

OPINION

CUIDANDO LO NUESTRO

2-1-1 Texas Lifeline helps with SNAP and WIC

On Oct. 1, the federal government shut down. The members of Congress failed to approve new funding by Sept. 30. We are currently on the 19th day of the shutdown. This week even the 10th attempt to end the government shutdown was rejected. As we enter the third week of this shutdown, uncertainty continues to loom over federal workers, the military, and those who depend on programs funded by the federal government.

For the past few weeks, federal workers have been waking up and heading to work without knowing if they will be paid. Can you imagine that? Not only are citizens nationwide going to work without a promised paycheck, but some are furloughed. It is a daunting time for those living paycheck to paycheck. It's not only federal workers who are anxious. These individuals also depend on federal food assistance programs.

According to the Federal Reserve Bank, as of late 2024 and mid-2025, about 66,412 people living in WEBB County depend on SNAP and WIC. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) helps those in need to buy healthy food to provide nutrition for themselves and their families. The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women,

Infants, and Children (WIC) provides tailored food packages for mothers with children under five. These programs funded by the federal government are highly relied on in Texas.

As of Oct. 16, both of these programs are still functioning despite the government shutdown. Even so, many are worried that if the shutdown stretches into November, it is unclear if they will receive assistance. For many families in Laredo, these programs are a lifeline. Even if it's only a month without benefits, it could put families in a difficult position of having to choose between paying for food or rent. As the government shutdown continues, families are forced to stretch every dollar further. During these unpredictable times, it is vital to be aware that Texas has nonprofit organizations that are here to help.

A great example is 2-1-1 Texas. In partnership with the Texas Health and Human Services Commission (TX HHSC), it connects Texans to a variety of support services, including Your Texas Benefits, local community programs and disaster resource services. 2-1-1 Texas is a direct link to Your Texas Benefits where you can sign up or obtain information on state sponsored programs such as SNAP, WIC, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid and

more. The 2-1-1 Texas website notes, "if the federal government shutdown continues past Oct. 27th, SNAP benefits will not be issued for November. HHSC will issue SNAP benefits as soon as it received new federal guidance."

2-1-1 Texas also provides information and referral services to local community agencies that provide services within our community. Programs that assist with housing, food, child care, crisis counseling, and substance abuse treatment and much more. The helpline operates 24/7 online or by phone in over 90 languages, ensuring there's no one left without guidance. It is a program dedicated to giving you accurate and easy access to local health services and human service programs. This program is vital as it helps people navigate resources and provides a direct connection to help in moments of uncertainty. Whether you need help finding a food pantry, financial assistance, home accessibility, emergency food, or paying utility bills, 2-1-1 Texas provides you with resource specialists who can offer community support.

To reach out, dial 2-1-1 or 877-541-7905 for information and referral services. You can also visit 211texas.org to apply online and find more information. Be aware that the help line may

experience delays during the shutdown. It is essential to apply for these services early, especially as we are unaware of how much longer the shutdown will last.

As we move through this shutdown, it is easy to feel powerless and helpless. During these times, it's important to remember that our strength lies in our community.

The Laredo community checks on each other, nonprofits step up, and together we won't let others be left alone. Although we have no power over the decisions made by Congress, we can control how we support one another. Be aware. Stay informed. Help those near you and inform them of the resources available. 2-1-1 Texas is here to help and guide you 24/7.

Mark your calendars
AREA HEALTH EDUCATION CENTER (AHEC): 41st VIRTUAL ANNUAL UPDATE IN MEDICINE CONFERENCE ON VARIOUS CONDITIONS AFFECTING OUR COMMUNITY

AHEC will be having a Virtual Seminar from noon to 5 p.m. Friday and from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday. Up to 11 Continuing Education Units (CEUs) for health care providers. There are fees for the conference. For more information, contact AHEC at 956-712-0037 or email hmedel-lin@mrgbahec.org.

[lin@mrgbahec.org](mailto:hmedel-lin@mrgbahec.org).

JUNIOR ACHIEVEMENT OF LAREDO; INSPIRING YOUTH BOWL-A-THON

Saturday game times: noon, 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. Different levels of sponsorships available. For more information contact Oralia Bernal at obernal@jast.org

CATHOLIC CHARITIES DIOCESE OF LAREDO: 15th ANNUAL MEDICAL MISSION WEEK

Catholic Charities DOL will be having its Medical Missionaries of Divine Mercy in partnership with Diocese of Galveston – Houston and Driscoll Health Plan. They are currently taking preregistration at www.catholiccharities-dioceseoflaredo.org. The basic and specialized medical services will be available Nov. 6–10. Preregistration is encouraged to avoid having to wait but walk-ins will be welcomed. For more information call 956-722-2443.

IMAGINARIUM OF SOUTH TEXAS: AEP LIGHT UP THE NIGHT

Join us for the AEP Light up the Night from 4-8 p.m. Nov. 14 at the Imaginarium at the main campus of Laredo College (West End Washington Street) Building P-149. For more information, please call 956-728-0404.

LAREDO MAIN STREET: FARMERS MARKET

Come join the fun! The next Farmers Market will be from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Nov. 15 at the Outlet Shoppes at Laredo! Each month features a unique theme, seasonal activities and exciting workshops. Every visit is a new and memorable experience. Whether you're shopping for fresh ingredients, supporting local artisans, ore enjoying live entertainment, the Farmers Market is the place to be. Vendor applications are now open! For more information email: lmse-ventsoi@gmail.com

SOUTH TEXAS BLOOD AND TISSUE: HOST A BLOOD DRIVE

The South Texas Blood & Tissue organization needs the support of local leaders, employers and partners to host a blood drive and ensure all patients can get the blood they need. Their team will help you coordinate a date and location for your drive. They will walk you through the process. Call 1-855-326-5765 or 1-210-757-9505 for more information on hosting a drive or visit them at <https://donor.southtexasblood.org>

If you have an upcoming community event or information on a non-profit 501(c)(3) charitable organization you would like to share, please email me at 956cuidandolonuestro@gmail.com.

