Enduring a Pandemic

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When 2020 began, I entered the year wanting to make a bigger impact. I had been working diligently as a change agent for Diversity & Inclusion initiatives at BNY Mellon when I was selected to join the inaugural Junior Board for the POTS organization. As a black woman, born and raised in the Bronx, I felt proud to join a team of individuals, passionate about creating possibility for those less fortunate – especially those in a marginalized community so close to my heart.

As with any first-time board, we needed to find our groove. Our initial goal was to get up to speed with the organization’s mission including the services we provide. We spent one Saturday serving POTS clients during the lunch program and had the opportunity to speak directly with the POTS staff. We left with a clear understanding of how important POTS is to the community and we knew our mission would be centered around bringing awareness to this cause.

In January, we tossed out ideas of block parties and in-person events. Then, just as we were moving into the next phase of development, excited to bring our ideas to life, COVID-19 hit. The pandemic disproportionately affected those living in the Bronx with an even larger effect on the African American and Hispanic populations. In that moment, the Junior Board quickly realized that we had to pivot in order to provide support for those significantly affected by this unforeseen crisis.

We worked collectively in partnership with the POTS operating team to create a COVID-19 relief video which highlighted, now more than ever, the importance of this non-profit. We used that video as a tool to be leveraged across multiple social media channels and within various email campaigns. Collectively we gathered donations for POTS’ Emergency Assistance Fund, created to provide grants to low-income clients who were at risk for eviction. We closed out the holiday season by sponsoring gifts for a family in need and gave a well-deserved thank you (through gift cards) to the essential workers making an impact throughout the POTS organization. With year one under our belt, we hope to kick off 2021 by doing more to serve our community through a high-intensity workout and the junior board was able to raise over $8,000. Throughout the year, members of the board continued to volunteer their time (in a COVID-friendly manner) packing groceries for clients regularly. We closed out the holiday season by sponsoring gifts for a family in need and gave a well-deserved thank you (through gift cards) to the essential workers making an impact throughout the POTS organization.

As we make our way through the winter months, we have only just begun and look forward to continuing our journey as part of the solution.
An Update on Vaccine Hesitancy

by Jack M. Gorman, MD for POTS

Experts agree that the only way to resolve the current coronavirus pandemic is with a vaccine. Fortunately, at the time of this writing two vaccines have been granted Emergency Use Authorization by the FDA (Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna/NIH) and more are likely on the way.

Everyone should be cheering these developments and readying ourselves to line up for vaccines against COVID-19 as they become available, yet around a third of us in various surveys say we either won’t have the vaccine until it is given to a large number of other people or won’t have it at all. Strikingly, people who have been most affected by COVID-19—Black, Latinx, Native American, and low-income people—have the highest rates of saying they will not accept a COVID-19 vaccine. Given the serious health threats posed by COVID-19 and the widespread damage it has done to our economy, these sentiments are both surprising and disturbing.

VACCINE HESITANCY IS NOT NEW

Vaccine hesitancy and refusal are hardly new phenomena. Ever since Edward Jenner introduced the smallpox vaccine in 1792, there have always been people and groups who have opposed vaccination. Benjamin Franklin wrote in his famous autobiography that one of the greatest mistakes of his life was refusing to have his children vaccinated against smallpox—one of his sons died from smallpox.

Although today vaccination is regarded as one of the triumphs of medicine and public health, anti-vaccination sentiment received a very unfortunate boost in 1995 when an English gastroenterologist, Andrew Wakefield, published a paper in a prestigious medical journal, the *Lancet*, claiming that the measles/mumps/rubella (MMR) vaccine causes autism. Many studies have since shown that there is absolutely no association between the MMR vaccine and autism and in fact Wakefield’s paper turned out to be loaded with misinformation and was retracted by the journal in 2004. But the damage was done, and we have seen a well-organized anti-vaccination movement grown in the U.S. and throughout the world as a result of this totally debunked paper. So destructive has this anti-vaccination been, that we have seen outbreaks of measles in the U.S. and around the world, largely among unvaccinated people. Contrary to what some believe, measles is not a benign disease; around 140,000 people, mostly children under the age of 5, died from measles around the world in 2018 according to the World Health Organization.

