

Aquí Entre Nos (Just Between Us): Engagement of hotel housekeepers during sociopolitical and environmental change

AUTHORS:

Samantha Sabo DrPH MPH ORCiD : 0000-0003-4509-9182
Center for Health Equity Research, Northern Arizona University

Dulce J. Jiménez MPH CHES ORCiD : 0000-0003-2962-7467
Center for Health Equity Research, Northern Arizona University

Alexandra Samarron Longorio RD MPH ORCiD: 0000-0003-4601-2923
Center for Health Equity Research, Northern Arizona University

Omar Gomez MPH
Center for Health Equity Research, Northern Arizona University

Melissa Leibert PhD MS
Department of Anthropology, Northern Arizona University

Miriam Adriana Cuautle
Hotel Housekeeper Advisory Board

Sara Shuman PhD MPH
Department of Health Sciences, Northern Arizona University

Jill Guernsey de Zapien
Zuckerman College of Public Health, University of Arizona

Shefali Milczarek-Desai JD
James E. Rogers College of Law, University of Arizona

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ABSTRACT

Background: *Aquí Entre Nos (Between Us)* is a community-based participatory research project to engage rural, ethno-racially diverse hotel housekeepers in a right to work state during a time of national anti-immigrant policy, wildfires and emergence of a global pandemic. **Objectives:** We aimed to (1) build trust and social support with the hotel housekeeping community; (2) learn about the occupational health, safety, and workers' rights challenges, strategies, and solutions held by workers; and (3) develop a workforce-driven research and action agenda to improve labor and health conditions. **Methods:** Participatory mixed methods rooted in popular education are described to form an advisory board and engage the workforce. **Lessons Learned:** Trusted relationships built through community organizing around immigration, housing, and minimum wage were critical to engage and drive a worker centered research agenda. **Conclusion:** Despite challenges, housekeeper advisors defined a research agenda that addressed immediate and long term needs of the workforce.

KEYWORDS: Community-Based Participatory Research, Southwestern United States, Occupational Health, Community health research, Immigrant health, Women's health

BACKGROUND

Approximately 1.8 million workers are employed in the hospitality industry in the United States (US). Housekeepers are the largest occupational group in this industry, comprising 25% of all hotel workers. Hotel housekeepers are 40% more likely to be injured on the job compared to all other service sector workers.¹ Hotel housekeepers belong to multiple social groups that face excessive occupational risks, including women, immigrants, Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC), and low-wage workers.¹ Hispanic and American Indian Indigenous housekeepers have disproportionately high rates of injury compared to other worker groups, 10.5 and 50 per 100 person-years respectively.¹ Emergent epidemiological and ethnographic research have confirmed several work¹⁻⁶ and non-work⁷⁻⁹ stressors faced by the workforce. Stressors are highly correlated with poor health outcomes such as cardiovascular disease risk and chronic stress.¹⁰⁻¹³ Most significant is job strain, characterized by high work demand and low job control. **Figure 1** summarizes the evidence that forms the *Entre Nos* project conceptual model.

