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Meet the Contact Tracers

Finding Common Ground

JOSEPH ORTIZ



When Joseph Ortiz was told he would help roll out a community engagement program for the Test & Trace Corps, he became excited about connecting with people again.

During the month of May, he and a team worked to reengage patients who had not completed an initial intake with a Case Investigator or Monitor. For many of the people he met, it was the first time they had seen someone since New York went into lockdown and people began to isolate.

“Some of them had socially isolated for months and were so glad to have contact with someone,” he said. “This is part of the reason people go into public health. You do this for good and altruism.”

Community engagement is nothing new for Ortiz, who began his career as a contact tracer with the New York City Department of Health. He was tasked with reaching out to people who tested positive for HIV/AIDS. He later accepted a role as a Reproductive Health Educator and was based inside public schools to help students of all backgrounds learn more about services available to them.

Working in the school system for the Department of Health was a dream for a public health expert, he said, but schools closed when COVID-19 forced the city into lockdown. Ortiz began working remotely, calling and texting students to check-in, though he wanted to use his expertise in a more relevant way to help his community fight the virus.

He accepted his current role as Community Engagement Supervisor and now works with a team that’s activated to find and engage people who are suspected or confirmed COVID-19 positive and in need of resources or care.

“We reach people at a very vulnerable time in their lives,” he said. “They’re scared, see or hear people are dying and sometimes have distrust in government agencies. They don’t know what to believe.”

He and his team rely on their training to help them better understand and communicate with the diverse populations of New York. Though there’s no manual on connecting with a person, Ortiz said he takes his time with each individual and listens to their story.

“Every client is different and has their own story but there’s something that unites us all,” he said. “I find common ground, which you can do with anyone.”