

# Centro de Salud Familiar La Fe

EL PASO, TEXAS

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Centro de Salud Familiar La Fe (La Fe) is a Federally Qualified Health Center with nearly 500 personnel and leads 23 diverse medical and social-service sites serving the entire West Texas region. La Fe works to “improve the quality of life of those we serve by continuously enhancing the health and human services provided.” The CHC has been leveraging the social determinants of health (SDH) particularly in youth development, education, and employment. La Fe's many efforts include providing adult education classes and youth arts and culture classes; supporting entrepreneurialism through a culinary academy; fostering pride and a sense of responsibility among Latino men for their children; bringing together volunteers age 55 and over with seniors in the community to support families or professional caregivers, or simply to be a friend; developing a mixed-income housing complex; creating a dual language immersion program for students in pre-K through 5th grade; promoting civic involvement in system changes in health and social policies; providing job training and free legal aid; and creating a neighbor-to-neighbor network for providing medical care in exchange for community service, thus building and strengthening the bonds of trust and caring among residents.

Centro de Salud Familiar La Fe (La Fe) was born out of the grassroots movements of the 1960s and formed by a group of women — mostly single mothers and grandmothers — from El Paso's Segundo Barrio (Second Ward). The women banded together to take action against the poverty, unemployment, lack of health care, and gangs that were rampant in their community. These Mothers of La Fe, as they are known to La Fe staff, envisioned a social-justice organization that would address *Total Wellness* — a holistic embracing of what their community needed to be healthy and strong, including the right to quality health care, job access, education, affordable and decent housing, preservation of cultural traditions, respect for family values, and a vibrant and flourishing arts and cultural environment. It was to be a community resource that would help them change their lives and the future of their children, a resource that would give them a hand-up from poverty and not a hand-out.

Their efforts and those of volunteer health workers and community activists resulted in a one-room clinic that opened in 1967 within the poorest tenement called "Seis Infernos" (Spanish for "Six Hells") of the Segundo Barrio. La Fe's current CEO Salvador Balcorta has been a major force in transforming the organization from this single-site clinic, and today La Fe is a Federally Qualified Health Center with an annual budget of more than \$25 million and nearly 500 personnel, leading 23 diverse medical and social-service sites that serve the entire West Texas region. La Fe's formal mission is "To improve the quality of life of those we serve by continuously enhancing the health and human services provided". In Balcorta's own words, La Fe works to "serve the quality of life, health care, and total well-being needs of our people

— all while keeping our community’s dignity, traditions, and cultural values at heart". In 2010, La Fe served more than 30,000 urban residents, largely of Latino origin, through over 300,000 patient visits. Most clients were uninsured (78 percent) or had Medicaid (24 percent), and 82 percent lived at or below the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). Only one percent had incomes above twice the FPL.

## La Fe Efforts to Leverage the Social Determinants of Health

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Leveraging the social determinants of health (SDH) is considered a given not only because of the vision of La Fe founders, but also thanks to the commitment and leadership of its CEO, since Balcorta joined La Fe as the executive director in 1992. He grew up in the Segundo Barrio community and has been involved with the community in various roles, including as an outreach worker for the health center, teen community social justice activist and, after studying social work, as deputy director of the El Paso City-County Health District.

In 2000 La Fe established HOMBRES 2000, a program that targeted men of all ages to foster pride and a sense of responsibility for their children. This effort was inspired by the view among Latino men that it is not manly to show their emotions or care for their children. The program continually brought together older and younger men to learn from each other and talk about life experiences and the importance of family. HOMBRES 2000 was supported by local and Annie E. Casey Foundation grants but when the grant period ended, so did the program. Using a “start slow and small” strategy, La Fe is now looking for new funding to restart the program at two of its sites in partnership with local schools.

La Fe is also a participating site of the Senior Companion Program of the Corporation for National and Community Service, bringing together volunteers age 55 and over with adults in their community who have difficulty with the simple tasks of day-to-day living, to provide valuable support and wellness. Volunteers may provide families or professional caregivers much-needed time off, run errands, or simply be a friend, making a difference that strengthens and helps preserve an individual’s independence.

