

TAP WATER: Exploring Perceptions of Latino/as



Created in collaboration with

evolution

Evolution Communications Agency

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*The Following Members of the **Tap Water Coalition** provided guidance and input throughout this process:*

Deborah Foote / Oral Health Colorado

Katya Mauritson / CO Dept of Public Health & Environment

Beth Wyatt / CO Dept of Public Health & Environment

Jessica Dunbar / Rocky Mountain Youth Clinics

Heidi Fritz / Tri-County Health Department

Matt Jackson / Tri-County Health Department

Jennifer Moreland / Denver Health

Kaitlin Wasik, RD / Denver Health

Maria Smith / Denver Health

Summer Laws / Boulder County Public Health

Tessa Hale / Boulder County Public Health

Molly Pereira / Colorado Dental Association

Wyatt Hornsby / Delta Dental of Colorado Foundation

Emily Schroeder / Stapleton Foundation

Fernando Pineda / CREA Results

Flossie O'Leary / Clinica Tepeyac

Sarah Barnes / Colorado Children's Campaign

Teresa Ramirez, RDH / Colorado Dental Hygiene Association

Wendy Peters Moschetti / LiveWell Colorado

Whitney Bell-Haggard / American Heart Association

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1. BACKGROUND

In early 2015, Oral Health Colorado (OHCO) convened a group of stakeholders to form a Tap Water Coalition. The Coalition was originally formed in response to several Colorado communities who ended their community water fluoridation programs without notice to the public nor consultation of environmental or health experts. In addition to the public health concern, the Coalition wished to bring together those working to end childhood obesity and those concerned with the impact of bottled water on the environment. All members of this unique Coalition saw the benefit of increasing tap water consumption, whether to improve health outcomes or to reduce environmental pollution.

The Tap Water Coalition currently includes representation from the Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment (CDPHE), Delta Dental of Colorado Foundation (DDCOF), the Colorado Dental Association (CDA), Clinica Tepeyac, Tri-County Health Department, Denver Public Health, the Colorado Children's Campaign, Boulder County Public Health, Rocky Mountain Youth Clinics, LiveWell Colorado, the American Heart Association, and Evolution Communications Agency.

Key Coalition member Delta Dental of Colorado Foundation (DDCOF) had conducted focus groups with Spanish speakers in Denver's Westwood neighborhood, a largely Hispanic community in the southwest part of the city. These focus groups collected data on sugary beverage consumption, and also dealt with consumption of tap water. DDCOF's findings seemed to indicate that Latinos, particularly those less acculturated, had strong misgivings about consuming community water. These families also consumed high levels of sugary drinks, contributing to increased rates of oral caries, obesity and diabetes.

On behalf of the Tap Water Coalition, OHCO successfully applied for funding from DentaQuest and the Colorado Dental Association, from the American Dental Association Foundation (ADAF). This funding allowed the Coalition to conduct focus groups in three disparate areas of the Denver metro: Boulder/Lafayette, Aurora, and West Denver/Sunnyside. It was the intent of the Coalition to look deeper into DDCOF's findings and uncover ways to successfully message that community water is safe and healthy to drink to Latino/as in metro Denver and surrounding counties.

Upon receiving funding, Coalition member Evolution developed a partnership with Spanish language television station Telemundo, to explore the possibility of a campaign to educate Telemundo's audience that community water is safe and healthy, improves oral health and weight management, and is better for the environment.

Telemundo has responded enthusiastically, offering production of Public Service Announcements, a strong paid commercial schedule with matching bonus spots, access to news features, and more. After the focus groups concluded, Telemundo provided translation of the notes, which were taken in Spanish, at no charge to the Coalition.

2. THE FOCUS GROUPS

Using DentaQuest and ADAF funding, OHCO partnered with Evolution and Latino-serving community based organizations to conduct a series of three focus groups in November, 2015. The groups consisted of (nearly all) women, all Spanish speakers, nearly all with children in the home. The groups took place on the following dates, in the listed locations:

- Tuesday, November 17 / El Centro AMISTAD / Boulder, CO
- Thursday, November 19 / Aurora Community Connection / Aurora, CO
- Monday, November 23 / Servicios de La Raza / Denver, CO
- Also, on November 20, Evolution conducted interviews in English with two Latinas who are members of La Alianza del Pueblo, a group of Hispanic-serving organizations seeking health equity for Latino/as in West Denver.