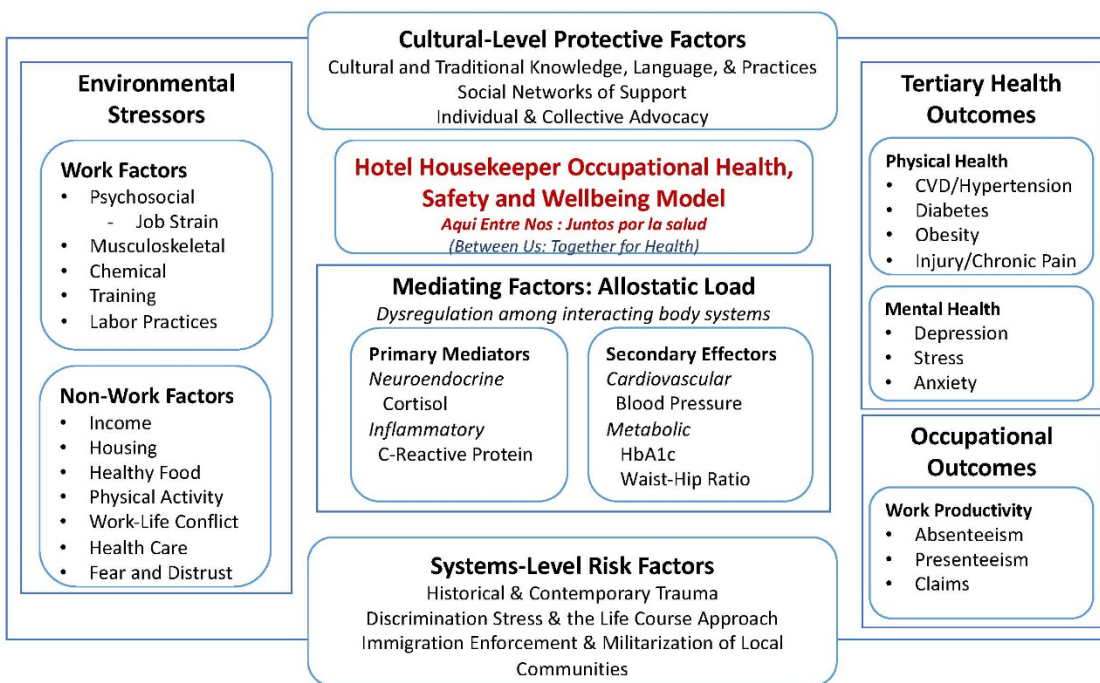


Figure 1. Conceptual Model

OBJECTIVES

Entre Nos: Juntos Por la Salud (Between Us: Together in Health) is led by the Northern Arizona University, Center for Health Equity Research (CHER) in collaboration with a hotel housekeeper

advisory board (HHAB). Here we outline the community-based participatory research (CBPR) process to engage a largely rural, ethno-racially diverse hotel housekeeper workforce unaffiliated with any organized labor union during a time of national anti-immigrant rhetoric and policy, a housing crisis, wildfires in the region and the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Generally, *Entre Nos* aims to: (1) build trust and social support with the Mexican immigrant and American Indian housekeeping community; (2) learn about the occupational health, safety, and workers' rights challenges, strategies, and solutions held by workers; and (3) develop a workforce driven research and action agenda to improve labor and health conditions, including the design and piloting of a workers' rights toolkit.

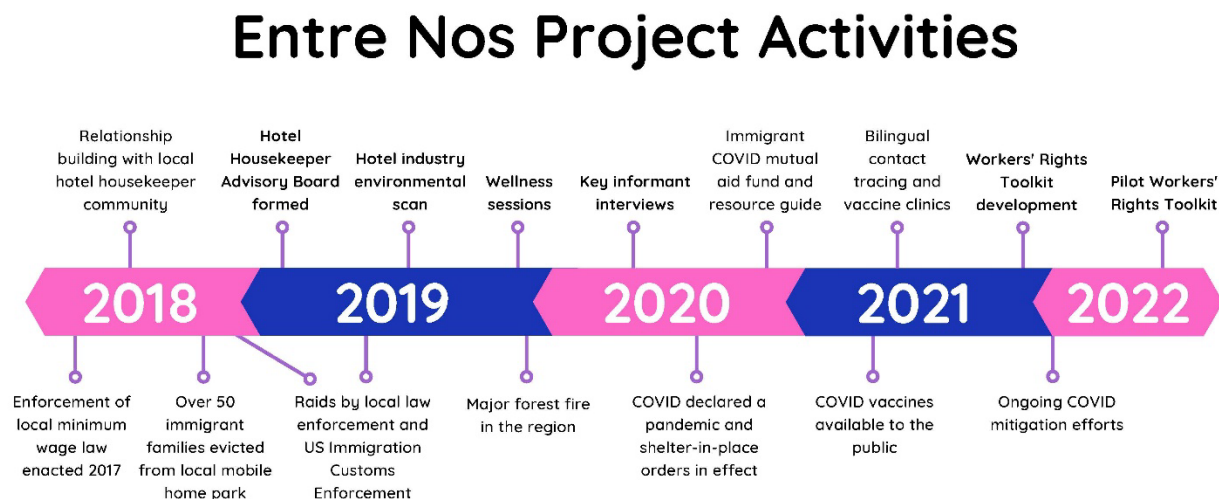
Arizona Context

Arizona has a complex anti-immigrant legislative history, empirically documented to create a climate of fear among immigrants and negatively impact access and use of resources and services.¹⁴ Arizona is also right to work state (RTW). Established in 1947, Arizona RTW laws serve to prohibit organized labor and collective bargaining among workers. Generally, workers employed in RTW states are more likely to live in poverty, be medically uninsured, earn less money, and have death rates 50% higher compared to states without these laws.¹⁵ Empirically, RTW laws reduce wage growth often secured through collective bargaining agreements and diminish union bargaining power.¹⁶