In 2002, La Fe launched a Time Dollar<sup>1</sup> program called Banco del Barrio to advance the concept of "Total Wellness" as part of health care services, public activities, and the 2010 Border Health Initiative. For example, participants in La Fe’s diabetes program could earn credits by losing weight or helping with a child care program for families with clinic appointments and then spend it for small home repairs. The entire operation of the La Fe Culture and Technology Center was driven by Time Dollars in that participants could earn and spend Time Dollars by attending classes. La Fe sought to advance the Healthy Border 2010 objectives by allowing migrant workers in Texas who were La Fe clients to transfer

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<sup>1</sup> Time Dollars are the currency of programs designed to promote equality and build caring community economies through inclusive exchange of time and talent (neighbors help neighbors). The Time Dollar system emphasizes reciprocity with a payback that is valued. Edgar S. Cahn began the Time Dollars project in the late 1980s to involve communities in promoting systems of self-help. To learn more, visit [www.timebanks.org](http://www.timebanks.org).

their credits to their families to be honored as a form of payment for health care services provided by a leading health facility in Juarez, Mexico. La Fe learned that the Time Dollar system also promoted a sense of solidarity, power, and community: participants of the program took the initiative to protest severe Medicaid cuts that were to be imposed by the Texas legislature. The *Banco del Barrio* program ended in early 2006, when the grant to fund the program organizer and staff personnel was not renewed. The concept, however, lives on; La Fe is not a free clinic but allows clients unable to pay for services to volunteer in exchange at the organization's human services sites based on their skills and interests. For example, a patient may teach knitting classes to (and consequently help support the social and emotional well-being of) La Fe HIV/AIDS Care Center clients or Culture and Technology center students. In La Fe's experience, a successful Time Dollar program requires strong leadership by a strong and talented community organizer, someone who knows how to motivate others to become a part of the project and give back, and how to inspire shared responsibility and a well-founded level of trust.

Also in the early 2000s, the health center began to create programs under the La Fe Montana Vista Community and Satellite Resource Center, which is owned by the county of El Paso but staff and operated by La Fe. Programs conducted at the resource center include citizenship test tutoring and conversational English classes, emergency food distributions, nutrition programs for seniors, Meals on Wheels (home-delivered meals services to people in need), and access to legal advice thanks to a partnership with the Mexican-American Bar Association Attorneys. La Fe also provides a wide variety of community programs at its Culture and Technology Center, which is another member of the health center's "comprehensive community wellness network". A detailed description of the center follows.

### **La Fe Culture and Technology Center**

When art programs in public schools became subject to budget cuts, La Fe took the initiative to create the La Fe Culture and Technology Center (CTC) in 2003 to fill the void and provide a platform for educational programs that ultimately improve health and wellbeing of the community. Community members of any age can benefit from a wide range of free classes throughout the year, including arts, computer literacy, music, exercise, folk dancing, theater, cooking, crafts, muralism, audio-editing, English for Speakers of Other Languages, and preparation courses for GED and U.S. Citizenship tests. The La Fe CTC also houses a spacious, one-stop academy that offers catering and culinary training. Known as the La Fe Commercial and Educational Kitchen, students learn how to prepare healthy foods, develop and market a profitable and legitimate food-based business, preserve the El Paso community's traditional foodways, and develop healthier lifelong eating habits. The program was inspired by an incident in the community where "this sweet little burrito lady got busted by the city health department," according to Estela Reyes, media relations administrator at La Fe, in an interview for the El Paso Times. "Everybody adored her and loved her food, but after they slapped her with that \$500 fine, that was it for her". At the academy, students receive advice on the maze of required paperwork, food-safety training, and the use of a commercial kitchen.

