

# Innovative Text Messaging Strategies to Reach Indigenous Communities

## Outreach Promising Practice

The Guatemalan-Maya Center (GMC) sends messages in various languages through a mass texting platform to share emergency information, invitations to community events, and cultivates awareness amongst their predominantly Indigenous community members.

### Organization name:

The Guatemalan-Maya Center (GMC)  
Location and Service Area: Lake Worth Beach, FL  
and surrounding areas of Palm Beach County



### About:

After fleeing the genocide and atrocities of the Guatemalan Civil War, many refugees settled in southern Florida and encountered discrimination in a community unprepared to meet their needs. Father Frank O'Loughlin founded GMC in 1992 in response to the lack of accessible health care for Indigenous Mayan women who faced linguistic and structural barriers in receiving pre- and postnatal care. Today, GMC serves individuals from 28 different countries and is an uplifting and empowering community space for many in Palm Beach County, Florida. The GMC not only provides essential services such as food distribution, legal services, health education, and youth programs to the refugee, migrant, Indigenous, and farmworker communities in their service area, but it is also a space where the community gathers for celebrations and holidays. During the pandemic, GMC relentlessly advocated for equitable vaccine access, hosted COVID-19 testing sites alongside the Palm Beach County Health Department, and educated their community members about COVID-19 and the vaccines.

## Unmet Need Addressed

Due to the language and cultural barriers present for immigrants and refugees in the United States, it can be difficult to obtain up-to-date information during emergencies. Lake Worth, Florida has a rich linguistic diversity due to the refugee communities that have made it home. Considering 22 Mayan languages are spoken in Guatemala, and each language may have various language variants that are not mutually intelligible, there is a great need for developing new ways of communicating. When individuals have access to information in languages they can understand, they are able to make autonomous decisions about their health and safety. GMC's mass texting program ensures the community-wide dissemination of events and emergency alerts in various languages to individuals who may speak very little to no English and/or Spanish.

## Description of the Practice

The GMC is a first responder to the needs of the migrant and refugee communities in Lake Worth, Florida, and the surrounding area. The GMC collects contact information upon client intake. The intake process happens during a community member's first time visiting the center to receive any form of assistance, such as food donations or legal assistance. To make the most efficient use of the contact information they gather, the GMC incorporated the use of SimpleTexting at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic to disperse critical information to the community.

## Key Strategies

### SimpleTexting Platform

SimpleTexting is a mass texting program typically used for marketing campaigns. For GMC, it is a tool to quickly and efficiently educate and connect with their community. Before the pandemic, GMC staff relied on messaging community members via WhatsApp groups. However, this method proved to be less efficient; SimpleTexting is more direct and private since the communication is 1 to 1. Unlike WhatsApp or other messaging platforms, message recipients are not required to download an application to receive messages sent through SimpleTexting.



### Charity Tracker Database

GMC uses a database called Charity Tracker to store their member's demographic and contact information and document their interactions with individual community members in a systemized manner. Individual contact information can be extracted from Charity Tracker for specific initiatives or programming that the organization is hosting. For example, if someone indicated during their intake that they were a parent or caretaker of a child between the ages of 2-4 years, the GMC can extract a group of contacts who are caretakers and use SimpleText to invite them to their literacy and early education programming. In GMC's efforts to vaccinate community members, they were also able to track who had participated in vaccination and testing events.

### Google Voice

Each message sent also includes staff members' Google Voice phone numbers which community members can contact directly. If community members have follow-up questions or concerns, they can contact GMC staff with the certainty of a familiar voice responding in their language. The use of a Google Voice number permits staff members to establish a professional boundary by not sharing their personal cell phone numbers nor needing to have an additional cell phone for work purposes. Complimenting the use of SimpleText with GoogleVoice calls can also reduce the cost by decreasing the number of 1:1 text messages sent through SimpleText.

### Linking Audio Messages to YouTube

To make their SimpleTexting messaging accessible for individuals who do not speak or read English or Spanish, links to audio messages uploaded to YouTube are included in the texts that GMC sends through SimpleTexting. The audio messages are recorded in English, Spanish, Q'anjob'al, Mam, Popti', Haitian Creole, Portuguese, and Urdu by GMC staff members. Because certain ideas or words in English and Spanish do not exist in many Mesoamerican Indigenous languages, the interpreters relay the original messages in a way that can be understood by community members, even if that means describing words or concepts in a different way.



