

# La Maestra Community Health Centers

SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA

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La Maestra Community Health Centers is a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) with more than 240 personnel and 15 sites. La Maestra works “to provide quality health care and education, improve the overall wellbeing of the family, bringing the underserved, ethnically diverse communities into the mainstream of our society, through a caring, effective, culturally and linguistically competent manner, respecting the dignity of all patients”. Every staff member is trained in identifying and addressing the patient’s total needs, i.e., leveraging the SDH, as part of the organization’s “Circle of Care” model. The community health center particularly believes in tailored and educational programs such as financial, language, and environmental literacy classes as the basis for any social change and effective health care outcomes, but is also involved in a variety of SDH efforts such as providing referrals and educational programs for first-time home buyers, promoting childhood literacy and offering childcare, creating a community garden, operating a food pantry, collaborating to organize a farmers’ market, and developing an emergency and disaster plan in collaboration with other first-responders in the community. La Maestra also provides micro-enterprise assistance, job training and placement, and transitional housing.

In 1986 La Maestra Amnesty Center (LMAC) opened as a non-profit citizenship center and educational facility for immigrants and refugees to San Diego, California offering services to help them gain citizenship. Based on a focus group with its clients, LMAC opened La Maestra Family Clinic in 1990 to meet the medical needs of immigrants, refugees, and low-income residents. Soon the clinic developed into an independent non-profit, absorbed many of the social service programs performed at LMAC, and changed its name to La Maestra Community Health Centers (La Maestra). Based on the LMAC experience, the La Maestra founders knew that in order to achieve overall wellbeing, the social determinants of health had to be part of the clinic’s mission and strategic plan. Zara Marselian, one of the founders and the CEO of La Maestra, has led the consistent and sustainable growth of the organization. Today, La Maestra is a Federally Qualified Health Center with more than 240 personnel and 15 sites, including four school-based medical and dental clinics. In 2010, with a budget of \$15 million, La Maestra served about 37,800 urban residents through 110,800 visits. The community health center predominantly serves Latinos, but also provides services to many Caucasians, African-Americans, Asian or Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans. Sixty-three percent of patients are enrolled in Medi-Cal, 29 percent are uninsured, and 98 percent fall at or below 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL).

La Maestra has a unique approach to leveraging the social determinants of health (SDH) and has been very successful in a very competitive health market with 22 community health centers in San Diego County. La Maestra's mission is “to provide quality healthcare and education, improve the overall well-being of the family, bringing the underserved, ethnically diverse communities into the mainstream of our society, through a caring, effective, culturally and linguistically competent manner, respecting the dignity of all patients”. For that purpose, the organization uses its “Circle of Care” model to put the social determinants of health directly into its way of working and thus distinguishes itself from other health care providers in the area. The Circle of Care is a holistic, solution-based approach to providing programs and services that integrate SDH efforts (community development), enabling services and outreach, social services, and primary care. Every staff member at La Maestra, from receptionist to physician, uses the Circle of Care approach to identify the patient's needs, to work as a team to assess the patient's needs and to guide the patient towards treatment, education, training, and ultimately, self-sufficiency.

Thus, it is very common at La Maestra that the client comes for one service and during the assessment several other unrecognized service needs are found. As the child of immigrant and low-income parents, Marselian personally understands the barriers and struggles that community members face and as such has been and continues to be a strong advocate for the Circle of Care approach.

La Maestra's many efforts to leverage the SDH include Reach Out and Read, the evidence based nationally acclaimed reading program that has been integrated into all of their pediatric clinics for the last five years. In 2001, a culturally sensitive Food Pantry opened providing free nutritious food to 70-100 families per day, twice each week. Volunteers sort, bag, dispense the food, and offer nutritional nutrition information and healthy recipes with food. Jardin de la Vida is an expanding community garden effort where clients can grow produce and herbs and sell excess at the local Farmers' Market, where La Maestra is a collaborative partner. Clients of the Microcredit Program for Women can sell their manufactured products at the Farmers' Market too. The Micro-enterprise Assistance and Job Training and Placement Programs focus on meeting needs of local businesses, including the community health center itself, while creating jobs and helping residents learn new skills. These businesses include building security, green janitorial services, laundry services, a secondhand boutique, and a flower shop. Other La Maestra programs train and place residents in food handling, childcare, hospitality, and health-related positions such as *promotoras* and Medically Trained Cultural Liaisons who are members of diverse cultural groups who have some health background and are trained to be medical assistants, interpreters, billing clerks, receptionists, lab assistants and pharmacy technicians. La Maestra financial literacy classes that teach the basics in finance are a prerequisite for a microcredit loan, first-time homebuyers, and recommended to individuals in the community health center's Transitional Housing program. The Environmental Literacy program teaches environmental sustainability, recycling, light bulb exchange, and other green concepts. La Maestra's sister 501c3 organization, the Housing and Community Development Center (HCDC) founded in 2003, helps clients navigate the San Diego housing market through referral, provides general information and offers classes that helps first time buyers. HCDC and La Maestra Foundation also house

