

# Kane County woman says a hands-on nurse helped her transition into motherhood during COVID-19 pandemic

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Registered nurse Kristy Brown, left, Daiana Torres and her daughter, Vanessa Lopez, 20 months, meet along the Fox River on March 15, 2022, in Elgin. (Stacey Wescott / Chicago Tribune)

When Daiana Torres, 26, saw that her playful 19-month-old daughter was not moving much, she sensed something was wrong. It had been two days since

Torres had last seen her toddler, Vanessa Lopez, be energetic by doing things like climbing on tables and chairs.

Her baby had a fever and within hours, Torres, who is Latina, found herself sitting in an emergency room waiting on a prognosis.

“It’s hard for a mom taking a kid to the ER not knowing what they’re going to do,” Torres said.

Seeking medical attention is a decision Torres would not have ordinarily made. She prefers to avoid doctors and hospitals, based on negative experiences. But not knowing whether her daughter had a virus or was simply teething scared her. It was one of the moments she felt like parenting, especially as a first-time mom, was difficult to navigate.

When Torres started to feel alone, she made a phone call to someone who had been by her side since her early stages of pregnancy.

That person was Kristy Brown, a registered nurse who works for a nonprofit organization called Nurse-Family Partnership.



Daiana Torres, along with her daughter, Vanessa Lopez, 20 months, walk to meet Kristy Brown, a registered nurse with Nurse-Family Partnership, along the Fox River on March 15, 2022, in Elgin. (Stacey Wescott / Chicago Tribune)

The organization pairs expecting mothers with a nurse who would be a resource from pregnancy all the way through the child's second birthday. Brown stayed on the phone with Torres for hours providing comfort and advice. It turned out Vanessa had an infection. Before sending the mother and daughter home, the doctor suggested Torres give her daughter Motrin twice a day and continue to monitor her fever.

"Sometimes doctors don't go into deep explanation about what's going on, but Kristy took the time to explain to me what to do and what to look out for," Torres said. "I feel like Kristy has been a great help and new moms should be able to have a nurse like I do."

Jordan Wildermuth, the senior government affairs manager for Nurse-Family Partnership, said such organizations are needed to support moms and families during a vulnerable time in their lives.

Nurse-Family Partnership serves 40 states, according to its website. The organization launched in Illinois in 2000.

"We really need to invest in programs like this one that would move the needle by helping pregnant women get the prenatal care they need, providing parenting support, postnatal care, and providing ongoing screening support during the critical stages of the baby's development and prior to delivery," Wildermuth said.

Once a nurse is paired with an expecting mother, the two create a schedule that works for them to perform wellness checks. Some women prefer to have a weekly visit while others prefer once a month.



Kristy Brown interacts with Vanessa Lopez, 20 months, on March 15, 2022, in Elgin. (Stacey Wescott / Chicago Tribune)

The organization says consistent check-ins help prevent maternal morbidity and mortality, particularly for women of color.

Every year in the United States, an average of 700 women die during pregnancy or in the year after, according to a 2020 report from the [\*\*Centers for Disease Control or Prevention\*\*](#). The report also states that Black women are three times more likely to die from a pregnancy-related condition than white women.

The number of maternal deaths rose nationally during the pandemic from 754 in 2019 to 861 in 2020, according to the [\*\*CDC's National Center for Health Statistics\*\*](#).

And in Illinois, an average of 75 women died while pregnant or within one year of pregnancy each year between 2008 and 2017, according to an April 2021 report from the [\*\*Illinois Department of Public Health\*\*](#).

In Illinois, the Nurse-Family Partnership, which is specifically for first-time moms, serves 11 out of the 102 counties, according to Wildermuth. In those 11 counties, about 500 families are being supported by the organization.

“We are really not even scratching the surface with the number of families that could benefit from the Nurse-Family Partnership services,” Wildermuth said. There are approximately 24,000 eligible families who can benefit from the Nurse-Family Partnership, according to Wildermuth.

“And we base that number off Medicaid eligible births in Illinois,” Wildermuth said. “A first-time pregnancy can be a scary time not really knowing what to expect. So with families and parents that are facing economic inequity and other barriers, it’s especially important to make sure they have the support that they need.”

When Torres learned she was pregnant in December 2019, her mother suggested she apply for WIC, a food assistance program for women, infants and children.

“We talked to Kristy by accident because we were looking for the WIC number but we got where she works at instead,” Torres said. “I decided to stay with her because she gave more information than an OB would give.”