## Different cases in which SimpleTexting has been used:

### Specialty Care

GMC partnered with the University of Miami to host a dermatology clinic to conduct skin screenings for people who work outdoors. Within two hours of GMC inviting community members to the clinic through SimpleTexting, the 40 appointment slots were filled. Since many members of the GMC community do not have health insurance and much less access to specialty care, the announcement of the clinic allowed people to quickly and easily gain access to needed medical care.



Pictured: Dermatologist from the University of Miami conducting a skin screening.

### Weather Emergencies

Because newscasts and weather reports are primarily in English or Spanish, GMC has emergency weather event outreach protocols to deliver information to community members. During hurricane season and weather emergencies, GMC SimpleText messages include emergency preparedness information about resources and how to protect their homes during inclement weather in multiple languages.



### Example of SimpleTexting in Spanish during a Hurricane:

today 11:46

La tormenta tropical Eta se dirige hacia Florida. Asegúrese de tener suficiente comida y agua para la semana y de tener linternas también guarden bien sus documentos importante en un lugar seguro, no manejen si hay inundaciones o evite líneas eléctricas caídas, si hay una emergencia muy grave llame 911. En caso de que se corte la electricidad si pierde electricidad y viven en la Ciudad de Lake Worth pueden llamar al [5615337300](tel:5615337300). Si usan luz con FPL llamar [1-833-437-5466](tel:1-833-437-5466) o [1-844-848-0465](tel:1-844-848-0465).

Pongan mucha atención si las autoridades te dan una orden de evacuación por favor evacúen en un Centro de refugio ustedes pueden llamar Cruz roja [1-800-733-2767](tel:1-800-733-2767) y también pueden llamar al 211.

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La escuela del condado de palm beach también estará cerrada mañana.

Si necesitan clarificación pueden llamar al Centro Maya al [561-547-0085](tel:561-547-0085).

Español: <https://txt.so/JLMCNC>  
 Popti ': <https://txt.so/AJDAQA>  
 Mam: <https://txt.so/ICNLQN>  
 Q'anjob'al: <https://txt.so/PVKPED>  
 Responder stop para detener

### COVID-19 Rapid Response

Messages were sent out to the GMC community to announce COVID-19 testing clinics. The Florida Health Department allotted 500 vaccination slots for GMC to vaccinate its members after a community event. Community members were invited to the event through the Simply text platform. They were encouraged to wear traditional Mayan clothes (trajes and cortes) to demonstrate that Indigenous community members were willing to be vaccinated.



## Key Challenges and How to Address

### Gaining Trust

Over the years, GMC has garnered the trust of their community and they have developed their reputation as a reliable resource hub. While other organizations and service providers have faced challenges in having people attend their community events, the GMC has found ways to effectively reach their members. A crucial element to ensuring that community members attend events is trust; the messaging or information regarding events or emergency situations needs to come from people who are trusted and have demonstrated care and support for the community. In GMC's case, staff members who have conducted the intakes or assisted individuals in a myriad of ways are the trusted responders.

### Interpretation Services

For many individuals whose first languages are not English or Spanish, language barriers are an obstacle for receiving and obtaining community information or understanding health education materials. Event invitations and information shared with community members must be shared in a language in which people feel the most comfortable expressing themselves. GMC is aware of the most prevalent Mesoamerican languages in their area and have interpreters and translators for their messages. The following organizations also provide interpretation into different Indigenous languages from Mexico and Guatemala and can offer guidance on how to address language barriers:

- [\\_CIELO's Center for Indigenous Languages and Power \(CILP\)](#)
  - To request a Mesoamerican language interpreter, contact Luis López Reséndiz ([luislr@mycielo.org](mailto:luislr@mycielo.org)) and Aurora Pedro ([aurorap@mycielo.org](mailto:aurorap@mycielo.org)).
- MICOP Interpreter Services
  - Request a Mesoamerican Language Interpreter [here](#).
- Red de Pueblos Transnacionales - [Colibrí Interpreters Collective](#)
  - Interpreters offered for Mixteco, Nahuatl, Me'phaa- Tlapanec, Totonaco, Triqui, Mixe, Garifuna, Kichwa, and K'iche.
- [International Mayan League](#)
  - A Mayan Language Interpreter can be requested [here](#).
- [Language Access Florida](#)
  - To request a Mesoamerican Language Interpreter, contact Dr. Laura Gonzales at [languageaccessflorida@gmail.com](mailto:languageaccessflorida@gmail.com)



## Resources Needed and Expenses

While the use of SimpleTexting is an incredibly efficient way of reaching a large number of people, it is an expensive platform for a small organization like GMCr. Currently, it costs around \$10,000 annually, but the annual price varies depending on the frequency of use. Sending a SimpleText to all of the subscribed members currently costs \$100 per message sent. If a community member responds directly to a SimpleText, the organization has to pay a small fee for each text they receive. Another thing to consider is that as the number of subscribers grows, the cost also increases. To offset costs, it is important to consider complimenting the use of SimpleTexting with the use of a program like GoogleVoice. Additionally, collaborating with other organizations who are interested in sending messages to the same community may offset some of the expenses of the program through cost sharing.

It is important to have a designated team to coordinate messaging, entering new contact information into contact databases, and SimpleText platform management and payment. Team members must also coordinate with interpreters or translators to interpret messages into the community's most prevalent languages.

## Partnerships

- [City of Lake Worth Beach](#) officials are very involved with the GMC in order to provide accessible services for the community and bridge gaps of services in the city. GMC advocates for the local government to vote out policies or ordinances that negatively affect the Lake Worth community and we are in constant communication to help them understand why an ordinance might not be effective in the community.
- [Palm Beach County Food Bank](#) is GMC's main source of food for their Food Pantry and provides tons of food weekly.
- Palm Beach County Fire Department is instrumental in assisting GMC with notifying the community if they need to evacuate during a natural disaster.



- **Palm Beach School District** facilitates communication between GMC and students and their families to ensure that Indigenous community members are included in the District's decision making process. GMC serves on multiple school district committees that vote on decisions that directly affect the GMC community.
- **Florida Health Department of Palm Beach** Dr. Alina Alonso was instrumental in helping GMC be the first site in the area to have a vaccination event for undocumented people and other individuals who were unable to provide two proofs of address prior to that rule being lifted. The Palm Beach Health Department helped GMC become an evening vaccination site and provided the vaccines and nurses.
- **University of Miami's** medical students work yearly with GMC to provide health education to the community and host free clinics for farmworkers and day laborers.
- **General Consulate of Guatemala in Miami and the Guatemalan Consulate in Lake Worth:** The General Consulate in Miami was instrumental in establishing a Guatemalan Consulate in Lake Worth Beach in 2017 after GMC advocated that there was a great need for a consular office in the community. GMC works with the Consulate to better assist people in obtaining their documents as well as hosting consular ID events to ensure community members have a valid ID.
- **General Consulate of Mexico in Miami** uses GMC resources to assist Indigenous community members and they prioritize referrals made by the GMC to help accommodate day laborers to avoid losing a day of work traveling to Miami.





## Results

GMC has made a myriad of new partnerships because of the variety of COVID-19 relief efforts that have been coordinated since the beginning of the pandemic. Joint outreach efforts complimented with the use of SimpleTexting has led to higher turnouts for events. The organization's use of the SimpleTexting program has encouraged the participation and engagement of community members in meetings and events. Through the GMC's outreach efforts, 5,000 community members are subscribed to the organization's SimpleTexting program.

## Learn More

- Guatemalan-Maya Center's [website](#)
- Contact: Mariana Blanco [mblanco@guatemalanmaya.org](mailto:mblanco@guatemalanmaya.org),  
Assistant Executive Director, Guatemalan Maya Center
- [SimpleTexting](#)



### *Pro Tip:*

*Consider building an accessible app or online program into your organization's outreach efforts. While some forms of technology may be harder to use or access, other programs like WhatsApp or SimpleTexting are widely used and accessible for many different communities.*

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