many job training and placement programs and Transitional Housing for people in recovery from substance abuse. La Maestra also developed an Emergency and Disaster program in collaboration with other first responders in the community. Furthermore, the community health center established an Annual Holiday Food and Toy Drive, and distributed toys and gifts to over 4,800 low income families and partner non-profits in 2010. La Maestra has become a meeting place for seniors to congregate, tell stories, and swap recipes. It also offers a safe place for teens to hang out and develop new skills.

An internal quality assurance evaluation measures outcomes for each SDH program; all have shown to be successful models that impact the overall wellbeing of people. Ideas for programs originate at all levels of the organization, and projects are driven by the La Maestra strategic plan based on the community's needs, rather than grant opportunities. To jump start an effort, La Maestra may use its own funds until outside funding is obtained. In cases where outside funding cannot be secured, the community health center continues to fund the effort if it has been proven successful. For that purpose, the organization holds large annual fundraising events to boost its funds, such as the La Maestra Annual Golf Tournament Fundraiser (\$50,000-\$60,000), an Annual Luncheon (\$50,000-\$60,000), and Casino Night (\$30,000). In all, it is challenging or perhaps impossible to identify what fraction of the La Maestra budget is dedicated to leveraging the SDH. Given the organization's Circle of Care model, however, it could be said that a portion of every dollar is spent on leveraging the SDH.

In terms of management, most SDH programs such as a food pantry, transitional housing, microenterprise and microcredit programs, are developed and held within the La Maestra Foundation, a 501c3 created in 2005, and HCDC. Doing so allows for grant funds to be dedicated to nonmedical-related projects and managed separately from the community health center's budget. The health center is responsible for grant writing and reports through its Fund Development Unit. The Foundation and HCDC fund program staff for efforts under the purview of the respective organizations. Although 15 full-time staff members are dedicated to efforts to leverage the SDH, Marselian explains that “if we all do our jobs correctly in the Circle of Care, then everyone is leveraging the social determinants of health”.

As noted, La Maestra has been involved in more than a dozen efforts to leverage the SDH. Several programs are described in more detail below.

***Micro-enterprise assistance program – Green Janitorial Services:*** A 2010 micro-enterprise job creation is training of janitors/maintenance workers who utilize environmentally friendly cleaning products and work at La Maestra to provide service all their locations. This year, 10 part-time positions paying \$5,000 per person were created at La Maestra, where they clean using green cleaning products, and recycle. They take environmental and financial literacy classes to encourage and prepare them to start their own business or franchise. The La Maestra Foundation's janitorial service is planning to expand to serve other local businesses. ***Laundry Services:*** As La Maestra expanded, so did its volume of lab coats, drapes, and the costs to launder them. In 2010 the community health center designed a business

model to perform these services at La Maestra for all their locations. The facility invested \$2,500 to buy the machines and purchase supplies and hired two full-time and two part-time staff. In time, they will offer this service to other businesses in order create additional jobs. The La Maestra Foundation owns and manages these self-sustaining businesses so La Maestra and other businesses would contract those services from the Foundation.

***Medically Trained Cultural Liaisons*** – There is a need for culturally sensitive, multi-lingual medical assistants in the community. The clinic identifies individuals who are fluent in English and at least one other language, have some medical experience, and are respected within the communities served. Many candidates have provided medical services in refugee camps, or were certified as nurses in their country of origin. These individuals are offered medical assistant jobs at the clinic and function as Medically Trained Cultural Liaisons (MTCLs) once they go through supplemental training and are cross-trained as pharmacy technicians, eligibility workers, outreach workers, and referral clerks. The MTCLs provide an important connection between the community and La Maestra. The MTCLs personally take patients to the appropriate service unit and explain to the patient why they are being referred, provide cultural orientation to clinical staff on how to approach patient care in a culturally respectful and sensitive manner, and conduct home visits to assess the safety of the home environment. This program started in 1990 and costs the clinic approximately \$374,000 per year. From 1998 to 2003 under a “Welfare to Work” program, La Maestra officially trained 457 community members.