Brown has been a registered nurse for 27 years and worked with the Nurse-Family Partnership organization for 16 years.

Brown had experience working with children in clinics and in an urban hospital pediatric unit.

She decided to pursue a bachelor’s degree in nursing and, shortly after obtaining it, Brown saw that Nurse-Family Partnership was being implemented by the Kane County Health Department.





Kristy Brown, right, interacts with Daiana Torres and her daughter, Vanessa Lopez, 20 months. (Stacey Wescott / Chicago Tribune)

“The idea that I’m offering services where I grew up is what made me say ‘yeah, this is where I want to work,’” Brown said.

When Brown met Torres, she was excited that the expecting mom was open to learning more about Nurse-Family-Partnership even though it wasn’t Torres’ intention to seek those services.

The two formed a quick bond, but it was when Torres was facing trials while seeking prenatal care that their relationship grew stronger.

Within the first month of learning she was pregnant, Torres knew which obstetrician she wanted services from, but had to seek another doctor because that doctor did not deliver in her area.

Torres was told to seek another obstetrician, but that was not a simple task. She met with four doctors in a two-month period before finding an obstetrician.

One doctor judged her for her weight, and another refused to see her because she did not confirm her pregnancy at that particular clinic. Torres was willing to seek different doctors until she felt like she found the right one for her. But doing so was a tedious process that she admits brought her to tears.

“She was being bounced around and that was very stressful for her,” Brown said. “But that allowed us to build our relationship so she could learn how to better advocate for herself so she can receive the quality care she deserved. Once she settled with a consistent doctor, Torres spoke with Brown on the phone and on FaceTime at least once a week for a wellness check. Usually, wellness checks would take place in-person but due to COVID-19, their check-ins had to be virtual.

Nonetheless, Torres grew more comfortable with Brown, who would listen to any concerns and offer a shoulder to cry on when overwhelmed.

In July 2020, Torres was full-term and was feeling ready to give birth to her daughter.

“She was prepared for the labor experience but there were some curveballs that were out of her control, such as COVID,” Brown said.

On the morning of July 23, Torres woke up at 3 a.m. in labor. She said everything was seamless until she got to the hospital.

When the soon-to-be mom arrived, she was given a COVID test and to her surprise, Torres tested positive.

“When I was told I had COVID, I broke down in tears,” Torres said. “Because I had COVID, only the doctor and the nurse were allowed into the delivery room.”

When Vanessa was born, the happy moment came to a halt. Torres started hemorrhaging and her newborn stopped breathing.

As more of the medical staff, mostly unfamiliar faces, entered the room, Torres found comfort in Brown who talked to her on FaceTime.

“I was proud of how strong she was through all of those obstacles,” Brown said. “(Daiana) was prepared for the hospital experience but she also had to grapple with unexpected emotional elements.”

Torres and Vanessa were able to leave the hospital two days after delivery. But the new mom had to take extra precautions until a COVID test came back negative.

Vanessa’s father, Miguel, and extended family members all tested negative so Torres watched others have a physical connection with her newborn daughter that she was not yet able to have.

“It would be a week and a half before I’d be able to give my daughter a kiss,” Torres said.

The bond between Brown and Torres continued to grow.



Kristy Brown, left, and Daiana Torres, along with her daughter, Vanessa Lopez, 20 months, meet along the Fox River in Elgin. (Stacey Wescott / Chicago Tribune)



“In the beginning, she was quite shy, but now we talk all day nonstop with nice, open discussions,” Brown said.

It’s the kind of closeness she aims to maintain with the other 19 new and expecting moms she works with.

“I tell all the moms I am honored to be part of their journey,” Brown said. “I love the fact that they can say for two and a half years we are going to have a partnership.”

Even though the nurses are no longer obligated to do check-ins after two years, Brown said she does not completely cut ties.

“If a family I used to work with is in the same neighborhood I’m doing visits in, I’ll stop by,” Brown said. “One day, I walked a child that I visited to school and he was a 7-year-old in first grade.”

In four months, Torres’ daughter, Vanessa, will be turning two.

“Let’s say my child is 5 years old and I need help with something, I know Kristy would be there,” Torres said.

Watching a woman gain confidence as she transitions into motherhood is what Brown said keeps her working with Nurse-Family Partnership.

“This program and the moms I work with will always have a special place in my heart,” Brown said. “I hope when I visit them, they know how much they mean to me.”

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