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General Overview

Executive Summary

After receiving the first installment of its State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF) program allocation, Hidalgo County commenced strategically developing methods to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic efficiently. The program, which supports state and local government's response to COVID-19 and its effects, has allowed the County to take a dedicated approach to address the COVID-19 public health emergency's disproportionate impacts on County residents. Simultaneously, federal funds have also granted the opportunity to address long-standing socioeconomic disparities among underserved communities.

Since its inception, the Department of Budget and Management American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Program has strategically operated to expend funds in compliance with the SLFRF final rule and Compliance and Reporting Guidance. The program is currently overseeing the expenditure of funds and ensuring that projects are executed in a manner that is equitable, efficient, and effective.

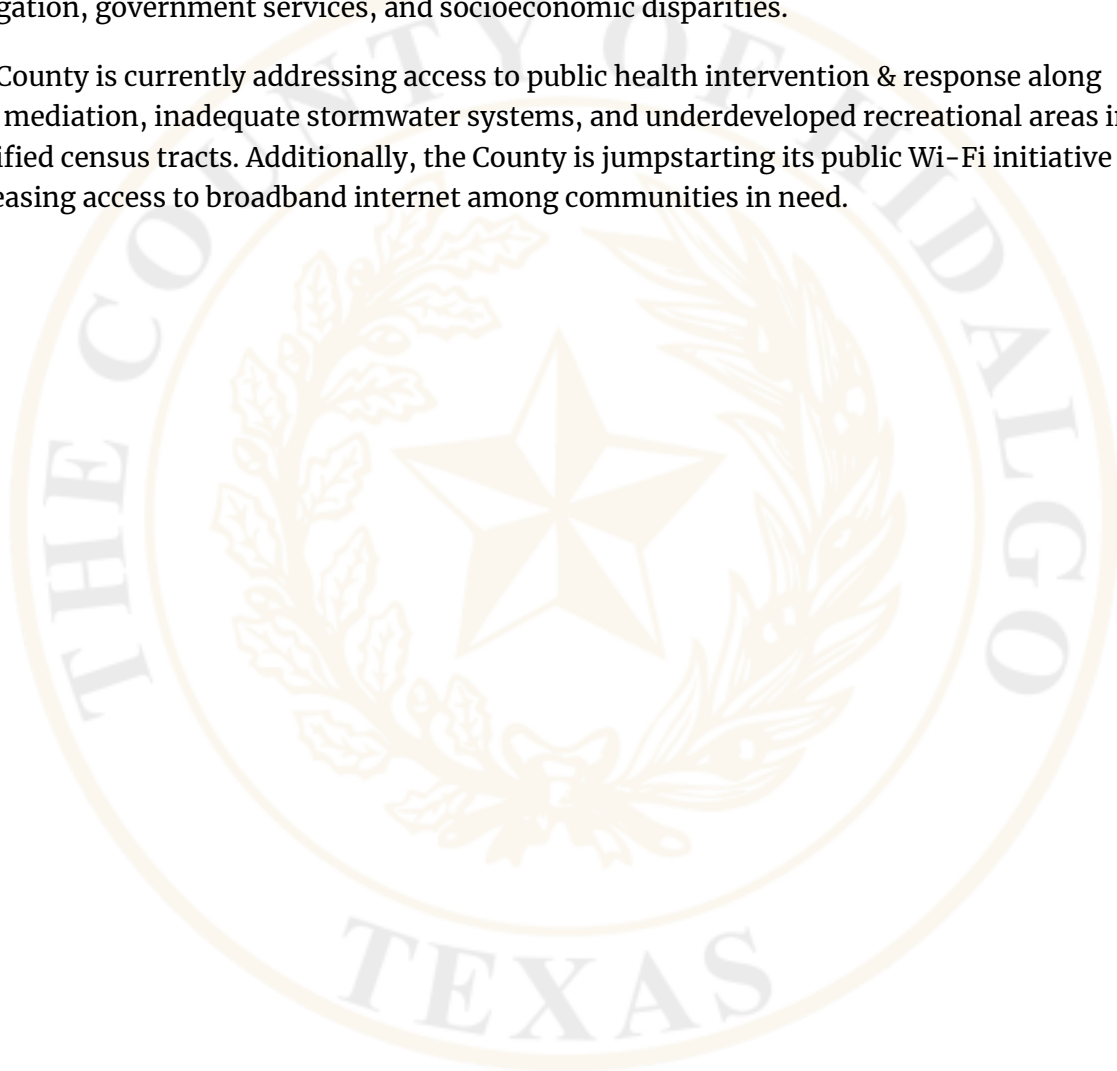
Last year, the County launched efforts to improve its public health system and system and the capacity to respond to large-scale Public Health events. Additionally, the damaging psychological and behavioral health impact due of CoVID must be considered. The psychosocial and emotional implication due to the closing of schools, daycares, and businesses has greatly impacted our County residents. The County is investing invest in its community through recreational development and improvements to stormwater systems. Public health interventions remain the focal point of the County's COVID-19 recovery. Meanwhile, projects addressing recreational spaces in qualified census tracts (QCTs) and stormwater systems are nearing the end of their respective preliminary phases.