From an administrative point of view, La Fe CTC is the arts and education component of the La Fe Child and Adolescent Wellness Center which also includes a pediatric and healthcare unit that may "prescribe" CTC classes to its clients. CTC itself is located in a separate facility with its own set of staff, but it is completely surrounded by other La Fe sites and often collaborates with each of these. For example, CTC provides cooking classes for diabetic La Fe clients. CTC also partners with the University of Texas at El Paso and El Paso Community College for arts programs. Different CTC partners include: Junior League of El Paso, the City of El Paso, Sonic Boom Ranch Recording Studio, and the Paso del Norte Health Foundation. The center is staffed by approximately 15 full-time health center employees, including a receptionist, three instructors for the educational programs and six AmeriCorps members for tutoring, an executive chef and one or more assistants for the culinary academy, artists in residence, and a recording studio manager. CTC is supported through a federal broadband technology grant, funds provided by the City of El Paso, and donations.

Students or participants that have been assisted by CTC often return to bring their skills back to the community. For example, one student who had participated in the recording studio program went on to study at a music engineering school and now comes back to the center to help run the sound for events and community festivals. Other past participants serve as mentors and tutors. In an interview for a web publication, the administrator for the CTC, Antonio Santos, explains that the success and reach of the center are driven by these returning individuals who set an example for the other participants. He says, "it's the responsibility of everyone to return to their community, not necessarily to stay forever, but to come give back to their own people for a year or so sometime during their lives. It's the only way of making a difference."

La Fe's social services division is another internal entity working to address the SDH by sending social workers for visits to a variety of La Fe sites and centers on a weekly basis to connect clients to social services.

The service-oriented La Fe also established a policy-arm to formally advocate for equitable access to social, economic, and health and human resources. A description follows:

### **La Fe Policy, Research, and Education Center**

In 2006, La Fe founded the La Fe Policy, Research, and Education Center (PREC). PREC is a non-profit organization based in San Antonio, TX, that works to improve the well-being of Mexican Americans through policy analysis, education, leadership development, civic involvement, and advocacy for system changes in health and social policies. The La Fe PREC grew out of a long held keen interest shared by its

executive director, Juan Flores, and the CEO of La Fe, Salvador Balcorta, who have known each other for many years.

To connect the “growing Latino-based research in academic institutions with the realities of policy making and whether it is addressing well-documented social and health inequalities and disparities”, the La Fe PREC publishes issue papers, fact sheets, and “action alerts”. Other La Fe PREC work also includes Abuelos y Nietos Juntos, a one-year demonstration project in collaboration with a local elementary school. The pilot family capacity-building project focused on grandparents who are raising their grandchildren, including initiating social support group services for grandparents and linking them to community resources.

The La Fe PREC is currently collaborating with community organizations, public agencies, volunteers, and the American Association of Retired Persons to bring policy attention and resources to address identified concerns among Mexican-American seniors. The Latino Senior Bienestar Engagement Project seeks to raise the level of civic involvement among low-income Latino seniors and engage them in advocacy work on improvements important to them. The La Fe PREC has also joined the National Latino Tobacco Control Network targeted to build leadership, inform, support and energize a National Network of tobacco control experts and activists to work with Latino communities.

The policy research and education center currently consists of four full-time staff members, including the executive director of La Fe PREC who also acts as fundraiser and researcher for the organization. Additional support may be provided by interns and contacts from the executive director’s strong network, as well as feedback from a Clinical Advisor to La Fe PREC and the La Fe CEO. La Fe provided seed funding for the first three years of PREC, which is now funded by grants from foundations, and contracts and subcontracts for training and education activities. Plans are to apply for 501(c)(3) nonprofit status and look into building connections with private donors to sustain the organization, given that foundations typically prefer to fund policy research centers affiliated with academic institutions rather than organizations like PREC.

Another innovative program of La Fe simultaneously targeted El Paso County’s drop-out rates, employment training, health and affordable housing needs. In 2007, the health center began to offer the La Fe YouthBuild Academy (LFYA) through its La Fe Community Development Corporation subsidiary. LFYA was housed in the CTC and offered 10 to 30 participants 18 to 24 years of age a 10-month educational program to earn their GED, develop valuable job skills, and receive personal development counseling. For workforce development, LFYA students chose to work alongside construction industry and area business leaders to develop and build quality, affordable housing in South El Paso, or train for El Paso’s fast-growing health-care job market as medical assistants. Grant funding for LFYA, however, was not renewed and La Fe ended the program in December 2011.