Northern Arizona, the region of focus of this research, is geographically expansive (over 66,000 square miles of land and home to 12 federally recognized American Indian tribes), largely rural (37% of residents live in areas with a population of fewer than 2500 people), and culturally diverse (62.5% White, 22.5% American Indian, and 11% Hispanic), making it a scientifically significant region for a focus on health equity issues of low wage earners. The regional tourism industry is a significant economic driver – increasing annually in both direct spending and tax receipts. In 2019, the region generated 606 million in direct spending and 195 million in tax receipts. A significant rebound occurred post pandemic 2020-2021 with direct spending and tax revenue increasing by 18.9% and 44.5% respectively.¹⁷ Despite these revenues, hotel housekeepers in this region continue to earn less than national and state averages, with an average annual salary for a hotel housekeepers in the region of \$24,560 and \$11.81 hourly wage in 2019 compared to \$28,750 and a range of \$13.82- \$14.72 in 2021.¹⁸

In Flagstaff, Arizona, between 2018 to 2019, the immigrant community experienced (1) over policing practices by local law enforcement and coordinated raids by Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE)

and (2) the abrupt eviction of immigrant families from a mobile home park community largely employed as hotel housekeepers in the city. These stressful events exacerbated distrust and fear of government and in public service institutions, including academic spaces, creating a challenging environment for community engaged research to take place. **Figure 2** provides a timeline of the evolution of the *Entre Nos* Project and outlines overtime both the CBPR activities and the environmental and political context in which these activities occurred.



Environmental and Political Context

Figure 2. Entre Nos Timeline

METHODS

Given the anti-immigrant and anti-worker landscape of Arizona, a CBPR approach was critical in the formation of the *Entre Nos* project. CBPR contributed to trusted relationship building, the development of culturally appropriate research questions, enhanced data collection and interpretation, and the translation of research findings into systemic and sustainable change.^{19,20} Tenants of CBPR have supported the practical and feasible development of culturally relevant research, and strengthened our collective capacity to address the needs of low wage earners.^{19,21,22} In this section, we delineate the CBPR strategies for community engagement, relationship building, collaborative project development, data collection and analysis. This research project is approved by the Northern Arizona University human subjects review board.

Community Engagement and the Hotel Housekeepers Advisory Board

CHER researchers involved in this project are a multiethnic and multilingual team representing public health, anthropology, and law, with diverse lived and professional experiences, a long-term commitment to immigrant and occupational health, and considerable experience in CPBR. Several of the *Entre Nos* research team members identified as Mexican immigrants with lived experiences of being Undocumented and having a parent or family member employed in hotel housekeeping. Trusted relationships built through immigrant and housing rights organizing efforts by one of our research team members provided a unique opportunity to invite workers (Mexican and Mexican-Indigenous Undocumented immigrant women) to join a Hotel Housekeepers Advisory Board (HHAB).

Once established, HHAB members invited friends and family with experience in housekeeping to the HHAB meetings. Meetings were attended by an average of 10 past and present hotel housekeepers ranging in age from 25-70 years, and 5-20 years of employment experience. The HHAB met 1-2 times monthly on Mondays after 5:30pm, a day designated by members as a rest day. Free childcare, \$20 incentives, and light refreshments compensated HHAB members' time for meeting attendance. Using popular education and adult learning techniques, HHAB members defined the culture and purpose of the meetings – which included to have fun, laugh, learn, and support one another. With this intentionality, each meeting engaged researchers and housekeepers in opportunities to identify the name, goals, and logo of our project which is featured in English and Spanish in **Figure 3**.