Uses of Funds

In November 2020, the Hidalgo County ARPA Program presented the preliminary allocation plan to Commissioners Court (AI-43461) to delineate the County's plan to expend funds received from the SLFRF program to Hidalgo County constituents. The preliminary allocation plan outlined four distinct focuses for the SLFRF program: Public health, COVID-19 mitigation, government services, and socioeconomic disparities.

The County is currently addressing access to public health intervention & response along with mediation, inadequate stormwater systems, and underdeveloped recreational areas in qualified census tracts. Additionally, the County is jumpstarting its public Wi-Fi initiative by increasing access to broadband internet among communities in need.





Public Health (Expenditure Category 1)

In 2021, Hidalgo County began a comprehensive response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on the public health system. Efforts included investing in health care access in indigent communities, addressing congregate settings in County workspaces and jails, and strengthening the County's response to COVID-19. Currently, the County is no longer utilizing a mobile unit for COVID-19 operations. The County is continuing to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, especially in jails by transferring inmates to other facilities in order to alleviate overcrowding. Recently, the County has reinforced COVID-19 prevention efforts in the Hidalgo County Adult Detention Center by hiring five additional medical assistants. The medical assistants provide crucial medical services to inmates in the event of a COVID-19 infection or other illness. Moreover, the County has retrofitted the new Hidalgo County Courthouse with COVID-19 prevention equipment and enhancements, including antimicrobial heating, ventilation, and cooling systems and hands-free functionalities in restrooms and congregate areas.

Last year, the County outlined measures to increase public health services and support greater access to health care for our County residents, improvements to the Hidalgo County Public Health Department's clinics are essential due to the population they serve, primarily uninsured and underserved indigent County residents. The County's public health clinics are located in areas easily accessible to that vulnerable population. The County clinics that are receiving assistance via the SLFRF program are the Hidalgo Public Health Clinic located in the City of Hidalgo, and the Mission Public Health Clinic. Both projects remain in the preliminary development phase, and an ongoing assessment of other public health facilities' enhancements is also being reviewed. The County is also still in the preliminary stages of reopening the Alton (El Paraiso) Public Health Clinic, a defunct clinic, located in Precinct 3. Beyond improvements to clinics, Hope Family Health Center will be granted ARPA funds to continue improving the quality of services that can be accessed by Hidalgo County residents. Funds will also be granted to nursing schools for instructor retention stipends in order to increase the number of graduating nurses in Hidalgo County, and partner with the City of Mercedes and others to address the shortage of EMS and the broader impacts of the pandemic on public health.

The SLFRF program has also assisted with the development of an Electronic Medical Record (EMR) system to assist in the documentation and retention of patient medical information within our public health program. The CoVID pandemic impacted thousands of residents. The documenting and tracking of CoVID vaccination and CoVID testing, long-term patient outcomes will be greatly enhanced by this critical system. The need for software to enhance cybersecurity and meet "The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)"



will heighten our team’s capabilities in collecting patient information off-site and at remote locations. The County as a whole is enhancing its cybersecurity capabilities for employees working remotely due to the COVID-19 public health emergency. The development of a “Laboratory Management System” to support and communicate with the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) Lab and the Center for Disease Control (CDC) Lab, establishing a secure clinical link on laboratory findings, supporting CoVID outcomes and other diseases impacted by CoVID and or other illnesses.

The SLFRF program would support the initial funding of clinical and laboratory staff to support the County’s CoVID response and the medium to long-term intervention of CoVID and any secondary effects. The County would continue the sustainability of these operations in the future.