3. THE METHODOLOGY

Using its strong connections to Latino-serving grassroots organizations, Evolution worked with the three host locations to request assistance with the focus groups:

- Evolution engaged a Spanish speaking moderator and note taker, and videotaped all sessions.
- Each host location provided child care and healthy snacks, including tap water.
- Each location was given a stipend of \$1,000 to cover costs.
- Facilitators, note takers and participants all received \$10 grocery gift cards as a stipend for their participation.
- The survey tools, including intake form, script and questions were developed collaboratively by the Coalition.

4. PARTICIPANT DATA

Please see Appendix A for an Excel spreadsheet containing all collected data. Note, our partners at Aurora Community Connection used a slightly different intake tool, and did NOT collect employment status. The other three groups collected employment data.

5. AN EXPLORATION OF QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

5.1 Beliefs and Myths about Community Water (Spanish speakers)

Thinking about the past few weeks, how much tap water have you had to drink? How much tap water does your family drink?

POSTIVE THEMES:

I drink tap water (2)

I drink tap water from the fridge with a filter

My dentist recommended I drink tap water for my teeth

I have a filter (2)

The dentist tells my kids they have to drink tap water

My doctor said use tap water when making baby's bottle

You can buy a Brita or a jar.

I used to drink bottled water, but made the change because my dentist told me.

The jars that connect to the tap water take out the fluoride, so I use a Brita (2).

The dentist recommends drinking water before bed.

NEGATIVE THEMES:

Only when making tea

Only when I cook and it's boiled

The pipes are in bad shape, water from old houses isn't safe

I will have it in my coffee/food but won't drink from the tap

Only use it to cook

Warm water has lead

I am cooking soup, and if it needs more water, I add hot water and they say it has lead if you add hot water to already boiling water

In the bottle, the water is more purified, the tap water is "heavier"

Tap water "tastes different"

If it snows we get water... it's recycled but they use things like fluoride and chloride

I have heard that the water is recycled and has pesticides and insecticides

QUESTIONS:

How do we know if the fridge filter is dirty? Does the fridge filter remove fluoride? Is water by the gallon in the grocery store fluoridated? Is water in our kids schools fluoridated? Fluoride or chloride? When the baby is born, is it better to use tap water? Is bathroom water connected to the toilet water? I saw on Telemundo you might not be brushing w/ clean water. Is water recyclable? When I boil the water, does it remove the fluoride?

5.2 Beliefs and Myths about Community Water (English speakers)

Thinking about the past few weeks, how much tap water have you had to drink? How much tap water does your family drink?

POSITIVE:

Water is virtually the only thing I drink.

I don't drink tap, but my kids have no problem with it.

I serve filtered water to my dog.

I mostly drink filtered water from the fridge, but have no problem with tap water.

Colorado water is better and cleaner than in other places.

NEGATIVE:

I don't believe tap water is safe, I believe it contains excessive bleach

Mostly I drink bottled water, OR filtered water from the fridge.

What is the purification process at Denver Water? Why is so much chlorine needed?

5.3 Where do you think your tap water comes from (Spanish speakers)?

From the mountains (4)

It's from springs

From the rain

From the drains – they treat it and clean it.

It comes from rivers and mountains and is distributed through wells.

It tastes like bleach, I think they add bleach.

5.4 Where do you think your tap water comes from (English speakers)?

Water comes from the mountains, then from Denver Water, where they add bleach

Second interviewee also believes water is from the mountains, but doesn't give much thought to the process of reaching her tap

5.5 Would you serve tap water to your children's friends or your guests (Spanish /English speakers)?

POSITIVE:

I have a filter (2)

The dentist said to give the kids tap water because of the fluoride

I offer water from the fridge (tap), or if handy, bottles

I give my guests the option of bottled, filtered or tap when they come over

I would not think twice about giving tap water to guests

NEGATIVE:

We were told to buy bottled water because tap water is bad.

The water has different flavors/tastes.

It is easier to use bottles.

Some Christian friends I have come to my home to read me the bible. I offered them tap water, but they would only take bottled because they said tap water is contaminated.

5.6 If you were at a friend's house and they offered you tap water, would you drink it? (Spanish speakers)

POSITIVE:

Yes but with doubt

I only drink filtered water

If I am very thirsty, I will drink it

My sisters drink right from the tap; I will only drink filtered water

NEGATIVE:

No because of the old pipes

No I only drink bottled water

It's better to be cautious

My friends always give me bottled

Follow up question: Why don't you offer tap water?