Community organizing and the multiplicity of positionalities, including the ability of the entire research team to communicate in Spanish, aided in building connections with primarily Mexican immigrant HHAB members and their families. Our research team was not integrated by Indigenous

community liaisons rooted in northern Arizona. Even when meeting with and presenting the project to multiple Indigenous community organizations, the lack of trusted community stakeholders in the research team weakened the capacity of the project to engage Indigenous hotel housekeepers.

Engaging Nonimmigrant Indigenous Hotel Housekeepers

In our recognition of the large proportion of nonimmigrant Indigenous housekeepers in the region, and in consultation with a representative from the Unite Here! national labor union organization representing hotel workers nationally, the research team originally intended to equitably engage Mexican immigrant and nonimmigrant American Indian Indigenous hotel housekeepers. We believed we could pursue this goal because our research team had trusted CBPR relationships with Native Nations and Indigenous peoples of the US Southwest. Yet, none of these relationships were directly linked to urban American Indian and Indigenous serving organizations or grassroots groups in Flagstaff, the location of the project. As our HHAB evolved, we learned the level of trust building required to successfully engage the Mexican immigrant hotel housekeeper community was substantial. Through the HHAB, we also became aware of the unique harms experienced by immigrant hotel housekeepers which included various levels of mistrust of their Indigenous coworkers, stemming from labor practices which purposely divided the two groups of workers. We also recognized that given our own identities as researchers and the lack of Indigenous representation on our team, that we too may not have the capacity to meaningfully engage both groups of workers. Engaging the nonimmigrant Indigenous community in Flagstaff required completely different engagement and recruitment strategies, and the active involvement of trusted Indigenous community liaisons in the research team were necessary. Despite inability to engage Indigenous HHAB members, and at the request of the Mexican immigrant HHAB many of whom identified as Indigenous Mexicans, *Entre Nos* structured all activities described below, to be inclusive of all hotel housekeepers.

Environmental Scan

To build collective capacity of the entire *Entre Nos* team, NAU researchers reviewed and presented hospitality industry data to the HHAB. Based on these data, and in consultation with an occupational health and safety specialist associated with UNITEHERE! [<https://unitehere.org/>], the HHAB members decided to conduct an environmental scan of the local industry. The assessment was planned to (1) introduce the *Entre Nos* research project to the local hotel management and (2) assess the acceptability of hotel management to distribute project recruitment and informational flyers with hotel housekeeper staff

on hotel premises. HHAB members helped researchers understand how characteristics of the industry affected worker health, safety, and rights. HHAB members explained hotels are organized by ownership (local, corporate, and management organizations), number of rooms, and quality rating (1-5 stars), and how in their lived experience, each of these characteristics could determine the occupational health and safety of a hotel housekeeper. Based on this local knowledge, researchers developed a sampling framework and a field note guide to systematically assess the characteristics of 15% (N=20) of the hotels in the community.

Wellness Sessions

To engage the broader hotel housekeeper workforce, the HHAB designed an event, centered on creating a supportive, loving, and fun environment for hotel housekeepers to meet the research team, learn about the project, and engage in self-care. HHAB members specifically wanted to create an event that addressed stress reduction and musculoskeletal injury and pain experienced daily by the workforce. To achieve this, we partnered with a community massage school to host five, 60-minute sessions with massage therapy students. Sessions were available in English and Spanish, included light snacks, childcare, do-it-yourself massage techniques and tools, and a goody bag with self-care items for hotel housekeepers to take home. Sessions created an intimate environment in which no more than 20 housekeepers and researchers conducted partner massage. This facilitated the equalization of power relationships where everyone learned something new. HHAB and researchers took turns providing a description of the project, administering a short occupational health and safety survey, and encouraged participants to sign up for the project list serve, Facebook page, a key informant interview, and or join monthly HHAB meetings. All participants were entered into a raffle for a free 1-hour massage. Researchers followed up with participants through phone calls and texts to invite them to upcoming events.

Interviews

To document hotel housekeeper lived experience, and before/shortly after COVID-19 was declared a pandemic (January – April of 2020), researchers also conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with hotel housekeepers identified through the wellness sessions. The HHAB co-developed the interview guide to explore occupational history, work schedules and tasks, and challenges and solutions to occupational health, safety, and workers' rights. Handwritten and audio transcriptions were entered into ATLAS.ti. A codebook was developed with the HHAB. Researchers coded data sources and summarized and presented

preliminary findings for HHAB member check and interpretation. Interviews were stopped in May 2020 due to the difficulty in recruitment, the onset of the pandemic, and multiple stressors experienced by the workforce during this time.