The Hidalgo County Public Health team continues to provide CoVID testing and vaccination services throughout the County for all its residents and anyone seeking CoVID support within Hidalgo County. Hidalgo County Public Health has coordinated with the collaboration of the Hidalgo County Emergency Management team, the distribution of “Personal Protective Equipment” (PPEs) to the various County Departments and various community partners. The PPEs range from hand sanitizer, gloves, disinfectant, and a multitude of products and disposables.

Hidalgo County Public Health is seeking to procure two quick deploy mobile clinics to assist with the ongoing vaccination efforts in the rural areas of our County and provide access to vaccines to those who do not have transportation.

The County is also enhancing its emergency response capabilities in order to be better equipped to administer services during peak operating periods, such as COVID-19 case surges. The ability to timely and aptly respond to emergencies is an essential aspect of government service. In order to better serve constituents, Hidalgo County has acquired a vehicle outfitted with pre-hospital medical equipment intended for medical services to homebound individuals, the elderly, and populations with disabilities. Services will primarily focus on communities that have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. The County is also obtaining a patching system to improve radio communication among County emergency responders.

Additionally, the County is planning to extend SLFRF to provide a future emergency management facility with the necessary equipment, means, and retrofits to operate under emergency situations. Hidalgo County is also funding a deputy emergency management coordinator position and an overtime program, which remunerates employees that are directly responding to the COVID-19 public health emergency.



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The Hidalgo County Health Department has also begun an initiative to electronically store COVID-19-related documentation, such as vaccination and testing records. The County obtained software to assist in this initiative and hired a team to scan and enter the documents into the new system. The Health Department has also adapted to COVID-19 era precautions by also acquiring software to enhance cybersecurity for employees working remotely. The County as a whole is enhancing its cybersecurity capabilities for employees working remotely due to the COVID-19 public health emergency.





Negative Economic Impacts (Expenditure Category 2)

The COVID-19 public health emergency severely damaged Hidalgo County's local economy and disproportionately impacted populations. In order to foster a resilient and equitable economic recovery, Hidalgo County is addressing the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable populations. Measures are taken to assist those who suffered the worst of the pandemic align with the County's goal of promoting equity among communities.

The County assisted a struggling emergency services (EMS) provider by contributing a portion of its SLFRF allocation. Although the EMS provider experienced the negative economic impacts of the pandemic, it continued to service County residents. The assistance provided to the EMS provider will allow it to continue to provide life-saving services to residents, especially those living in unincorporated areas of Hidalgo County.

In response to the collective grief endured by students in Hidalgo County schools due to COVID-19, the County is partnering with school districts to create programs that promote wellness and mindfulness among low-income and disadvantaged students.

In addition to providing mental health services to the County's youth, the County is also promoting wellness among children by assisting two nonprofit organizations. The assistance will allow the nonprofits to continue providing educational and behavioral health services to children in Qualified Census Tracts. Investments in the behavioral health and education of the County's youth are critical to their emotional and physical development.

Families across the County have endured the indiscriminate and harsh negative economic impacts of the pandemic. The County is planning to provide assistance to a nonprofit organization that services low-income individuals and families experiencing homelessness in *colonias*, residential areas along the Texas-Mexico border that may lack basic living necessities like potable water, septic or sewer systems, electricity, paved roads, or safe and sanitary housing. The program will provide small repairs or larger rehabilitation. Individuals and families in *colonias* are in dire need of support, and the program will bring much-needed improvements to homes in unincorporated areas of the County.



Services to Disproportionately Impacted Communities (Expenditure Category 3)

The COVID-19 public health emergency has collectively impaired the psyches of Americans. Pandemic-related stress has exacerbated behavioral health difficulties, depression, anxiety and substance use. In response, parks and hike, and bike trails have become stages for collective exercise and mental relief. The County is utilizing funds to increase accessibility to recreational areas in disproportionately impacted communities and improve the mental and physical well-being of residents.

Various parks in disproportionately impacted areas within Precinct 3 are still being identified. Meanwhile, J.R. "Milo" Ponce Park, located in Precinct 4, is nearing the end of its preliminary development stage. The park will have existing playground equipment replaced with new, more inclusive playgrounds for children aged 2 to 12 years. Measures will also be taken to improve accessibility. After identifying a different funding source, the County rescinded the action to improve Precinct 4's Pueblo de Palmas Park with monies from the County's SLFRF allocation.

Large developments will be made to Lopezville Park in Precinct 2. The improvements have the intention of improving social determinants of health in, near, and around the park. Soccer fields, inclusive playscapes, basketball courts, tennis courts, walking trails, and a fishing pond will be added to the park.

