

THE BACKSTORY OF A THREE-PART INVESTIGATIVE SERIES

La Nueva Voz takes a story and runs with it as it becomes a series with a life of its own

Alleged improprieties and abuses at Pomona's 'COVID Hotel'

La Nueva Voz, Pomona's only community newspaper, ran a three-part investigative series on issues at Pomona's "COVID hotel," the Sheraton Fairplex Hotel (on the campus of the Los Angeles County Fair and other major events), as the lead stories in the January through March 2021 issues. An editorial on the alleged irregularities and improprieties uncovered in this investigation ran in the April 2021 issue.

One thing that was interesting about the development of this series was that it was not initially planned as a series. The first story simply was based on information that was provided by mail to Renee Barbee, Vice President of Marketing and Operations at La Nueva Voz, by a male nurse who was concerned about the way the isolation facility was being operated, with allegations that patients were being shifted around from one facility to another for "double counting" and double billing.

That story prompted responses from other employees inside and out of the operation – new allegations regarding drugs and alcohol being used to keep "patients" from leaving, again to keep the billings up, and the second story in the series was written.

The story continued to feed on itself and other higher-level nurses and managers reached out to La Nueva Voz with the "follow the money" angle – doctors in charge paying outside staff far more than county employees had been paid for the same work, allegedly pocketing portions of inflated charges and the like. That seemed like a perfect finishing touch to a three-part series.

Allegations from news sources – both named and unnamed – appeared to be consistent across the board, providing La Nueva Voz with a high level of credibility in the story pointing to the likelihood of corruption in the operation on a variety of levels, all taking allegedly improper and illegal advantage of contracts with both the County of Los Angeles and the federal government.

And as the story rolled out, piece by piece, La Nueva Voz learned that Pomona's "COVID hotel" really was the largest isolation and quarantine facility in the nation – and possibly in the world – and was handling the "sickest of the sick," according to sources.

In addition, while this fact was never published, La Nueva Voz was informed by a major confidential source that it was BECAUSE of this investigation – and high-level management concern that the scheme was about to go public big time – that the hotel operation was shut down prematurely to eliminate evidence, paper trails and more.

This belief was supported by the understanding of La Nueva Voz news sources that Los Angeles County was even considering purchasing the hotel making it possible to continue using the facility for health services operations, a plan that was abandoned.

Today, after roughly seven months of using the hotel for federal contractors involved in the unrelated temporary sheltering of "unaccompanied minors" crossing the border, the hotel has returned to its original uses operating hotel rooms for the public, meeting rooms for groups and an upscale on-site restaurant open to the public.

Meanwhile, the story became a topic of interest to both elected officials and members of a variety of law enforcement agencies. And it became the most-read and most talked about story in the 12-year history of La Nueva Voz, a newspaper that picked up where the old La Voz left off after its own 28-year run in Pomona.

And according to the La Nueva Voz web consultant, the story also received more “hits” on the web site than the newspaper has ever received – literally thousands of county health services employees routinely grabbed a link and shared each installment among themselves as the story they had been trying to tell for months came to life.

According to confidential sources, those employees were surprised – as was La Nueva Voz – that no mainstream news media attempted to pick up and run with this difficult but important story, despite the fact that La Nueva Voz offered the story to Los Angeles television, the Associated Press and City News Service of Los Angeles at no cost or obligation other than a courtesy mention that the story was first reported in La Nueva Voz.

Finally, while La Nueva Voz has attempted to remain in contact with the various law enforcement agencies who the newspaper made aware of these developments, no law enforcement agency – or even the Medical Board of California – has confirmed that an investigation is under way.

It is not known if that is because an investigation is being conducted but officials are not commenting because press coverage could compromise the investigation, or if that is because no investigation is being conducted at all – it could have been ruled too difficult to prove (although La Nueva Voz offered access to confidential sources), too difficult to obtain news headlines making it all worthwhile, or impossible to proceed due to political pressure inside or out of the county.

For now, at least, that part of the story remains untold.

NOTE 1: For contest rules compliance purposes, this statement confirms that no objections, requests for corrections or retractions or other controversies arose after publication. Only one comment came close – a telephone call and subsequent e-mails from a nurse who was concerned that her photo, provided to La Nueva Voz along with other photos by Los Angeles County, was being used since she did not authorize the use of her photo and she was no longer working for the “COVID Hotel” operation. As it turned out, she became one of our best confidential sources for the series.

NOTE 2: La Nueva Voz publisher Jeff Schenkel, who reported this three-part investigative series, received his bachelor’s degree in journalism in 1970 from the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. He has worked in news and public relations in Southern California for the past 51 years.

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