SOME REASONS FOR COVID-19 VACCINE HESITANCY

The introduction of vaccines against COVID-19 has stimulated anti-vaccination sentiments, some based on understandable concerns, others on misinformation, and still others on conspiracy theories. Our group at Critica has been working on a project to counteract online misinformation about vaccines and have encountered this range of vaccine hesitancy and refusal concerning the COVID-19 vaccine. Here is what we’ve heard and our responses:

1. The COVID-19 vaccines are being rushed without enough time to make sure they are safe. This is by far the most common reason people give for not wanting to be vaccinated as soon as possible and this is perhaps the most understandable of all vaccine hesitancy concerns. Indeed, the COVID-19 vaccines have been developed remarkably quickly, but there are good scientific reasons for this. First, the virus that causes COVID-19, called SARS-CoV-2, is very close in its structure to viruses that scientists have always been working on for decades. They were able to use this knowledge to figure out what part of this coronavirus a vaccine should target. Second, because of very substantial developments in biomedical technology in the last decade, the genetic structure of SARS-CoV-2 was figured out just months after the first reported cases in China. Third, never before have so many scientists and laboratories worked on finding a vaccine for a single virus. Finally, the clinical trials done on these vaccines are very similar to those that have been done for already available vaccines and so far, no serious adverse side effects have been seen. Most vaccine side effects show up hours to weeks after the vaccine is administered, so there is actually enough time to pick these up. Still, we understand that when something is new, it will raise worries. Our job is not to dismiss them but to help people understand what the science says.

2. The mechanism for these vaccines might affect a person’s genes. Whenever the word “genetic” comes up, people automatically fear that some terrible harm will come to them. It is true that serious harms like cancer and radiation disease come from mutations in our genes, so once again being told that two of the new vaccines contain genetic material has made some people fear that it will get mixed up in our human genes and cause serious problems to occur. Indeed, the platform for the Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna vaccines uses messenger RNA, a molecule that tells cells what proteins to make, and these will be the first RNA vaccines. Therefore people might worry that this won’t cause mutations? Here we have to try hard to explain some very technical things about viruses and genes in ways that are understandable to people without advanced scientific training. RNA vaccines should be safer than existing vaccines because no whole virus particles are involved and studies have shown that the RNA itself does not incorporate into human cells.

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3. Natural immunity is better than vaccine immunity. Once a person has had a case of measles, mumps, or chicken pox their immune system has enough information to prevent them from ever getting sick from the viruses that cause these illnesses again. So why not just let everyone get COVID-19, develop this kind of natural immunity, and avoid vaccines? The answers are that a first round with COVID-19 makes some people very sick and even die and it is not known whether natural immunity to COVID-19 is actually strong enough to prevent getting it again or passing it on to other people. People often believe that anything that is natural is better than something made in a laboratory, but in this case we would be taking huge risks to rely on natural immunity.

4. COVID-19 isn’t serious enough to risk taking a newly developed vaccine. It is true that most people who get COVID-19 survive. And it could be the case that survivors become immune to the virus—although again we just don’t know yet. To say, however, that the virus is not serious ignores the fact that more than 500,000 Americans have already died and that among survivors some suffer prolonged breathing and heart problems that require extended recovery periods. COVID-19 is also filling up hospital beds and exhausting healthcare workers.

5. The conspiracy theories. These include that the pandemic is a hoax cooked up by a conspiracy among pharmaceutical companies, the government, and doctors and that the vaccine contains microchips that will be used for surveillance. We know that whenever something is complicated or new and people feel threatened, conspiracy theories like these will arise. They are hard to debunk, but we must do our best to make sure that more people don’t jump on these bandwagons. By the way, currently available microchips are about the size of a grain of rice and therefore too large to make it through a needle into your arm.

We hope that people will check with their own doctors about COVID-19 vaccines and avoid these five (and other) fear-laden ideas that circulate on the internet and social media. The risks of allowing the coronavirus pandemic to continue unchecked are severe and unacceptable. The risk of these new vaccines seems far less. You may know some—or even many—people who have gotten over a case of COVID-19 but ask any hospital doctor or nurse and you will hear grim stories of people getting very sick, needing to be on respirators, and even dying. We all make the mistake of thinking anecdotes and stories are data and facts. The facts about COVID-19 can be complicated and technical but they show that this is a very serious and sometimes life-threatening disease that natural immunity won’t solve.

