

An Interview with Carlos Gomez

Perspectives from the COVID-19 Pandemic: Leadership and Learning in Nevada

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Principal Researchers:

Magdalena Martinez, Ph.D. and Kelliann Beavers, Ph.D.

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Each interviewee had the opportunity to review their transcript. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the interviewee. This interview features Carlos Gomez, Vice President of Latin Chamber of Commerce, and was conducted on 1/27/2023 by Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio. This interview covers topics including reflections on leadership, organizational challenges, and opportunities for collaboration.

## **Interview with Carlos Gomez**

### **SPEAKERS**

**Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio and Carlos Gomez**

#### **Carmen**

Okay, got it. So we are here with Carlos Gomez, Vice President of Business Development for the Latin Chamber of Commerce. It's Friday, January 27th. Carlos, if you could just give us your consent again, if you agreed to be recorded for this call.

#### **Carlos**

The answer is yes, I agree for the recording.

#### **Carmen**

Thank you. And as we mentioned a little bit in the email, our research study is really about assessing the impact of COVID 19 in Nevada in different sectors, be it business, education, nonprofits, etc.

So we have a list of questions here for you. If you could just kind of revert back in time a bit. The first one. Is pretty basic. Can you describe your role throughout the pandemic and the role of the Latin Chamber as a whole?

#### **Carlos**

Well first with the pandemic COVID 19 now different names. Was difficult at the time because we didn't know how to deal with it.

And keep in mind for all the audience soon come in to solve the problems. Team Microsoft team works. So in the past was face to face. Always our interaction was. Face to face, being in the community and the business community, seminars, everything, people coming in. But when this hit, a pandemic hits, we didn't know how to do it.

So the first thing as they came in, we closed the office. We, we were open, but we limit just to certain people really insulated with the distance, social distance, everything. But we learned that. The community, the business community need help, especially the Hispanic community. So we didn't know how to deal with it.

So we started working with SBA working with all, all, all the, all the state, the the county and the cities. to find out how we can help those businesses. And also, I need to mention Workforce Connections and many other organizations because they, with soon, we start connecting the dots. How we can help those businesses connect with the services, And we connect that.

Grants, help for the inventory, help for a payroll, and our role, my role was to connect, just to get the assistance from the federal agencies and local agencies, and see how we can connect the local community. But everything was through Zoom. Never face to face. Almost throughout two years, almost two years where we were doing that.

So, our role, my role was. To connect grants services with the small small, well, the Hispanic, a small business, diverse minority owned businesses and connect them. But we had we had a lot of trouble because in our community, first generation business owners, they don't have the paperwork, nothing. They, they do the taxes.

They do everything. But for this progress at the beginning. Was so much paperwork, so much. Asking the PPP loans and everything was impossible to be in compliance for a small businesses. Second generation small businesses already in second generation, we don't have any problem. They had all the paperwork, insurance, business licenses, all the paperwork required and was easy for us to compile.

Well, easy in the sense, but we compile the paperwork, we submit the paperwork for them and they got the assistance.

### **Carmen**

Thanks. That's exactly what I was hoping to get answered through this question. So next question, and I'm gonna ask you to kind of think back a little bit. If you could walk us through the pandemic as a timeline, the way that you remember it.

So what, what happened? Were there kind of pivotal moments that you remember like, oh, this happened and it really was a, a pivotal moment that changed the way that I decided to act as a leader.

### **Carlos**

Well to be honest, I, it's in my memory, is when the casino industry start closing casinos. First they start by sections, then the whole casino, I don't remember the names, but when one casino start on the street, and then the rest follow.

That's what they hit us and we say, wow, what is this? What is what we need to do first security? I remember the before any PPP's or PPP's or any federal help. We didn't know this. The people come to us and say, Well, face mask the what is the health and, and, and, and, and just the basic that we learned through the news and, and calling, calling Southern Nevada Health Department, calling the state, calling all those agencies.

We know that there are the first respondent, Metro Metro was very helpful and we asking what we need to do in order to transmit that information to the business owners. I remember that was where it started and I believe it was around May 19 something or 20. No, May 20 because this pandemic started January, December, January was, was growing up.

But when really hits, I don't remember it was before summer, but I remember casinos closing in that impact. closing them, them banks and then everything. And then executives, for instance, we start dealing with meetings and things like that. And I remember a big company saying, you know what, Carlos, by company policy, we cannot be with more than 10 people in any meeting at all.

And then, well, how can we help this person? Well, Bring it to the chamber one to one, put the 12 feet distance and we will call in with it and you need to be far away. So that's what we did. I mean, nobody knew, not even us. We were requiring from authorities to feed us information so we can get this information back to the business owner and our community.

### **Carmen**

So you do you deal exclusively with business owners or also their staff or any other types of groups?

### **Carlos**

Our organization, the first goal is the business community. But to be honest, no, we were really involved in everything. Doing the setup, for instance, with Las Vegas convention and in the cashman field to do the vaccination, the COVID vaccination.

We were very involved in promoting those events. We were really involved with all Metro. Southern Nevada Health Department, state, county, the city, and, and we really were involved because this pandemic, it was not about businesses. That's about what impacts our community. So we'll focus and bring all the resources for our community at large.