### **La Fe Preparatory School**

In 2007, the La Fe Preparatory School opened its doors in South El Paso, TX, to provide Segundo Barrio children with the opportunity to learn and graduate with the ability to communicate socially, academically, and professionally in both Spanish and English. The charter school is free of charge to children from Segundo Barrio, and uses an integrated, thematic-based curriculum with a focus on arts, culture, and technology, to foster deeper understanding of the subject matter. In 2011, the school served 225 students from pre-kindergarten to 5th grade.

La Fe Preparatory School grew out of the vision provided by La Fe CEO, Salvador Balcorta. In looking at the academic performance of South El Paso youth, he saw opportunity for improvement and for La Fe to take the lead in providing a solution. When the National Council of La Raza began to offer incubator funds for researching and developing charter school applications, La Fe applied and received a one-year grant. Meanwhile, a new resident with a background in education began to ask around on how she could get involved in the community. Locals repeatedly directed her to La Fe and Mr. Balcorta eventually asked her to assist him with the research and development of the charter school application. For the development of the program, La Fe also drew on an advisory board composed of members from the local education service center, University of Texas El Paso, community colleges, school districts, business communities, advertising, banking, and local nonprofits. La Fe's affiliate organization, the La Fe Community Development Corporation, submitted a successful charter school application, and the La Fe staff member with expertise in education now serves as the administrator for the school.

At the school, every child has access to state-of-the-art technology including computers, smart boards, digital cameras, and digital projectors. Parents are also given the opportunity to use the technology available and are strongly encouraged to volunteer at the school and attend monthly Parent Nights. One Saturday a month students go on field trips or participate in community service projects, and the school provides a three-week enrichment program during the summer. Small classes allow each child to receive individual and personalized attention, and students are taught and understand that they are capable of and expected to attend a four-year university. The afterschool program at La Fe Preparatory School provides a space for the children to get involved in fine arts and athletic activities that help them build self-esteem, discover new talents, and stay healthy.

From an administrative point of view, the Preparatory School is managed through a La Fe subsidiary, the La Fe Community Development Corporation. In terms of staffing, the school's leadership consists of an administrator, principal, and assistant principal, with the latter two handling day-to-day management of the school. The administrator's responsibilities include continuously looking for funding with support from La Fe's CEO and board members to connect to opportunities and develop relationships. Two

classroom teachers per grade level are assisted by a mix of part- and full-time tutors including five college graduates and 12 AmeriCorps members.

La Fe Preparatory School partners with the health center to provide free medical and dental screenings and referrals to social services for students. Health center staff also come into the school to provide educational events for parents on a range of topics including parenting skills, health education, nutrition, and steps to take for preparing their children for college. School staff also encourage parents to attend GED, English as a Second Language, and other courses offered at the La Fe Culture and Technology Center.

The school is funded and sustained by a charter school award that is renewed every five years as long as reporting and student achievement requirements are met. To sustain its ability to go above and beyond what schools typically provide, additional funding is obtained through small fundraising activities with parents in the community, one to two-year grants, corporate sponsorships, and American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds. The leadership is considering organizing larger annual fundraisers to increase contributions and raise the school's profile.

On an anecdotal level, the staff has noted increased confidence and growth among students with their ability to speak both English and Spanish as well as improved academic performance. In its most recent reevaluation (2011), the school was rated "Recognized" with 97 percent of 4th grade students passing the state writing exam, 85 percent of 3rd/4th graders passing the reading, and 80 percent of 3rd/4th graders passing math. The school has set a goal for itself to obtain an "Exemplary" rating by 2013. Additionally, healthy competition among local schools has encouraged improvements in academic achievement across the community.