Jack Gorman is a physician and scientist who founded Critica with his daughter, Sara E. Gorman, PhD, MPH. The mission of Critica is to improve the public’s acceptance of scientific consensus, counteract misinformation about science and health, and increase the use of scientific evidence in public policymaking. Critica grew out of Jack and Sara’s book Denying To the Grave, which discusses the psychology and neurobiological basis for science denial and will be published in an updated and revised edition by Oxford University Press in June 2021. More information about Critica can be found at criticascience.org.

Community Spotlight: ANA GILDA DOMINGUEZ & KAREN WEINBERG

POTS’ ability to withstand crisis stems from its nearly forty-year history of staying in tune with the needs of its clients and adapting accordingly. This has been particularly difficult during the pandemic, as physical distancing has created numerous obstacles that limit interaction between POTS staff, volunteers and clients. But POTS people, deeply invested in organization’s mission, have helped bridge the gaps and restore this interrupted connection.

Two of our dedicated community members, Ana Gilda Dominguez and Karen Weinberg, have played a vital role in helping POTS continue to be a loving community to individuals and families seeking relief and resolution despite the harsh effects of the pandemic. Ana who is a Bronx native, and Karen who moved to Harlem with her daughter during the pandemic have begun picking up groceries and delivering them to individuals in their communities who are elderly, single parents, unemployed, or undocumented, and have no way to make it to the POTS facility. They are helping to preserve the health of their neighbors in need while ensuring that they have the resources they need for a more stable life.

What is it about POTS that motivates them to help out in their own communities? Karen is driven by the idea that “we are all connected to each other and can show kindness is so many ways - big and small. At POTS, kindness is always in abundance in the way that everyone works, volunteers, and interacts with each other and in how clients are helped and treated. I have seen that the smallest bit of kindness can make a huge difference in someone’s day, so now I practice that whenever I can: smiling and saying “hello”, holding a door open, asking if someone needs help, offering a helping hand, and making sure that people know I appreciate their acts of kindness.”

For Ana, it is the spirit with which POTS serves and nurtures its community that is motivating. She is inspired by how POTS has worked with so much patience and honesty in support of the many who need even more help during this pandemic. Although Ana and Karen have been enjoying the experience of bringing joy and greater peace of mind directly to their neighbors’ doorsteps, they also look forward to a brighter future at POTS. Ana anticipates a sense of normalcy being restored in the Bronx community, especially for those who have been marginalized even further due to the pandemic. Karen is grateful for the fulfillment and positivity she gets at POTS, and is excited to continue working there throughout the year!
Looking to the Year Ahead

POTS Executive Director Christina Hanson sees 2021 as a time to stay strong in the face of crisis, to collaborate with community partners, and to be prepared to seize new opportunities later this year.

After 10 months of shutdowns, uncertainty, social distancing, kids in remote schooling, economic upheaval, and lost loved ones, the vaccine roll out is happening all around us. As employees and patients in hospitals and nursing homes, seniors, teachers, front-line responders are vaccinated, we will see the light at the end of the tunnel. But we aren’t there yet.

For the first 6 months of 2021, POTS will continue to prioritize safety for clients and staff while providing service to the community at an unprecedented level. Unemployment in the Bronx remains very high at 16% — twice the rate of New York State. This is especially challenging in a borough that already had the lowest average income in the state before the crisis. POTS clients are still facing hunger, unpaid rent and utility bills, and difficulty accessing life’s necessities.

POTS is here for those people who need it, connecting them to life-sustaining benefits, such as groceries and prepared meals, providing showers, guidance toward obtaining employment, and keeping people in their homes with the lights on. We are also here to listen and learn about what they need, fear, hope and dream of.

POTS has also learned and is expanding on new ways of serving the community that line up with our values and use technology that has become so familiar during the pandemic. First, through online education, mental health and “know your rights” workshops and parenting assistance. Second, through use of texting as a means of staying in touch with clients. This has been a very successful way of providing legal and case management support.