So we, and even members or non members, we will say what you need. We were there for our community. It doesn't matter if there are members or not, but for first time we focused in our community to bring, believe me, there are organizations, members of the chamber, they send us face masks, face masks, we deliver them all.

K95, all those kinds of face masks, we deliver those. Health, I mean, boxes, United Way was really good, they give us so many, and we deliver those, and we call the people. Families, everything, businesses, business owners, No matter what, we deliver those items. So, first of all, for health. First of all, for protection, then later on, later on through the process, we start with the

grants, the processes and how health businesses, but the first was community at large, how we can protect them and us as a community.

**Carmen**

So based on your work with the community at large, from your point of view, who do you think were the groups that were hardest hit or perhaps most vulnerable?

**Carlos**

I will say, because we, we are very involved with all communities, with the community at large, with the Asian population, with the urban population, African American population, and, and them all, because we are all together.

We were together and we're still together, but we focus on our Hispanic community. It was really hard because, for instance, a mechanic or restaurant or retail employee cannot work. They had to apply for unemployment. So, but the owner needs to continue with the business. So, what we saw is all relatives, all families, they bring all the families into the business.

And that's the way they survive. That was really hard. Believe me, really hard. I saw it and I saw, I still, you know, emotional because I remember crying, people crying because they don't know how to do it. And we need to step up to help. But believe me, our communities is really good because they help us a lot.

And I said, all organizations in Southern Nevada were really proactive. Really help us. They really guide us and they gave us the resources to offer to our community, but our community was really, really hard hit.

**Carmen**

I tend to agree with you as a Latina. I've heard a lot of stories on this project right and especially also statistics in addition to stories right about the Latino community being disproportionately impacted health wise, economically.

Really. It sounds like you've mentioned a lot of interagency work and collaboration across organizations, especially community organizations. So that leads me into my next question. Is there anything that you wish the government or at any level, right? Federal state or local had done differently or could do differently in the future in response to the economic downturn?

**Carlos**

I believe the federal government opened the doors, but only the very sophisticated. I'm talking about accountants and business, really business, when I say business sophisticated, because they are contract ready or loan ready. So they have the paperwork where the ones who got the money

first, but our communities, They say, oh, because your last name is Gomez, or Diaz or Gonzalez, oh, you know what?

This is the right ground. You need to submit it again. Oh, this is, this is not, I cannot read it. So a lot of, a lot of red tape throughout the process and when, when the people need the money, business and community, it took so long to get \$8. All their businesses, they got the money right away. They have, yes.

And, again our community, we have first generation and second generation and third and so forth, but first generation, they're really smart business people, really good entrepreneurs, they know how to make money out of the 1. But they don't know how their system works. And that was a handicap in order to get those loans, those grants.

And believe me, we have a lot of, and I remember, no mention names, but for instance, oh, we need the payroll. The payroll is here. And for us, Oh, we need the insurance on the payroll on another paper. Oh, it's missing something. It's a lot of obstacles, but we deal with them. And finally, just at the very end of the pandemic, the process will come through.

We have a lot of businesses, but so many. They, so many, many reasons, especially sole proprietors, independent contractors. They got nothing, nothing through the whole pandemic.

### **Carmen**

Thank you. That's an important distinction that I actually have not heard before. But what you're saying about red tape and access and paperwork and systemic issues definitely have resonated across these interviews. My next question. So you were talking about payment protection programs, very specifically.

Yeah, so I would like to share a fact sheet with you, Carlos, that we I'm actually a co author on this one. It's, it tracked payment protection program loan impact in the Mountain West specifically. So it's a regional look of who got loans and where. Right. And we did it by state. So I wasn't looking at types of businesses or anything like that.

But you can see where cities are kind of how cities fared, you know in comparison to other places in the region. And it's not something that you know, we need to discuss now, but you mentioned it. So I thought you'd find it interesting, but it does lead me into my next question. Which is. One second.

Were there any specific policies that the state or the federal government implemented that you noticed impacted people, right? Whether positive or negative. So you've talked about PPP. If you want to elaborate on that or perhaps discuss another grant.

**Carlos**

To be honest, the federal government is slow.

But in this case we have Saul Ramos, very proactive. He does a small business administration and also Joe Matter[?]. It was Joe Matter. And then Saul Ramos. Really proactive because when we had a question with a paperwork, how to submit everything and, and online processes and things like that, they were really proactive and in reality and it's federal government.

Believe me, the first time I say they're really proactive and that helped us a lot. In regards our Hispanic community always, oh, the social doesn't match the, your this or, or your records is, doesn't match; always is a handicap, always a red tape, but the Hispanic community or, oh, you have a permit and you had your business, but always was little.

Those things. First, it takes loans to give the money and second, when the money is needed. It wasn't there. At the very end, they solved the problem, but I don't blame either Joe or Saúl. They were really proactive to get things done. And second generation, other businesses, Hispanics and other members of the chamber, they helped us a lot, believe me, a lot.