***Microcredit Program for Women*** – Women comprise 61 percent of the patients at La Maestra. On average, these women have three children, and 72 percent are heads of their household. La Maestra Foundation developed a microcredit program to provide this particular target group with the opportunity to be independent and empowered to better their own lives and eventually operate sustainable businesses that employ others. The program has collaborated with various organizations in California since 2008 and provides low-income women with loans of \$250, \$500, or \$1000 – funding to which they would not normally have access. Participants learn marketing techniques and receive help with meeting the challenges of complex business regulations like obtaining a food handler’s license. The program also helps borrowers establish credit and teaches the women the value of saving money. Once a loan pool is established and education program created, this program is self-sustaining except for a small grant to cover the salary of the coordinator and instructors. In November 2009, La Maestra Foundation obtained a loan to expand the microcredit program, and the number of participants has thus increased from 36 to almost 500, 98 percent of whom repay their loans.

Participants in the microcredit program meet weekly with the program coordinator to make their loan repayments and discuss their businesses’ progress. These meetings provide a forum for peer support, while encouraging the women to make their own decisions and learn firsthand about running a business. Speakers attend the meetings to talk about topics in small business and financial literacy as well as about issues that affect women in the group, such as cancer and chronic diseases, child abuse, and domestic

violence, or legal issues. Even though certain issues seem unrelated to business and finance, they can impede business progress. The opportunity to hear from experts and discuss work with peers further empowers the women to continue developing their business in spite of challenges.

To qualify, the new borrowers must be recommended by a program participant who has been successful in repaying a \$1,000 loan, own no property, and have a social security number. Before receiving a loan, the borrower must complete financial literacy training, have a business plan, attend three weekly meetings, and be approved by the other borrowers in the group. If the new borrower does not make a weekly payment, the participant who recommended her is responsible for the payment. When a borrower struggles to make a payment, the other women in the group may reach a consensus to assist with the payment for that week. This group consensus system, combined with the fact that the women meet, support and grow with each other on a weekly basis, creates a strong bond and sense of responsibility – thus the high repayment rate. These women bring with them a wide variety of skills and experience from working in their countries of origin. Some examples are selling tamales door to door, making and selling piñatas, offering home cleaning services, window washing, baking wedding cakes, catering, making and selling handmade crafts at the Farmers' Market. Gardeners that participate in the Jardin de la Vida program are able to sell their extra produce at the Farmer's Market. Some of the community garden plots are specifically reserved for growing flowers to sell as bouquets at La Maestra Blossoms Flower Shop or sell for special events (weddings, corporate events). Many of these small business efforts incorporate environmentally sustainable design, such as piñatas made from recycled cardboard and newspapers and purses made of soda can tabs and recycled yarn.

**Job Training** – La Maestra has assisted in placement of over 560 people in a variety of job training positions from 1998 to 2003. Of this group, 80 percent remained in their jobs through the first three months and 70 percent through the six month period. Job mentors were helpful in increasing the retention of jobs as they mediated between the newly placed person and the employer and staff. La Maestra also provides or refers residents to continuing education, training, and employment.

**Housing Assistance** – The community health center helps clients navigate the San Diego housing market through referral, provides general information and offers classes that help first time buyers. They offer financial literacy classes on topics as the importance of the credit record, paying bills on time, on building credit, banking, and loans. They also oversee the Transitional Housing Program.

**Transitional Housing Programs** – La Maestra's original clinic sites, a set of single-family homes, are being converted into Transitional Housing for people in recovery in partnership with the California Department of Housing and Community Development Center (HCDC). The *I Choose Recovery (ICR)* program offers affordable transitional housing and integrated services necessary for people to reenter society with a clean start. ICR has opened three men's houses since April 2010 that house 83 men at a cost of \$150,000 in renovation. Another ICR house is home to 12 women. Residents or their sponsors

pay \$450 in monthly fees for fully furnished units. HCDC's services are fully integrated with La Maestra's Circle of Care services, including healthcare and job training and placement, computer literacy education classes, art and music center, and a food pantry to enable people in this recovery program make a successful transition back into society. Other recovery support services include 12-step meetings and collaboration with County Mental Health Services, the Drug Court Program, Parole Board, the Veterans Association, the Indian Human Resource Center, and other agencies. Residents may work in microenterprises run by ICR and La Maestra Foundation, to develop their skills in professions such as building security, green janitorial services, laundry services, construction cleanup, hauling, parking attendant and valet services, a flower shop and a secondhand boutique.

In its first year, ICR assessed over 230 men and placed 83 into transitional housing with access to medical, dental, and mental health services and social services. All were also placed in job training internships and full time employment. 60 percent are still in the workplace and successfully progressing in their recovery. This is a successful rate and La Maestra believes it can be directly attributed to the one-stop, integrated service delivery model. This program will be monitored over time for impact and cost effectiveness.

In all, La Maestra has transformed itself beyond a medical clinic into a community institution that promotes resilience and total health.