Bottled water is more convenient

When I visit friends they have pitchers of water, but I don't drink it

It tastes bad, has a "different" flavor

I come from Mexico (18 mos ago), where you don't drink the water, it's not drinkable

5.7 If you were at a friend's house and they offered you tap water, would you drink it? (English speakers)

POSITIVE:

Only if it tasted good

I would not think twice about drinking it

I make lemonade using tap water

5.8 Your opinions about tap water, and drinking water from the tap (Spanish speakers)

POSITIVE:

I will drink tap, and have a filter in my fridge (3)

I drink from the tap and have a bottle for the kids

I use it, but am unsure of the risks and have doubts about purity

I drank only bottled, but saw friends drinking from the tap, so now I will only use the water from my fridge filter

I go to Children's and the dentist always tells me to drink tap water, its better, and I shouldn't waste my money

NEGATIVE:

I drink from a bottle, not the tap, because it tastes like bleach

I don't drink it, it smells different

We only drink tap when there are no bottles

I use two kinds: bottled water and the gallons from King Soopers
I don't drink tap water because I think it's not hygienic
Tap water tastes bad, the pipes are old and make it not possible to drink
I use bottled water because I have heard tap is contaminated
My dentist never told me tap water was better

5.9 Your opinions about tap water, and drinking water from the tap (English speakers)

POSITIVE:

I don't like to see things wasted, and not buying water means one less thing to buy

NEGATIVE:

I know I am missing the fluoride from tap water, but I won't drink it so I use a fluoride rinse
If people have to boil water in an emergency, what does that say about the safety of the tap water

5.10 What words come to mind when you hear tap water? (Spanish speakers)

Fluoride, bleach, lead, bugs, microorganisms, mountains, salt, health, money, water is expensive, cleanliness, privilege, worry, water is life.

Bad plumbing, dirty, tastes like bleach, stomach pains or diarrhea, it gave me arthritis...
"they" told me I would get arthritis because of the tap water.

5.11 If a friend told you tap water is healthy and good for your family, what would you say? (Spanish speakers)

Who said it; explain yourself; I don't trust; depends where you live; perfecto.

Based on what? We pay attention more to the bad than the good.

5.12 If a friend told you tap water is healthy and good for your family, what would you say? (English speakers)

There is no one who could convince me to drink tap water, family members who worked at Denver Water were harmed by exposure to the chemicals there.

(Our two interviewees were diametrically opposed on the issue)

(At this point, we did a demonstration using a bottle of water with a \$1 bill, and a glass of tap water with a few pennies in front of it. We wanted to illustrate the differences in costs. We also sent around a photo showing tons of plastic water bottles being moved around in a dump. The reaction to the photo was visceral in every case. This was done to set the group up to discuss messages that might sway them to switch to tap water.)

Messages/Spanish speakers

Concerned about the plastic used in the US

We are killing our earth

We don't know how to recycle, we are not educated and are hurting and heating the earth

The issue is global, how we affect the earth and the future of our kids

We are damaging the planet and we are making the companies rich that bottle the water

We are hurting our children's teeth by using bottled water

Follow Up Question: Do you think drinking tap water is an economical choice?

Yes.

Yes, and it does not destroy our planet.

Yes, only if it was analyzed.

Follow Up Question: Who here is worried about damage to the environment?

No, because I recycle

Yes, because many do not recycle

The trash truck does not separate and does not recycle

I take mine to the supermarket

I think we should all be aware... I should have a balance between drinking tap water and taking care of the environment and the health of my family

I saw you can take bottled water to the Children's Museum and they recycle them with the kids

English speakers: Our anti-tap person feels very bad about buying bottles, but makes sure she recycles. She also re-uses bottles. Our pro tap water person felt bad about putting plastic bottles into the recycle bin. She was impacted by the trash photo.

5.13 What influential person might convince you that your tap water is healthy? (Spanish speakers)

People that work in the industry (2-3)

A scientist

The manager of the plant that provides our water

Someone who has studied it or a doctor

Those who work with the water

Advertising through the schools would be effective

NEGATIVE:

We don't know who to believe because we are told so many double messages
I am cautious of doctors, they only want money... perhaps a chemist can tell me how
the water is processed
Someone on TV said it wasn't safe

5.14 Do you think drinking tap water is healthy? Why or why not? (Spanish speakers)

POSITIVE:

Yes, as I have seen a report saying the water is good
Yes, because it is good for me
Yes for health
Yes because it's easier
All the water is the same. It's safe because we drink it. If it wasn't, we'd all be dead,
although we are used to drinking from the bottle.

NEGATIVE:

No (2)
Don't know, need more info
I don't like the bleach
Depends on information received
No because of the plumbing... there are roaches and rats in there
No, here people say it should not be consumed
I think it is safe if it is distilled... the bleach can hurt us

5.15 Would you offer tap water to your kids? Why or why not? (Spanish speakers)

POSITIVE:

Yes, because the dentist recommends it.
At school they drink the tap water.
Doctors recommend the fluoride and calcium.