On the state level and other organizations, I would say former Governor Sisolak was really good. He was there for us. Also, he has a PETS program. There's a pandemic. I don't remember my acronym, but they were given \$10,000 per businesses. And we work with the governor, ex governor at that time, and he put 20 million and \$10,000 assistance.

No much, nothing, no requirements. And he did. And I remember he hit the, the, the same thing on 20 minutes. He put more money, more money, more money. And I believe we ended up giving away like 110 million during the pandemic. So they stay very proactive. Always is a problem. And then city, the county. They, they helped us a lot and what they, what we did is say, look, you know how the federal system works.

You know the paperwork? Yes. Let us know what you need. So what we did, we approached our members and documenting general and say, bring this paperwork. We scan, we put together and, and they order is needed for them. We submit 'em for them in the either city or county. And the state, they pay directly to our members and community, business community.

So no complaints at all, but that help came very late. It wasn't at the beginning, it was almost at the end of the pandemic.

**Carmen**



I found it. PETS program, P E T S, yeah, the PETS grant. So they had less red tape, but the help came a bit too late.

**Carlos**

Yeah. And the good thing, they help a lot of businesses in general. And with the Hispanic community was very popular and yes, it helps a lot.

**Carmen**

Oh, so do you heard that from people? That's interesting.

So speaking on that collaboration between organizations and individuals even, right? Because we saw a lot of that too. What do you think have been the most innovative ways that people have kind of stepped up? So you could just give me an example.

**Carlos**

Digital communication. The way we talk is you and me. It was tu y yo; and me that's the best tool because with that, we reached out to so many people and we were able to deliver and bring good things for both sides.

For the government to help with that, to transition the paperwork, and for a community to bring the resources they need for their business and for the community in general. And not only that, we're talking about government, but also other organizations like United Way, Southern Nevada Health Department, and many, many others.

And I, please forgive me, I forget names, but so many others that were really proactive, but Zoom meetings, all those kind of computer or cell phone communication, I believe that was the key to transform everything and also for businesses because they switch over to sell online and now those different places selling online and delivering the products from the place to their homes.

Oh, that's a big success. For me that was the key communication, digital communication in, in the way to deliver products and services. To me, that was, I believe was our salvation for everybody because that connect. That was the connection in my case.

**Carmen**

Communication is key. Did you see, did you see any individuals kind of step up or more instances of individuals saying, Hey, how can I help?

**Carlos**

Luckily, I will tell you the former governor. Who's that hundred and plus a million dollars, I would say Saúl Ramos is SBA, very active. And I, forgive me, I forgot to mention names. Marcel with the state. It's a lot of people. Southern Nevada Health Department. Yes, I forget the name. It's COVID effect, post COVID effect.

No, there are so many. United Way. Many, many people, Janet Quintero many, many do really, they step up beyond and above their duties. Believe me, incredible. And, and always the communication and very helpful, very responsive. When we need something, we call them and believe me, very responsive and very helpful.

So it's so many, many, I believe in, I hope they forgive me all the names, but I had the faces with me, but very helpful because very, very responsive. It thanks to them because to them, we had a potential to deliver our membership in our community. Honest.

**Carmen**

We interviewed Janet Quintero and she was just lovely.

**Carlos**

Yeah, that's amazing.

**Carmen**

Yeah, so this next question is kind of more geared toward the future. What do you think we can learn from this crisis that could serve as a lesson for future crises, different types of crises, right? Whether that's environmental or fiscal or any other nature of security.

**Carlos**

It's a good question, but what I saw is when the problem hit us. It doesn't matter our nationality, our background, and everything. I see people helping others. That's, that's what I, what I saw, is helping others and with no intentions in the back or nothing. Yes. Giving and helping out. And, and what I believe is this lesson is learned. So hopefully it never happened in the future, but now the government, now they know how to approach communities.

That's a good thing. Agencies now how know to deal and how they can coordinate with each other. So they know and communications. To me is the key because with that, we can connect resources. With the individual in both, not only English, Spanish, different, because our community is so diverse that we had Mandarin, we had Tagalog, we had so many languages, but we can connect.

So to me, communication, digital communication is the key because we connect each other. But when I saw the human factor it was amazing. People willing to help. That was amazing for us.

What's the key role, how people help us to help others, to be honest. We were just the transition team. This important service is here, it's for you.

That's what we did. Let's just put it together.

**Carmen**

So my next question was going to be, are you hopeful? But you sound really hopeful, Carlos. Is there anything you're concerned about?

**Carlos**

I'm concerned? Well, even though humankind is kind, I saw so many people, they don't care about the rest. They don't cover their faces. They don't get the immunization because whatever. But I say, look, we live in this community. If I had the immunization shot, everybody has to have the immunization shot.

Because we don't know if they, the person who for personal beliefs or whatever it is, they didn't got the shot, but probably they got the kids and probably they got the virus. It will get in my kids. So I had a problem because somebody else is not taking care of themselves. That's, that's. That's the only thing I can say.

We need to, if we're in this boat, we need to be all together. That's it.

**Carmen**

Well, thank you, Carlos. I'm going to go ahead and hit the record button again so that we can end.

**25:07 End of audio**