Moreover, large investments will be made in hike and bike trails located within Precincts 1 and 2. The developments made in the trails are a part of the County's goal of improving the mental health of the County by addressing social determinants of health in disproportionately impacted communities. The ARPA Program's goal is to reimagine public spaces and create access for constituents to discover hidden gems within Hidalgo County. Precinct 2 trails will be extended to connect to trails in the Cities of Hidalgo, McAllen, and Mission. Meanwhile, a new trail will be developed in the mid-valley area of Precinct 1. The Precinct 1 trail will travel through the Cities of Alamo, Donna, Mercedes, Pharr, and Weslaco.

Hidalgo County is also planning to add a community resource center to an upcoming clinic. The community resource center will provide disproportionately impacted communities access to educational services and child care.

Meanwhile, the County will also create two positions to specifically address the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic. One position will provide an assessment of the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The assessment will allow the County to deliver more targeted services to constituents. The second position will act as a community navigator to persons with disabilities. The navigator will locate and access COVID-19-related



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community resources, develop relationships that promote community inclusion, and equip persons with disabilities with the necessary means to navigate the ongoing public health emergency.





Premium Pay (Expenditure Category 4)

In 2021, Hidalgo County authorized premium pay programs for County, Community Service Agency, and Drainage District regular full-time, regular part-time, temporary full-time, and temporary part-time employees who were hired in person on or before August 1, 2021.

The purpose of the programs was to provide pay to eligible employees who have been, and continue to be, relied on to maintain the operations of essential, critical infrastructure sectors, including those who are crucial to protecting the health and wellbeing of their communities; employees teleworking from a residence are not eligible to receive Premium Pay. Premium Pay has been awarded at a rate of \$13.00 per hour in addition to regular wages. Premium Pay should not exceed the tiered amounts of \$3,500.00 for eligible employees earning up to \$40,000.00, \$3,000.00 for eligible employees earning between \$40,001.00-\$60,000.00, and \$2,500.00 for eligible employees earning over \$60,000.00. Regular part-time and temporary-part time employees will receive 50% of the \$13.00 per hour pay rate once approved hours are met.

All three programs are complete. There are no future plans for additional premium pay programs or extensions at this time.



Infrastructure (Expenditure Category 5)

In order to recognize and address areas of critical need, the U.S. Treasury's SLFRF final rule allows state and local governments to expend funds to enhance existing storm and wastewater infrastructure and invest in waste and sewer infrastructure as well. Hidalgo County has an array of areas with limited or no access to clean water or viable stormwater systems. The aforementioned areas are often susceptible to flooding during rainy seasons. Most notably, low-income and minority communities often face some of the greatest water inequities, such as increased lead exposure and risk of infection from exposure to fecal matter. All in all, the streets, avenues, and main roads of Hidalgo County are affected by the collapse of drains. The flooding caused by inadequate stormwater systems damages houses harms constituents, destroys property, spreads disease, and erodes roads. In order to address health and equity in the County, the ARPA Program is launching a dedicated effort to providing efficient stormwater management.

The County plans to address flooding by addressing inequities in the following stormwater systems:

- Precinct 1 Mercedes Gate Structure
- Precinct 1 Inline Check Valves
- Precinct 1 Delta Region
- Precinct 2 Stormwater System Management
- Precinct 3 Tierra Dorada Boulevard
- Precinct 3 Glasscock Road Miles 4 to 5
- Precinct 3 Farm to Market Road 2221
- Precinct 3 Harvest Time Road
- Precinct 3 Jessica Drive and Ashley Way to Goodwin Road
- Precinct 3 Tierra Linda Boulevard Drain
- Precinct 3 Stormwater Equipment
- Precinct 4 Tex-Mex Road
- Precinct 4 Terry Road
- Precinct 4 Mile 17 Road
- Precinct 4 Encore Ranches (Northeast corner of Curry and 83rd Street)
- Precinct 4 Mile 17 & 83rd Street
- Precinct 4 Rio Grande Care Road
- Precinct 4 Colonia Tejana (Southside of S.H. 107 and North of Tex Mex Rd. between S. 83rd St. and S. 87th St)
- Precinct 4 Bentsen Road