NEGATIVE:

No, because I don't want stomach or diarrhea problems.
No, only bottles.
No, because we are used to other ways.

5.16 Conclusions from the participants (Spanish speakers)

I would have liked some answers; we received many questions, but not many answers.
We would be willing to return to learn more.

We need a kit so we can test the water ourselves.
We could be your promotores to talk about tap water!
We drank tap water today!
I have heard the water is better in Lakewood than in Aurora.

6. DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS

Like the recently reported findings from the Westwood neighborhood, conducted by Delta Dental of Colorado Foundation, our groups reported distrust of water delivery systems, as well as other barriers to drinking tap water. We did, however, find an eagerness among participants to learn more about the safety and the delivery process of tap water, and feel there is a tremendous benefit to airing the kind of comprehensive education campaign we have been discussing with Telemundo.

We also discovered strong response from focus group participants to the environmental impact of plastic water bottles, and believe that environmental damage should be a strong factor in the education and messaging process. To that end, we have been speaking with Conservation Colorado's Protégete, a Latino/a environmental group who is using the promotora model to educate Hispanics about environmental issues and environmental justice. Protégete will partner with us to get positive tap water messages out to this population, who is clearly concerned about the environment.

6.1 Reasons for Optimism

- Many Latino/as are consuming tap water. Denver Health's Pediatrician and Oral Health Specialist Dr. Patty Braun estimates that about half of her Hispanic families report drinking tap water. Many in our groups did as well, most using filtered water through their refrigerator. Several cited Brita, and some were curious if the large volume bottles at the grocery store were being filled with fluoridated water.
- Many Latino/as cited an openness to being educated. They suggested someone from Denver Water, their doctor/dentist, or someone from the world of science could be a positive source of information. Because Evolution has worked with the Spanish speaking community for many years, we know that the white coat, whether doctor or dentist, commands respect. DDCOF's tour of Denver Water was a brilliant tactic, and would be a great thing to do with our partner, Telemundo.

- **The reaction to the photo of environmental impact from plastic water bottles was visceral in every focus group.** There is a belief that the bottles are recycled, making it okay to use them. When the participants saw the photo, the tone of the conversation changed and became about protecting the earth and protecting their children. **WE FEEL THIS IS A STRIKING AND EXCITING FINDING**, allowing us to increase the fold of stakeholders by bringing in the environmental community.

6.2 The Barriers

- There will always be naysayers in the community. If you believe tap water harmed a family member, or harmed your health, it is unlikely you will be swayed. The upside is the youth of the Hispanic community. The young people in each group were the most engaged, and showed the most interest in learning more.
- **TASTE.** Both Spanish and English speakers reported the water tasting like bleach. We know that some communities have poor-tasting water. We recommend that education about healthy filters, those that don't filter fluoride, be included in our proposed campaign.

7. CONCLUSION

The Tap Water Coalition, Oral Health Colorado, and Evolution were grateful to have the opportunity to expand on the work done in Westwood by DDCOF. By talking to groups of Spanish-speakers in Boulder, Aurora and Denver – as well as English speakers from Denver, we uncovered a wariness that we expected, but an openness to being educated, especially when environmental factors were included.

The Spanish speaking community is young and vibrant. They want and deserve honest information so they can make good, healthful choices for their families.

8. NEXT STEPS

- Include reactions from Tap Water Coalition members to the information in this report.
- Brainstorm with Tap Water Coalition on ways and means to distribute this information throughout their networks.

- Determine key influencers who should read the report. (Denver Water, etc.)
- Visit with funders to explore interest in underwriting the campaign. (See document)
- The campaign's depth and duration will depend upon the amount of funding we are able to raise. Our original \$25,000 budget was based upon limits set by the Dental Trade Alliance Foundation. We can seek a larger amount by seeing if several funding sources might all come forward with \$25,000.
- With the basic funding of \$25,000, we can probably stretch a campaign with Telemundo 8-10 weeks depending upon their level of promotional and editorial support.
- With an additional \$25,000 we would seek out radio partners, both the popular Spanish language stations and those who specialize in topical programming for Latino/as. We would also add Educa Radio to the campaign. Focus group participants reported that they would welcome information that came through their children's schools, and Educa would make a great partner to get that information out.
- With yet another \$25,000, we could look at expanded tactics such as digital. Evolution uses sophisticated digital techniques to reach Hispanics in English and Spanish. We could also consider partnering with one of the English speaking radio stations that appeal to Chicanos.
- At \$100,000 we could also explore direct outreach to communities, and could definitely work in both languages.