Finally, we are glad that Congress approved additional relief funds including direct payments to individuals, significant rent support to be distributed through the state, and food aid increases through SNAP (food stamps) and to food charities nationwide. These actions are extremely meaningful to our community. The $600 can pay overdue utilities, chip away at rent owed, ensure children can access what they need for school, keep a family stocked with products that promote hygiene and cleanliness. The food aid will mean that everyone with SNAP has a little more to support the food they purchase and cook to nourish their families. The rent arrears support will be essential to ensuring that a whole generation of low-income Americans don’t become homeless when rent moratoriums expire. Support of this nature is so important to ensuring that the challenges of COVID-19 don’t become a determining factor in people’s futures. The power of federal support will deepen and broaden the impact of POTS’ work — in the Bronx and nationwide.

We are optimistic about learning from the past year and are embarking on a strategic planning process to chart out the coming years. We’re particularly excited about our planned expansion into new space and we look forward to growing our capacity to help our community members reach stability and freedom from poverty.

POTS has become like a second home to Leroy Brown, POTS’ Community Dining Room Chef, in January 2020. Leroy previously worked as a chef at a college, but he had to take some time off due to a hip replacement surgery. While recovering from this surgery was not the most enjoyable time for Leroy, he is happy that it led him to POTS. He loves what POTS does for and means to the Bronx community.

When he first began looking into POTS, he was excited about the opportunity to help the community by cooking a lot of fun, healthy foods. “I love that I can help people that aren’t in the best situation or in the best space by making them a good meal. And people tell me my chicken is pretty good, so I couldn’t wait to make it for everyone.”

Leroy was only at POTS for about two months before conditions in the community and the world completely shifted. In mid-March, POTS modified its program delivery so that it could continue providing vital services to those in need in a safe and efficient way.

While the majority of POTS’ programs began to transition to remote operation, Emergency Food Program Staff stayed on the frontlines. Leroy was able to continue making meals that sustained individuals and families during periods of intense hardship and used his talents to provide a sense of hope to the POTS community. Leroy’s work played a major role in POTS’ distribution of over 2,300,000 meals in 2020.

With over a year of working at POTS and frontline hero duties under his belt, Leroy reflected on how the organization has changed since the pandemic and what he misses most. “I miss talking to the guests. They would ask me questions like, “What’s on the menu for tomorrow?” or tell me “I really liked the meal you made today for lunch.” But now, you can barely touch base with clients to talk about the basics. I miss being able to show concern for our guests, not just for things regarding food, but for how they are really doing.”

One thing that Leroy is counting on for 2021 is that it will be safe enough to have clients return to the Community Dining Room for lunch. Even though he knows this hope may be a little farfetched, he takes pride in the fact that no matter what’s going on, regardless of whether you can sit down or not, there will always be a meal or help waiting for you at POTS’ doors. “Some people think POTS is just a soup kitchen when POTS is so much more. At POTS, we want the recipes to translate from here to home.” POTS is grateful for all the work Leroy has done to make it feel like home.
A Conversation with POTS’ Congressman, Adriano Espaillat (NY-13)

The Recipe: How has COVID impacted the Bronx?

Espaillat: In an immeasurable number of ways – this pandemic has not affected all Americans equally, and the impact it has had on the Bronx and other parts of my district, makes this clear. While Manhattan has about 13% more residents, the Bronx has seen more cases, hospitalizations and deaths across the board. These disparities are due to numerous factors, but at the forefront are systemic inequities that we have yet to address in communities around this country – and in New York City – that makes the difference between life and death for so many of our residents.

The Recipe: What would you like people outside the Bronx to know about that impact?

Espaillat: I want people to know that this isn’t because of the luck of the draw, and this has not been “the great equalizer” – these inequities exist because of the underlying systemic inequities that were already present in the city. Parts of the Bronx, for example, face food deserts, income inequality, public housing that is in poor condition, and low-quality clinical care – and on top of that, it is home to more frontline workers and subway riders than other boroughs. I urge my congressional colleagues and public leaders to take into consideration, especially when we talk about relief and support for our most vulnerable communities, that we must start providing special care and attention to those disproportionately impacted, that we just simply have not seen yet.