Workers' Rights Educational Series and Toolkit

Based on their expert knowledge, the HHAB members outlined a 6-month calendar of monthly educational sessions, including relevant topics of eating healthy at work and stress management (classes facilitated by experts within our own research team). Due to an increased need in workers' legal rights among the hotel housekeeping community amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, HHAB members recommended the research team organize a workshop that focused on wage theft, sick time, anti-retaliation, and concerted activity, defined as the right to act as a group with co-workers to address work-related issues.²³ Concerted activity is protected under the federal National Labor Relations Act law and ensures that workers can come together to advocate for legal rights in the workplace. In turn, researchers partnered with stakeholders in the community – including the University of Arizona, School of Law Workers Rights' Clinic – to facilitate an workers' rights online session and connect hotel housekeepers with the legal clinic's services. Such partnership led to the creation of a formal workers' rights toolkit guided by the lived experiences of HHAB members and the recommendations of trusted community health workers in design, content, and delivery.

LESSONS LEARNED

Hotel Industry Environmental Scan

Researchers made 28 face-to-face visits to 20 hotels in the region as per the sampling frame. Hotels ranged in size from 21-300 rooms and included five corporate hotels, five management groups, and ten local owners. The number of employees ranged from 1 to 250 employees, with an estimated total of 953 employees across the 20 hotels. Hotels varied in level of interest, understanding of the purpose of the visit, and commitment to share the flyers with employees. Overall, about half (45%) of hotel personnel expressed interest in the project; approximately 65% of hotel staff agreed to post flyers in a location convenient to hotel housekeepers. One-third of hotels allowed research staff to engage directly with hotel housekeepers staff about the project, while in 55% of the visits the flyers required manager or human resource department approval before being shared with hotel housekeepers. Hotel owners and

management did not allow researchers to directly speak to hotel housekeepers except in one small local family-owned hotel. Despite outreach to the hotels and many hotels willing to post flyers, this method was not effective in recruiting hotel housekeepers to the summer wellness sessions. Results of this environmental scan are described in **Table 1**. Hotel Environmental Scan Observation Check List.

Wellness Sessions

During May-August 2019, a total of 18 people participated in four wellness sessions, 15 participants were eligible to be included in the survey analysis. These participants identified as Hispanic/Latino/a with the majority (86.7%) identifying as women aged 30 and 49 years old (n=11, 73%). Over half (60%) were currently employed as Hotel housekeepers, while one-third were former housekeepers. Ninety percent of participants were employed as housekeepers for greater than one year, with a range in employment of 2 to 22 years.

Approximately, 47% (7) of participants reported having been injured at work in the last year; 67% (10) had pain in the hands, wrists, arms, or shoulders every day for a week or more in the last year; 60% (9) had back pain every day for a week or more in the last year; and 93% (14) found their work stressful. One-third (4) reported that their mental or physical health prevented them from doing their daily activities in the last month. In terms of medically diagnosed chronic disease, 13% (2) were diagnosed with diabetes; 27% (4) were diagnosed pre-diabetic; 7% (1) had high blood pressure; and 13% (2) needed medical attention but could not get it in the last 6 month due to cost. Our preliminary data is consistent with the broader hotel housekeepers and low wage worker literature. When asked what worried them about the health of hotel housekeepers, participants expressed concerns around physical health including pain (66.7%), workplace pressure (13.3%), and occupational safety (26.7%). In terms of physical health, participants were concerned about their back and shoulders, hands, knees, feet, bones, muscles, and nerves. Participants described increased labor pressure due to the recent increase in the minimum wage which had resulted in an increased work load. Occupational safety concerns included participants reporting lack of proper equipment, chemical exposure, and risk for falls.

Participants also evaluated the wellness sessions. Participants enjoyed that the massage techniques were basic, that they received a brief massage, and learned new techniques to care for themselves. They described wanting a longer massage with more focused techniques, classes on diet and nutrition, and occupational safety information related to posture and lifting heavy objects. Most participants heard about the wellness sessions via word of mouth from HHAB members – who directly

invited and brought groups of coworkers and family members. Research staff with relationships with hotel housekeepers also invited participants. To our knowledge, none of the hotel housekeepers who attended these events were recruited via the flyer shared with hotels or faith-based organizations.

