to keep him safe, going out only for essential errands.

Three older women exiting the Family Dollar store said they wouldn’t take the COVID-19 vaccine, even after it’s been cleared by the FDA.

Rodriguez said that’s not uncommon.

“It’s a numbers game,” he said. “You can’t convince everyone. You just have to talk to more people.”

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