This is a challenging time for individuals and families in the Bronx and all communities throughout my district. The ongoing pandemic has touched each of us directly in some way, and we have witnessed strains on our health systems, transit systems, schools and public services. As a result, experts have warned on an imminent mental health crisis on the horizon. It remains critical that we support our friends, family, neighbors – and at times, even ourselves – to ensure resources are available to address the mental health needs of our communities.

The Recipe: What are the most important issues for our community for the new Administration and the new Congress to understand?

Espaillat: There are many issues that should be addressed within the first 100 days of the 117th Congress. It remains critical that we address health disparities facing minority communities, the unequal impact COVID-19 has had on residents and communities of color as well as environmental injustice. There is a direct link between socioeconomic status and human health, and minority communities face an array of distinct economic and social challenges that are often overlooked once people get to Washington – and the health disparities in New York City are a perfect example of that. The Bronx is not the wealthiest congressional district and sees some of the worst health outcomes in this country – there is a direct connection. Our community suffers from disproportionately high incidences of obesity, diabetes, asthma, cardiovascular disease, mental illness, and other chronic health conditions. Moreover, individuals from the Bronx are more likely to experience higher morbidity and mortality when compared to middle-income or wealthier neighborhoods of mainstream America. The Bronx has made great progress and has come a long way, but still, too many residents remain in poverty, unemployment is high among our youth, and affordable housing remains a large concern.

The Recipe: What would you like to see Bronx residents do to get more involved in making positive change?

Espaillat: Use your voice. Representation matters and it’s critical that our community has a say on the issues that affect us directly. The most important thing anyone can do is to use their voice – and once they’ve done that, encourage their friends, families and neighbors to all use their voices, because our constituents are the lifeblood of what we do in Congress. We can only do our jobs better when we consistently hear about what our constituents are struggling with. I want our Bronx residents to be relentless in fighting for the change they want to see in our community, and to know that any and everything that is impacting their life impacts mine, and the work their elected leaders are doing on their behalf. I vow to continue listening and fighting for my Bronx constituents – it’s the only way we can build back better.

The Recipe: In what ways do you feel the Biden Administration will help improve the economy of the Bronx?

Espaillat: The Biden-Harris administration is a monumental opportunity for the Bronx, and for New York and our nation. More immediately, we anticipate seeing much more federal investment that will aid in our recovery from the COVID-19 health and economic crisis – more stimulus checks, more rental assistance, and more relief and targeted support specifically for our lower-income and minority communities. Our borough has the lowest percentage of employees who can work remotely and was hit the hardest economically at the start of this crisis. I now look forward to working with the Biden-Harris administration to ensure another round of relief is a priority, to tackle issues impacting communities like the Bronx, and to ensure our families are no longer rent-burdened, but have equal access to quality healthcare and have food on the table.

The Recipe: What gives you the most hope for America’s future and what are your greatest concerns?

Espaillat: We are resilient and as a community, we have shown through our dexterity that we are on the road to build back better and stronger than ever before – especially as we head into 2021 under the leadership of President Biden and Vice President Harris. My biggest concern, however, is that spark of resiliency might be lost in the fray of partisan infighting and disunity. I hope that under his leadership, President Biden will lead our community and our country into a future full of empathy, healing and betterment all around – equitable resolution to crises like these is only possible when those at the top share that vision. I know I do, and I know the new administration does as well.
Longtime POTS leader Taina Rodriguez, was honored by the Robin Hood Foundation as a New York City Hero during its televised Heroes of New York Special on December 1 for her tireless commitment to helping hungry Bronxites get a meal and so much more when they come to the POTS facility. While devoting her time selflessly for over 20 years, Taina has naturally become an intrinsic part of the POTS community and has played an integral role in helping the organization emerge as one of the Bronx’s leading providers of emergency food services. Taina initially came to POTS at the age of 11. She and her family faced the same issues our staff encounter with clients on a daily basis—primarily food insecurity. Once she felt the warmth and love of the POTS community, she was moved to share it with the many others who came to POTS seeking help. Taina transitioned from being a client, to a volunteer, and eventually she joined the POTS staff at the age of 14, working with the maintenance team. Over the years, Taina has served in a number of roles at POTS, including Community Dining Room Cook and Volunteer Coordinator. Today, Taina continues to be a hero to the POTS community in her role as Associate Director of Food and Dignity Programs, spearheading the operation and growth of the Emergency Food Program and Day to Day Services. The impact of her work was felt more than ever in 2020 as POTS served more than twice the meals it did in 2019.