During this phase of the project, two major issues occurred that we believe deeply affected our ability to recruit. First, under the direction of the Trump Administration, the Department of Homeland Security were actively engaged in weekly immigrant raids of small and large workplaces sending shockwaves through the local immigrant community. Second, a large-scale wildfire occurred in our town causing us to cancel our wellness sessions and force hotels to close due to state-imposed travel restrictions into the region. At this same time, we recognized our ability to recruit and retain majority Spanish speaking immigrant hotel housekeepers was testimony of our teams' and HHAB strong social networks with this community. This served as another sign that this work was naturally beginning to focus our work away from the original intention to engage Indigenous hotel housekeepers.

Interviews

A total of 12 in depth, semi-structured interviews were completed prior to the start of the pandemic. All interviews were conducted with Mexican immigrant Spanish speaking women. Preliminary analysis suggested housekeepers shared a sense of being forgotten, unappreciated, and uncared for as people and as workers. Housekeepers felt unappreciated by the lack of financial compensation, performance appraisal, and support from their supervisors. In most cases, the supervisor(s) were identified as creating or perpetuating these conditions. Specifically, workers felt unappreciated by the lack of praise for good work, lack of pay raises or bonus, limited support from staff or peers, and limited access to materials and equipment to do their job effectively and with ease. Workers felt forgotten, specifically through inaction of hotels or supervisors to follow-up with reports of injury, family situations, or conflicts at work. Several informants point to favoritism towards one group or individual or belittling of Latina workers, especially immigrants, by supervisors or by those in authority positions. Housekeepers also experienced a sense of lack of respect, exemplified by inconsistent communication about scheduling and last-minute calls to stay home from a shift or being sent home after arrival to a shift. A feeling of being uncared for also stemmed from the lack of health benefits, trainings, inconsistent work schedules, unhealthy social and physical environments, discrimination, and wage deficits. Workers stated that if supervisors knew workers and their circumstances, applied policy equally, followed up and attempted to prevent occupational injuries, and provided workers with supportive and respectful environments, various bad outcomes could be avoided, and workers would be happier and more productive.

Workers Right's Educational Series and Toolkit

By late April 2020 – the COVID-19 pandemic shut down the hospitality industry almost completely. Our planned May 1st International Day of the Worker bilingual Workers' Rights session was moved to a Zoom platform. Despite this major shift, this event was attended by 40 new participants. Finally, we understood, the broader workforce was interested in legal tools and resources to solve immediate problems. Yet, COVID-19 directly affected our ability to continue the *Entre Nos* project as planned. Instead, our research team pivoted to address the immediate needs of these essential workers. HHAB and researchers kept in touch through a secured group chat, sharing resources related to food, rental, and utility assistance and COVID-19 prevention and testing information. One researcher, collaborated with broader immigrant rights groups to start a mutual aid fund – raising more than 75k for undocumented workers ineligible for COVID relief money. This research team members also designed a COVID-19 occupational health education magnet for the workforce featured in **Figure 4**. This magnet is based the unconditional love and protection offered by the Virgin of Guadalupe revered in Mexican culture. Other researchers trained in public health assisted local health department address immigrant and Spanish-speaking essential workers affected by COVID-19 through contact tracing and vaccine outreach efforts. Other members focused their Master of Public Health internships toward creation of a bilingual web-based resource guide by calling organizations to verify availability of bilingual resource staff and identified resources restricted due to immigration status. Throughout the pandemic, we continued to strengthened our partnership with the law school, to first identify local hotel housekeepers to participate in the free Worker's Rights law clinic to address labor issues directly. Second, we developed and piloted a Spanish version of the toolkit designed for low wage and immigrant workers directly and community health workers generally to build capacity to engage in collective action and or protected concerted activity.



Figure 4: La Santa housekeeper magnates in English and Spanish

CONCLUSIONS

The *Entre Nos* project occurred in a climate of anti-immigrant rhetoric and action, local challenges in stable and affordable housing, large scale forest wildfires, and emergence of a global pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, the level of precarious living and working conditions of members of the hotel housekeeper community was very high. This, coupled with lack of organized labor and ability for hotel housekeepers

to engage in concerted activity compounded our ability to engage the workforce. Despite these challenges, new partnerships were formed between hotel housekeepers, public health, and law resulting in a worker driven research agenda and a Worker's Rights Toolkit aimed at building worker capacity to engage in collective action and concerted activity.