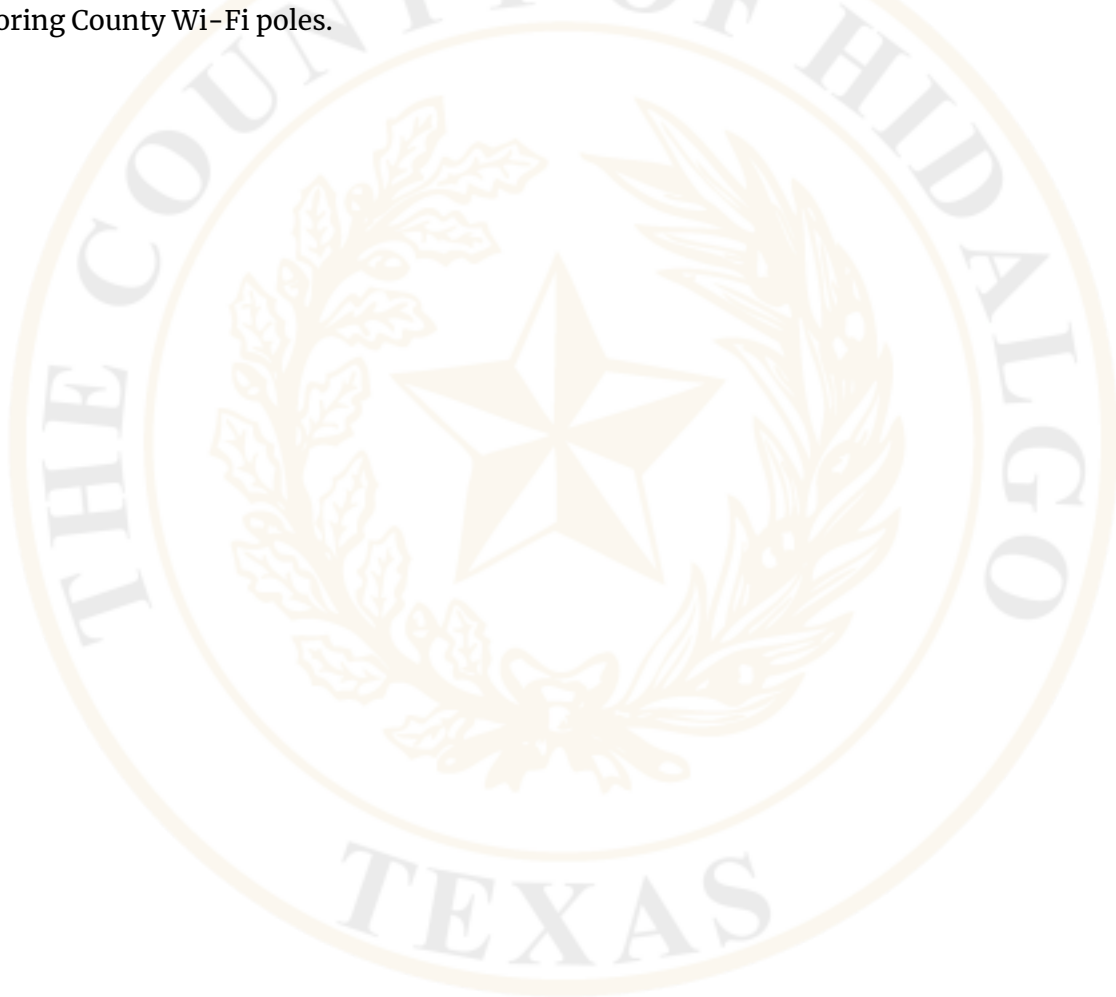


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- Precinct 4 North Main Drain III
 - Phase 1
 - Phase 2
- Precinct 4 Hoehn Road and Southeast Monte Cristo Road

Hidalgo County is continuing its Wi-Fi accessibility initiative via the ARPA Program. In response to the increased need for stable Wi-Fi access due to changes brought about by the COVID-19 public health emergency, the Hidalgo County ARPA Program has made dedicated efforts to increase Wi-Fi accessibility through last-mile projects and replacing and/or restoring County Wi-Fi poles.





Provision of Government Services (Expenditure Category 6)

In order to facilitate government services, Hidalgo County invested in retrofits for County equipment and facilities. The County also ensured that essential government services and emergency operations continued through the ongoing public health emergency, including debris removal, improvements to public Wi-Fi accessibility via pole replacements, and County cybersecurity.

In an effort to maintain social distance guidelines, the County is also continuing the use of Google Suites and obtaining a new human resource management system to reduce the need for in-person attestation and, by default, assist with COVID-19 mitigation.