More recently, the health center has been involved in creating housing. Inspired by the City of El Paso's call for new housing as a catalyst for revitalization, La Fe established a for-profit corporation subsidiary named MPV Inc., which owns and opened Magoffin Park Villas, a high-end, mixed-income housing project located in downtown El Paso in August 2011. La Fe owned the land where the complex was constructed for many years, and had a warehouse on the property for a time. La Fe is now looking into additional housing project opportunities.

## How La Fe Does It All

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La Fe's "infrastructure" for leveraging the SDH to improve the health of clients and the community can be described as follows:

***Developing SDH Programs*** – La Fe’s CEO Salvador Balcorta is a direct and driving force behind the organization’s consistent efforts to leverage the SDH. For example, the La Fe Policy, Research, and Education Center grew out of a long held keen interest shared by its executive director Juan Flores and Balcorta, who have known each other for many years. The La Fe Preparatory School also grew out of the vision provided by Balcorta, who saw opportunity for La Fe to take the lead in providing a solution for improving the academic performance of South El Paso youth. In parallel to the activities of the CEO, all senior staff are expected to constantly research and network for grants, and monthly meetings among them provide opportunities for each to speak about issues, upcoming events, grants, projects with all attending and identify opportunities to collaborate. The culinary academy program components of the La Fe Culture and Technology Center, for example, grew out of senior staff discussions inspired by local, unlicensed vendors who were selling homemade food at grocery store parking lots and street corners and living in fear of the city health department and potentially bankrupting fines.

Thus, the CHC's efforts in leveraging the SDH may come about through a variety of means, including community events (e.g., unlicensed vendors running from the city health department, art programs in local public schools getting cut), and direct observations and suggestions from leadership and staff. Other opportunities for new program ideas, as well as partners and funding, may come from consistent coalition meetings with South El Paso Association, U.S. Mexico Border Health Association, U.S. Mexico Diabetes Collaborative, and the AIDS Education Technology Coalition of Texas and Oklahoma. La Fe's decision-making in program development is also informed by a door-to-door community mapping process that the CHC conducts once a decade to document residents' English and Spanish language skills, educational backgrounds, years lived in the U.S., health issues and concerns, involvement in community activities, and job status.

***Management, Staffing, Partnerships*** – This CHC typically manages and conducts its SDH work through specialized internal departments that may be physically separate from the clinics (e.g., the Culture and Technology Center, Montana Vista Community and Satellite Resource Center, social services division) or subsidiary non-profit entities (e.g., La Fe Policy, Research, and Education Center; MPV Inc.; and La Fe Community Development Corporation) that operate with their own staff, offices, and funding streams. La Fe departments and entities often partner with each other, but the CHC and its subsidiaries also partner with educational institutions, the city and county of El Paso, Paso del Norte Health Foundation, investor groups, and Junior League of El Paso, to name a few. To implement and manage efforts to leverage the SDH, La Fe and its subsidiary entities often hire their own, permanent staff from the community. This hiring practice also enables La Fe to successfully address its clients' needs and issues, including those related to law enforcement and immigration, because many of the staff have grown up among the same conditions. La Fe Staff also include 10 AmeriCorps members (provided through La Fe) who tutor and assist teachers at the Preparatory School and the Culture and Technology Center.

***SDH Program Funding and Sustainability*** – La Fe has been raising funds for many of its programs through an annual golf tournament fundraiser and donations from individuals and businesses, but the CHC predominantly relies on grants to support its SDH efforts. For that purpose, a set of about five senior staff members take primary responsibility for writing and managing grant proposals besides their other responsibilities within La Fe. This team works with other staff members and directors from La Fe departments or subsidiaries based on the program to be proposed. In particular for its high-end mixed-income housing project Magoffin Park Villas, the La Fe subsidiary MPV Inc. took advantage of loans from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, in addition to support from federal HOME Funds<sup>2</sup> directed to the City of El Paso. The housing initiative has become self-sustainable through rental income, and also utilizes Section 8 (Housing Choice Voucher Program) funding to provide reduced rent fees based on the family’s income.

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<sup>2</sup> HOME Funds are a block grant to State and local governments designed exclusively to create affordable housing for low-income households.