

One organization offers translation services for indigenous Mayans during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Mayan League members shoot a video about the COVID-19 pandemic. Source: Mayan League.

“When the pandemic started, our community would go to the hospital without knowing what COVID-19 was. Those who understood some English or Spanish passed the information along to the community. There was a sense of chaos, confusion and fear,” said Gerónimo Ramírez, a member of the Ixil Council in Virginia.

In the Centreville Labor Center, the Mayan League prepares informational material about the COVID-19 pandemic. One-minute videos explain in Ixil, Mam and K’iche’ how to wear a mask, what symptoms to look for, and where to go to get tested.

This information plays an important role in the fight against the virus, especially in the absence of official information in Mayan languages.

“We heard that the information was not reaching our community. There was so much fear in the community because we didn’t have the facts right, so we started to make short videos with simple information about the pandemic,” Juanita Cabrera, the executive for Mayan League, explained.

“Fairfax County, where Centreville is located, confirmed 30,404 COVID-19 cases up until the first week of December. According to the Virginia Department of Health, 45.48% (13,830 cases) of positive cases came from Latino residents, though it's unclear how many cases include Indigenous Mayans.”

Melvin Camey, 38, an assistant manager at a restaurant in Baltimore, is in charge of producing and editing the information for the Mayan League in his spare time. “I’ve been creating videos and have taught myself Adobe Premiere Pro. This tool that I’m passionate about is giving me a chance to help the community,” Camey said.

The videos, based on CDC and UNESCO recommendations, are narrated by community members, published on the Mayan League social media, and disseminated using WhatsApp.

The Latino and Hispanic categorization ignores indigenous people’s unique needs, and for that reason the community is left behind in accessing services and information, Ramírez said, who is also an interpreter of Ixil. “We are not recognized by the county. Schools and hospitals treat us as Latinos and immediately talk to us in Spanish or English, but many of our community members cannot speak Spanish very well because their first language is Mam, Ixil or K’iche’,” Cabrera López said.

Local and state authorities still confuse the identity of indigenous Mayans, calling them Latinos or Hispanics, Cabrera López said. “We are not Latinos, we are not Hispanics, and we are not Latin-x,” she said.

In 1980, the U.S Census Bureau added the category ‘Hispanic’ to the Census to estimate the amount of people in the U.S. with ties to Latin America. In 2000, the term ‘Latino’ was added along with country of origin, and it wasn’t until 2020 that an option recognizing indigenous communities from Central America appeared on the Census.

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Gerónimo Ramírez, an organizer at the Centreville Labor Center and the Ixil Council in Virginia. (Photo by Vanessa Sánchez/La Voz Unida)

The Mayan community faces linguistic barriers and doesn't have access to an interpreter in life-or-death situations. Many times, the only reason they cannot see a doctor or are not properly treated is because they didn't have an interpreter, Ramírez explained. During a pandemic, information can be the difference between keeping people safe or spreading the virus to others.

"Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 requires anyone receiving federal support, even indirect support, to provide language access and meaningful oral information and services to LEP individuals."

"Interpretation can make a significant change in a Mayan's life, that's why it is so fundamental to us," Ramírez said.

The Mayan League and the Centreville Labor Resource Center launched a series of Indigenous interpretation workshops to tackle the absence of indigenous Mayan interpreters in hospitals, schools, and immigration courts in 2017.

This October, they started a new training to offer interpretation services over ZOOM. "Many members of our communities have the language skills but are also being left behind because of a technological gap," the Mayan League said in a statement.

Ramírez and nine more interpreters have had to modify their shifts at work to voluntarily assist the community with interpretation during the pandemic. The demand is very high, he said, but few of those who speak Mayan languages can volunteer their time to help. “We are in the process of making this a paying job so that hospitals or lawyers can contact us directly if they need an interpreter,” Ramírez said.

“Finding financial aid, leading, and responding to the community has been very hard... in spite of 524 years of dispossession, genocide, waves of violence, we are resilient, and our existence is strong,” Cabrera López said.