Taina's words of encouragement to viewers of the Special were, "Your situation today does not define what you will be tomorrow." Not only do these words perfectly exemplify Taina's dedication and spirit, but it is this sentiment that motivates POTS to keep helping those in need persevere during hard times.

2020 will long be remembered as a year of uncertainty due to the many fluctuations in social and economic conditions around the world, and especially in underserved areas like the Bronx. As a new year begins, both government officials and residents alike look forward to the prospect of federal, state, and local policies that will promote greater stability. Congressman Adriano Espaillat of New York’s 13th District sees the new Biden-Harris administration as presenting an opportunity to bring a sense of hope to Americans who have been struggling. In accordance with this expectation, President Biden announced in early January that he will work to assemble a multitrillion-dollar relief package for Americans, inclusive of an additional stimulus payment, and billions of dollars designated for aid to city and state governments. The relief package will also include funds dedicated to improving vaccine distribution, supporting schools, rent forbearance, and financial assistance for small businesses. One area in which the potential for new federal policies may be particularly relevant to the POTS community is unemployment. President Biden is urging an expansion of unemployment insurance benefits. While the previous relief bill grants beneficiaries a weekly $300 payment to supplement unemployment benefits, the Biden administration seeks to raise this amount to $600. These discussions arose just as the Department of Labor announced that 140,000 American jobs had been lost in December. These unemployment benefits will replace on average more than 90% of wages in leisure, hospitality and health care jobs—roles that are primarily occupied by low-income Black and Brown Americans. POTS’ Workforce Coordinator Jay Escobar, offers some words of advice for individuals navigating the unemployment process:

*Be patient with the process. Don’t give up or quit because you aren’t getting through or hearing back, instead try calling at different times of the day and putting the call on speaker phone until someone picks up. Get the name of the representative who assists you, and ask that notes be kept pertaining to your claim.*

I would also recommend that individuals collecting unemployment take advantage of this time to upgrade their skills via job trainings, or to get credentials to increase their chances of a successful career change post-unemployment. The Recipe is grateful to POTS’ Workforce Coordinator, Jay Escobar for his contributions to this article.

Sources: The Washington Post; U.S. Department of Labor
All of us in the POTS community wish to express our heartfelt gratitude to the more than 2,200 individuals, families, institutions, and businesses who became part of the solution in 2020. The challenges were many, and unprecedented on so many levels. But our supporters stepped up and made sure we met every one. Thanks to people like you, POTS was able to provide more than 2,300,000 meals last year. And the word is spreading. POTS received first-time gifts from an unprecedented 1,462 donors this past year!

With unemployment in the Bronx at Great Depression levels just last summer and poverty still deeply entrenched, record numbers of clients continue to come to our door. With your help, we can continue to make sure that POTS’ door is always open, and that we continue to open doors of opportunity for our Bronx neighbors. Look out for our winter appeal coming soon and when you receive it, please consider a generous gift. It means so much to our neighbors in need.

For more information on how to be a part of the solution contact Director of Development Dan Rostan at 718.220.4892 ext. 107 or drostan@potsbronx.org.

POTS is no longer a kid. Or even a teen or young adult. POTS turns 40 next year. As Part of the Solution plans for its future, we encourage you to do the same. By including POTS in your legacy plans, you’ll ensure that your commitment to our Bronx neighbors continues well after your lifetime.

By establishing your giving plans now, you can specify how your generosity will impact POTS. Also, many donors want to make a major gift but lack the financial flexibility to do so. You may find that gift planning lets you make a large gift, and have the satisfaction that the POTS mission will continue to be advanced for generations to come. For example, bequests have been shown to typically amount to over twice a donor’s lifetime giving. There are also tax advantages to planned giving. These will vary according to the nature of your gift. If you would like to discuss your planned gift to POTS, or are ready to consider one, please do not hesitate to contact POTS Director of Development Dan Rostan at 718.220.4892 ext. 107 or drostan@potsbronx.org.