CBPR In Heightened Socio-Political and Environmental Context

Most empirical research with hotel housekeepers has emerged through partnerships with organized labor that leverages union level relationships and proxy trust to identify and directly engage the workforce.

^{4,12,13,24,25} As a RTW state with no organized labor, our research team immediately consulted occupational health and safety experts from a national labor union representing the hospitality industries in neighboring states of California and Nevada and beyond. At that time, we explained we wanted to engage the workforce, which included Indigenous Mexican, Mexican immigrant, and American Indian workers. Union officials were impressed with our success in forming the HHAB through community organizing efforts observed as difficult at best in other RTW states. Union leaders were supportive and advised *Entre Nos* to involve all workers because united workers have more power than discreet groups of workers. In our experiences and given the unique context of the rural Arizona region of focus, engaging and uniting these diverse workforces proved challenging. The *Entre Nos* project left out American Indian and Indigenous hotel housekeepers, largely because we had not built the necessary relationships with this community as we did with Mexican immigrant hotel housekeepers. By focusing on Mexican immigrant hotel housekeepers and through CBPR, we were able to learn about the potential power dynamics set in motion by hotel industries to pit Mexican immigrant and American Indian and Indigenous workers against each other - common practice by many industries attempting to disincentive organized labor or collective action.

Anti-immigrant and specifically anti-Mexican immigrant sentiment was palpable during the life of the project and sparked the project in the first place. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers partnered with local law enforcement to identify and arrest undocumented community members. During the 2019 summer wellness sessions, the Department of Homeland Security executed several national immigration raids of large employers in the meat packing, hospitality, and agricultural sectors ²⁹ sending shock waves through the entire immigrant community. Locally, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers partnered with local law enforcement to identify and arrest undocumented community members. Prior empirical research conducted by our team has demonstrated how such immigration related violence contributes to a climate of fear and stress among people of Mexican heritage regardless

of immigration status.^{14,26,27} Emergent research also demonstrates how jurisdictions with more immigration enforcement (through partnerships between local law enforcement and DHS) have correspondingly lower rates of workers' rights complaints to federal agencies. We believe this socio-political climate also further complicated CBPR efforts.

Implications for CBPR and Next Steps

In sum, many CBPR projects begin with a problem identified by the community in which researchers respond by leveraging their unique skills with those of the community to create social change. We prioritized building trust with a small group of hotel housekeepers and their families by embracing community organizing efforts as part of the research process. It was the strength of our relationships with the Mexican immigrant hotel housekeeping community that guided us to leverage financial and academic resources to spark the development of a hotel housekeeper driven research agenda in Arizona.

Our next steps include, (1) expand our team to involve Indigenous identities who hold relationships with hotel housekeeping, (2) identify and build relationships with Mexican Immigrant and Indigenous hotel housekeeper and labor champions who have experience bridging multi-cultural and multi lingual worker groups and (3) train community health workers and tribally employed community health representatives in our bilingual Worker Rights Toolkit to build worker capacity and potentially bring workers together in meaningful and culturally safe ways to advocate for collective rights in the workplace.

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Table 1. Hotel Environmental Scan Observation Check List	
Interaction Characteristics	% (n/20)
Researcher spoke directly to manager*	55% (11)
Researcher spoke to front desk staff only *	55% (11)
Hotel personnel agreed to post flyers in breakroom	40% (8)
Hotel personnel agreed to post flyers in other location (clock in, front desk, behind desk, laundry)	25% (5)
Recruitment flyers required manager approval to be shared	55% (11)
Hotel personnel agreed to verbally inform staff of opportunity	10% (2)
Hotel personnel allowed for direct engagement with HHs on site	30% (6)
Hotel personnel offered or expressed interest in the project	45% (9)
Hotel personnel offered or expressed interest in employee wellness	20% (4)
<i>*Numbers may not equal 100% due to multiple visits to the same hotel.</i>	

Description: Participant demographic table