Karla Varela For the United Way of Laredo

GUEST OPINION

This flu season doesn't have to be as deadly as last

By Lisa Jarvis
BLOOMBERG OPINION

Last year's flu season was long, brutal, and ultimately tragic. By the time infections had subsided in May, as many as 1.1 million Americans were estimated to have been hospitalized and as many as 100,000 had died. Among them were 280 children — the highest number recorded in a non-pandemic year since health agencies began tracking the virus in 2004.

Some of that misery was likely avoidable.

Over the past few weeks, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has released a series of reports analyzing last year's flu season, and together they point to one simple way to ease the burden of the infection: get more Americans vaccinated against the virus.

That needs to happen soon. October marks the official start of flu season, but the virus has yet to start spreading widely. Because the shot, which the CDC recommends everyone six months of age or older receive annually, offers the best

protection when people get it before the virus begins circulating, now is the time to get vaccinated.

Last season, the flu started picking up in November, but really peaked in February 2025, when entire schools were forced to shut down and some hospitals were more crowded than they'd been during parts of the Covid-19 pandemic.

A CDC analysis of hospitalized flu patients across 14 states found that nearly 90% had at least one underlying condition—and yet fewer than a third had received a flu shot. Other CDC data reveal a particularly troubling trend: a steady decline in vaccination rates among vulnerable groups. Flu vaccination rates among pregnant women have dropped consistently since the 2019-2020 flu season, when nearly 57% of pregnant women were vaccinated, compared to last year's nadir of 38%.

Meanwhile, less than half of children received a flu shot last year, according to CDC estimates. Notably, among the children old enough to be vaccinated who



Win McNamee/Getty Images North America

U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. has previously spread false claims about the vaccine, asserting that it transmits the flu and does not save lives.

died, nearly 90% had not gotten a flu shot.

A reluctance to get the flu vaccine isn't new. A 2019 survey of parents found that more than a quarter were hesitant about it. Some don't consider the flu a serious threat, while others worry about the safety of the shot or mistakenly believe the vaccine can actually give them the virus.

And some doubt the vaccine's effectiveness. In

that same survey, only 1 in 4 parents believed the shot worked. That's understandable. Many of us know someone who's gotten sick — or have ourselves been knocked out by the flu — despite being vaccinated. Yet even when seasonal flu vaccines aren't a perfect match for the strains in circulation, they still do a good job of keeping people from suffering the worst effects of infection.

An initial analysis of this year's vaccine in the Southern Hemisphere — which experiences flu season from March to September and offers a preview of how well shots might work in the U.S. — underscores why vaccination really matters. Early CDC data suggest the shot reduced hospitalizations and flu-related outpatient visits by roughly half.

But convincing the

public that their illness could have been far worse if they hadn't given their immune system some target practice against the virus has long been a public health challenge. In fact, amid broader vaccine hesitancy following the pandemic, the CDC held focus groups to craft a new message. In 2023, it launched the "Wild to Mild" campaign that emphasized the shot's ability to "tame" the virus. In theory, the campaign aimed to tackle two problems at once: a lack of education about the vaccine and lack of trust in public health agencies.

Unfortunately, last February, just as flu rates were soaring, the Trump administration pulled the campaign. A Health and Human Services spokesperson said via email that the program would be replaced this fall with "a new national outreach campaign designed to raise awareness and empower Americans with the tools they need to stay healthy during the respiratory illness season. This effort builds on CDC's trusted guidance for flu, RSV, COVID-19, and other respiratory illnesses, reinforcing practical prevention steps."

That shift in strategy is particularly concerning given new data showing that parents need more educating on the dangers that flu poses to children — even healthy ones — and the role vaccination can play in mitigating those risks.

A recent poll conduct-

ed by KFF and the Washington Post found that only 27% of parents considered the flu shot to be "very" important, while another 29% considered it "somewhat" important.

Of course, the broader climate of skepticism around vaccines within this health administration leaves little reason to hope it will deliver a clear and forceful endorsement of the shot this fall. Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. has previously spread false claims about the vaccine, asserting that it transmits the flu and does not save lives.

Meanwhile, the CDC's vaccine advisory panel further undermined confidence by removing its recommendation for shots containing thimerosal, despite decades of data affirming their safety. Although those formulations are used by only a small percentage of the population, medical groups fear the move will erode trust even further and sow additional doubts about the flu vaccines overall.

This struggle to boost flu vaccination rates is nothing new, but today's environment makes the challenge even tougher. Let's hope the nation's most trusted messengers — frontline physicians offering the most trusted advice — are able to cut through the rhetoric and turn things around.

Lisa Jarvis is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering biotech, health care and the pharmaceutical industry.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR POLICY

The Laredo Morning Times does not publish anonymous letters. Letters must include the writer's first and last names as well as a phone number to verify identity. The phone number is not published; it is used solely to verify identity and to clarify content, if necessary.

When responding to another's letter, writers should focus on the topic and not on the original writer themselves. No name-calling or gratuitous abuse is allowed. Letters are edited for style, grammar, length and civility. Also, letters longer than 1,000 words will not be accepted.

Please send letters to editorial@lmtonline.com attached in a word document or in the email itself. If you cannot send an email, mail to Letters to the Editor, 5711 McPherson Rd Suite 203A, Laredo, TX 78041.