In Virginia, a Safety Net For Hispanic Immigrants;

Agencies Help Ease Transition to New Life

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Body

On her first stop of the day, Patricia Moreno sees a ***new*** client who responds to the question "What's wrong?" with the answer "Everything."

There is no food in the house, the woman tells Moreno. Both she and her husband have lost their jobs. They have no medicine to treat their seriously ill daughter. All Moreno can offer today is an emergency food voucher.

Minutes later, Moreno visits a 68-year-old woman who is going blind from glaucoma. Moreno drives her to the Fairfax County Department of Human Services. But there is no ***help***, Moreno is told, because the woman is an illegal ***immigrant***.

Before the day is over, Moreno will see six such cases. It is a routine day in her work with Comite Hispano de ***Virginia***.

The ***agency*** is part of a well-used ***safety net*** of a half-dozen private ***agencies*** in Northern ***Virginia*** that serve ***Hispanic*** ***immigrants***. Often, these ***agencies*** are the sole lifeline for needy people whose status as illegal ***immigrants*** disqualifies them for most government-financed ***help***. The ***agency*** also serves legal ***immigrants*** who have little or no understanding of what ***help*** is available, or how to get it.

In the last decade, the number of Hispanics in Northern ***Virginia*** has increased by 169 percent, to more than 100,000 people, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. More than half of them live in Fairfax County. The majority are dispersed throughout the county, making their presence -- and their needs -- less visible.

Comite Hispano is struggling to meet that nearly invisible need in one of the nation's wealthiest counties. The ***agency***'s 16 social workers saw nearly 10,000 clients last year, but they admit they are reaching only a fraction of those who need ***help***.

"I think the majority [of the ***immigrants***] fall through the cracks," said Marta Wyatt, director of Comite Hispano. "We do our part, but we are just a small ***agency***."

"It takes a special quality of person to deal with these kinds of problems," said Irma Ortiz, assistant director of Comite. "There is a lot of work and it's very stressful."

Moreno's part is to be detective, teacher, psychologist, disciplinarian and often the only family for uneducated and frightened ***immigrants***.

"What has always impressed me about ***new immigrants*** is the sense of awe they have for the system," said Donna M. Foster, head of the Fairfax County community health care network, which serves legal ***immigrants*** who qualify for ***help***. "But these people are still shut out of the mainstream of American ***life***. They are disadvantaged and disenfranchised."

Moreno's clients seek ***help*** with everything from health services to food to shelter -- and many times all three. Mostly, it's understanding they want, Moreno said.

"They come here and are so ill-prepared for ***life*** in general," Foster said.

"It makes assistance so much more important," she said of the role that Moreno and others like her play for these ***immigrants***.

Coming from countries with virtually no social support network, these ***immigrants*** often have no idea that ***help*** is available to them, Moreno said.

Jaime Perdomo, for example, spent a year in bed as a quadriplegic after being severely beaten during a mugging. The 21-year-old lived with his father, who, not knowing what else to do, left his son a bowl of food every morning before heading for work. Perdomo ate from the bowl "like a dog," Moreno said.

When social workers with Comite were informed about him by county officials and responded, they found him lying in his own urine and feces. He had not left his room for more than a year. Within days, the ***agency*** found him a wheelchair and a private nurse, and he is now on a regimen of physical rehabilitation.

But it was the birth of Jose Sanchez that best illustrates the challenges of Moreno's work.

His birth 18 months ago actually began as a low point in Moreno's career, she said.

Born prematurely, Jose contracted encephalitis, Fairfax County records said. He was hooked up to a respirator for a week before doctors called Moreno in to translate for the baby's mother, Emperatriz Salvador.

"They told me it was better to remove the baby from the machine," Moreno said. "At that moment, I didn't know how to translate this to the mother. I was very frustrated. As a Catholic I had second thoughts about translating this, but as a worker I knew I had to."

Salvador, the mother, was well known to workers at Comite, even before Moreno's arrival. Uneducated and extremely shy, the woman came to Comite after she learned she was pregnant, seeking medical care.

Moreno described Salvador as completely dependent on social workers. "She used to call me to ask me to call other ***agencies***. She was so afraid that these people would speak English that she couldn't call."

She also had a boyfriend who beat her, according to county records, which specify one instance in which Salvador was severely beaten while she was six months pregnant, forcing her to flee to a shelter.

At one point, Salvador's only contact with the outside world was through Moreno. But the social worker prevented total reliance, often scolding Salvador into acting on her own, Moreno said.

Salvador's assertiveness did not reveal itself until that day in the hospital, when Moreno translated the doctor's recommendation to remove Jose from ***life***-sustaining machines.

"She said she would never kill her son," Moreno recalled. So bowing to her wishes, the hospital kept the boy on machines, and eventually he grew well enough to leave the hospital.

But the county's child protective services moved to take custody of the baby, contending Salvador was unequipped to care for him. For Salvador, it was no longer a matter of being intimidated; it was a matter involving her child.

"I felt like running," Salvador said when told the child could not be with her. "I felt like dying." Ultimately, this woman who had been terrified of the system felt like fighting.

Her fight against a governmental system that had so frightened her in the past was remarkable, Moreno said. Such assertiveness, she said, is an integral part of acculturating into the often intimidating American lifestyle.

Once Salvador made the decision to keep her son, Moreno found her legal ***help*** and offered constant moral support. She became the baby's godmother, and she watched in amazement as independence flowered in Salvador.

This mother with virtually no education was learning cardiopulmonary resuscitation -- for her child. This woman who knew no English was learning how to provide complete care for a baby so disabled that he cannot be left alone for more than a few minutes.

This mother, whose fear of the system was so acute she wouldn't seek ***help*** by phone, waged a legal battle to keep her child -- and won.

Now, Salvador is able to live in federally subsidized housing because her son is an American citizen. She has recently completed a basket-weaving course and runs a modest business selling the baskets.

The highlight of Jose's story came shortly before Moreno had the child baptized. For four months, the child had been on machines. And for the first time, his mother, who fought to keep him, held her son.

"Everybody, the doctor, me, was holding back the tears," Moreno said. "Every problem has some kind of solution."

Graphic

PHOTO, COMITE HISPANO'S YOLANDA CAMBERDS HUGS ***AGENCY*** BENEFICIARY JAIME PERDOMO. JAMES A. PARCELL

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