‘It Was Hell’: When Both Parents Get COVID-19

By Farida Jhabvala Romero | KQED | May 26, 2020

In early April, as coronavirus outbreaks spread rapidly across the San Francisco Bay Area, Lorena found herself trapped in her apartment obsessively disinfecting surfaces, wearing gloves to cook meals and abstaining from holding her own two children.

Both Lorena and her husband, Jorge, had tested positive for COVID-19.

“It was hell, to be honest with you,” said Lorena, 30, who works as a receptionist at a doctor’s office.

KQED is only using Lorena’s first name because she worries her daughter will be bullied if classmates learn both of her parents were diagnosed with the disease.

Lorena was terrified of transmitting the coronavirus to their 1-year-old son, who wheezes and needs an inhaler if he gets sick with a simple cold.

But a doctor told Lorena and Jorge that their baby and 8-year-old daughter had likely already been exposed to the virus and they must quarantine together. The normally active family who loves spending weekends at parks suddenly found themselves confined to their three-bedroom apartment in Richmond.

The pandemic’s toll has disproportionately impacted Latinos statewide, who comprise more than half of all confirmed COVID-19 cases, according to the California Department of Public Health. Lorena’s story is one family’s nightmarish experience with recovering from the disease. But it also points to vulnerabilities many Latinos and others face as they get sick with the coronavirus.

The Ordeal Begins

On March 21, Jorge came down with a bad cough, high fever and intense headaches. His sweat soaked through the bed sheets at night. Lorena’s worry for her husband grew.

Doctors at Kaiser Permanente initially declined to test Jorge, 34, for COVID-19. At the time only a limited number of test kits were available in the Bay Area, and Contra Costa County public health officials recommended tests be prioritized for the most vulnerable symptomatic patients, including those who were hospitalized.

Six days later, Jorge’s symptoms worsened. He landed in the emergency room at the Kaiser Permanente Richmond Medical Center. He was tested and confirmed positive for COVID-19. But doctors believed Jorge would recover on his own and sent him home.

“I did worry a lot because he had to sleep almost sitting down, he couldn’t breathe when he would lay on his back,” said Lorena, a legal permanent resident originally from Mexico. “He’d cough so much that his chest wouldn’t stop hurting all day.”

Lorena’s symptoms were relatively mild compared to her husband’s: light headaches, exhaustion and a loss of sense of smell and taste. She was able to cook and keep an eye on her kids at home. And she avoided hospitalization, as well as a potentially costly health care bill down the road.

Unlike her husband, Lorena doesn’t have health insurance. Her employer, a workers’ compensation doctor, doesn’t offer the benefit to her 12 employees, Lorena said. Under the Affordable Care Act, only businesses with 50 or more full-time employees may be financially penalized if they don’t offer health coverage.
While Jorge has insurance through his maintenance job at a seniors apartment complex in San Francisco, Lorena is not on his plan because the premiums are too expensive, she said.

But her family’s income, about $60,000 per year, means Lorena earns too much to qualify for Medi-Cal, the state’s coverage for low-income people.

Latinos Have Highest Uninsured Rates
Lorena’s story is not uncommon. Latinos are more than twice as likely to be uninsured than other racial or ethnic groups in the state, according to a study by the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. That’s in part because only about a third of Latinos get their health coverage through an employer, the lowest job-based coverage of all racial or ethnic groups.

As the pandemic continues, the state has committed to covering the cost of COVID-19 testing and treatment for uninsured Californians who need it. The demand for that safety net may increase as the pandemic ravages the economy, and millions of Californians lose their jobs and health coverage for themselves, their spouses and their children.

Still, it’s unclear how much medical treatment related to COVID-19 the state would ultimately pay for those who lack full coverage, said Anthony Wright, executive director of the consumer advocacy coalition Health Access California.

“Frankly, if you end up in the ICU on a ventilator for a week, it may not cover the follow-up care afterwards,” Wright said.

Lorena said she used to be covered by Medi-Cal in the past. She has received medical care for years at the Lifelong Brookside San Pablo Health Center. Now that she’s uninsured, she pays for medical visits at the community clinic on a sliding scale. That’s where she, and eventually her children, were tested for COVID-19 free of charge.

In retrospect, Lorena said the risks of being uninsured weren’t top of mind while she was sick with the coronavirus, as her symptoms didn’t deteriorate.

During the nearly three weeks it took for Lorena and Jorge to recover, they tried to stay away from their kids at home to avoid getting them infected. Their 8-year-old girl took on more responsibilities, helping to feed the baby, change his diapers and carry him.

“Having to do things that she shouldn’t be doing ‘cause she’s a kid,” Lorena said.

Lorena said she was overcome with sadness as the baby would stare out of the window and then come towards her and ask to be picked up, holding his little arms up. She told herself, as emotionally hurtful as it may be, she would not touch or hold her children, even when they were afraid, sad or worried.

“My daughter was scared when she heard that I was positive, too. And of course, she needed a hug,” she said. As she spoke, Lorena started to cry, and said, “We couldn’t give it to her. Not being able to hold the baby, it was just ... bad.”

The family got by with Jorge’s paid leave from work. Lorena filed for disability. Her parents, both diabetics in their 50s, left bags of groceries at her door. While grateful for the help, she worried her mom and dad would contract the virus while at grocery stores or streets.

“This whole experience drains you mentally,” she said.

Recovered and Relieved
Lorena and Jorge are back at work. Both kids tested negative for COVID-19, Lorena said with relief.

But in some ways, the family is still dealing with the trauma of their experience. When Lorena and Jorge were finally able to touch their children without fear of getting them sick, their son wouldn’t let his parents hug him.

“I don’t know if the baby was mad, but he wouldn’t want to come to us,” Lorena said. “I felt so bad. Like, ‘Hey, it wasn’t our fault.’ “

Their daughter is recovering emotionally from her fear her dad wasn’t going to make it. She recently told Lorena that she’d stay up at night, hearing her father’s labored breathing and coughing fits.

“I’m so happy my dad got better because I was really scared,” Lorena’s daughter said.

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