

WELLNESS CHAMPION

OCTOBER 2024

EDUARDO "EDDIE" OLIVAREZ

CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER
HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICE DEPARTMENT

Volunteering and community service offer numerous benefits for mental, physical, and social well-being, according to a study by the National Institutes of Health. These activities reduce mortality and improve quality of life, pride, empowerment, motivation, social support, and a sense of community.

If you've ever met Eduardo "Eddie" Olivarez, Chief Administrative Officer at Hidalgo County Health and Human Services Department, you've likely noticed his vibrant energy and commanding presence. When Olivarez speaks, his passion and commitment to his work are unmistakable.

A baby boomer, Olivarez didn't serve in the military—he was too young by the time the draft ended. However, his father, who served in the U.S. Navy aboard the U.S.S. Independence, and his mother, who worked in sales, instilled in him a strong sense of service and teamwork.

"I was raised that way. My dad was a volunteer firefighter, my parents were always volunteers and supportive in the church," he recounted.

Olivarez's journey into community service



began shortly after high school. "I was a volunteer firefighter in Mission, then I became a volunteer firefighter here in Edinburg," he said, noting that Edinburg had a program that allowed college students to live in the fire station at no cost if they volunteered to fight fires.

The program, designed for students at what is now the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, required participants to pass their courses each semester.

"... the benefits you get have tremendous value. Nothing can beat that value."

After graduating, Olivarez moved to San Antonio with his fiancée, who was pursuing her graduate degree at St. Mary's University. He began working at a psychiatric hospital, which marked the start of his career in healthcare.

"That started my psych career and that's how I got into healthcare," he said. "So, [healthcare] has always been part of my adult life."

After more than a decade, Olivarez

returned to the Rio Grande Valley to take a position at a behavioral center in McAllen. He later gained experience at private outpatient facilities before being offered a role in 2001 with Hidalgo County's juvenile probation boot camp. Less than a year later, he was asked to interview for the position of Chief Administrative Officer at the Health Department, a role he held for more than 22 years.

“It’s a different person who [serves the community]. Not everyone is cut out to do this work.”

Transitioning from private hospitals to the public sector was relatively seamless, Olivarez said. “It was not a big jump,” he noted. “My goal over time was to transition it to be more of a different healthcare model that combined primary care with preventative healthcare and also brought emergency management into it.”

This decision to merge public health with emergency response was influenced by the 9/11 attacks. The focus shifted to managing large-scale events such as chemical spills, wildfires, disease outbreaks, and hurricanes. Partnerships with cities and school districts were established to ensure preparedness, including strategic national stockpiles and dispensing sites.

These resources were put to the test in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“All [those resources] came into play during the pandemic,” Olivarez said. “But the most difficult thing about the

pandemic was handling the fatalities.”

He recalled the overwhelming sight of FEMA and state trailers holding the deceased and the challenge of ensuring accurate information for each victim.

“I’ve dealt with fatalities. I’ve dealt with large-scale death—big car accidents—but not hundreds and hundreds,” he said.

Olivarez also opened up about the personal toll the pandemic took on him. He rarely saw his wife during long stretches of 2020 and is still grappling with the mental health effects of that period.

“It was hard. It was difficult,” he said. He continued mentioning he spoke to a close colleague about how the global event was personally impacting him, adding it was an emotional conversation.

Olivarez has long encouraged his staff to prioritize their well-being, and the pandemic amplified that focus.

“The concept of the wellness component in dealing with some of the contract services that have been offered to the county, to get that emotional support... the county has gone a long way to assist that,” he said. “That is so critical. We have nearly 4,000 employees in the county, and you have to sit down and think about the emotional impact.”

Reflecting on his 38-year career, Olivarez noted that discussions around mental health were once considered taboo, particularly in Mexican American culture.

"I'm glad that in the last three or four years or so, the embracing of mental health as a need in our community has grown," he said. "It's night and day compared to when I started my career. We still have a lot of work to do."

At 63, nearing retirement, Olivarez credits his faith for guiding him through difficult times in his life and career.

"Diosito is powerful, man," he smiled. "To me, God is so strong. Diosito put me into this place to lead and to do this for our community and to better our community. I have to have faith in him that he knows I can do it."

Olivarez acknowledges that giving back to the community is no easy task, especially when it comes to the time and commitment required. But he takes pride in the extraordinary team behind him.

"We have fantastic people who work for us," he said. "Their skills are beyond belief. We have people here who could be making hundreds of thousands of dollars in the private sector, but they're here."

"Why?" he asked, pounding his fist to his chest. "It's about serving the community. It's a different person who does that. Not everyone is cut out to do this work. That's the truth."

He's particularly proud of how far Hidalgo County has come in supporting employees.

"We've got the nutrition, the fitness, the wellness, the contract to provide mental health services," he listed.

When Olivarez joined the county nearly 23 years ago, he said his ideas for better insurance and employee support, such as weight loss programs, were dismissed.

"Now it's encouraged!" he exclaimed. "So I tell the new employees, 'You guys are joining a good team that is going to promote your health, your mental health, your physical health. The county has a fantastic retirement program, has some fantastic benefits. Our salary might not be as competitive as the private sector, but the benefits you get have tremendous value. Nothing can beat that value.'"

