

# La Maestra Community Health

A simple concept inspired the evolution of this diverse organization.

## Meeting the Need



Many facilities say they're striving to meet the needs of the community, and although that may be true, few have let community needs shape their organization. But that's exactly what La Maestra Community Health Centers has done. Today, these centers act as beacons for underserved populations, providing care for patients of all ages while constantly improving their service offering.

La Maestra's roots stem back to La Maestra Amnesty Center, a non-profit citizenship center for the amnesty immigrants in San Diego. The center was founded in 1986 and offered services to those living in the City Heights community. The center provided ESL vocational training, and it assisted more than 12,000 eligible applicants through the residency process. Out of those 12,000 students, about 9,000 became permanent residents.

Zara Marselian, CEO of La Maestra Community Health Centers, has been with the company since its inception. She described the evolution of La Maestra Amnesty Center into La Maestra Community Health Centers as a simple one: meeting the needs of community members. She explained that the early years of the company were focused on education, social services, legalization assistance, family literacy and children's literacy programs, and job training.

"We moved into healthcare beginning with immunizations. Children needed them for school," she said. "We found a lot of domestic violence cases were making their way into our children's center, and it was the student council at the



**Zara Marselian**

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center that suggested we needed additional pediatric services. The board of directors at La Maestra agreed with the student council, and we thought to ourselves, 'How hard could it be?'"

The organization brought in doctors to answer questions posed by the student council concerning insurance coverage and payment. Shortly after the organization began offering healthcare services in 1990, Marselian and her team began applying for licenses. Marselian said it was a long process for the center to become certified since it involved setting up a separate non-profit organization. She and her team worked with other community clinics and hospitals to help get their plan off the ground, and in 1991, their vision came to fruition.

"It will be 22 years this May since we opened the first community clinic," said Marselian. "Today, we have six medical clinics and five dental clinics, along with behavioral health and optometry clinics throughout San Diego County. There are also three school-based sites. It's been wonderful to witness their growth. The non-profit corporation is unique because it really is a grassroots organization; everything that's developed

and grown within it has been a result of meeting the needs of the community."

### Special services

The centers' first service offering centered on pediatric care. The organization's City Heights location was open two half days per week and began to offer pediatric and OB/gyn services shortly after its inception. Marselian explained that as patients came to the clinic, they often brought sick family members with them, forcing



the clinic to look for a team of providers who could treat patients of all ages. Soon, the centers' comprehensive range of primary care services began to include specialty services, such as breast and cervical cancer screenings.

"It was the first time low-income women in our community were able to be screened," said Marselian. "We thought about what to do if they did have abnormal results. That led our team to build a network of specialty care services related to breast and cervical health. We also learned that patients were more likely to follow through with specific procedures if they were offered at our clinic sites. Instead of sending them to outpatient facilities, we decided to offer those procedures at the clinic for significantly less cost."

Since then, the centers have grown to offer many specialty services and treatments. Their service offering became known as a circle of care, and they continued to evolve. Dental services came next, which were a huge investment for the organization. Marselian explained that a lot of children visiting the organization had never received preventative care.

"A lot of patients came from refugee camps," she said. "As we continued to grow, we focused on meeting needs, one at a time. We looked for answers that wouldn't only meet that need, but would also sustain that service unit in the years to come."

### Catering to the culture

The organization began writing grants and networking to support its growth. It worked collaboratively with many organizations, including many outside of the healthcare industry. Marselian explained that as the clinic drew in more patients, the cultures became incredibly diverse. Today, about 20 languages are spoken at La Maestra's main site.

"We've also always employed people from the cultures we serve," she said. "That automatically makes us culturally sensitive and competent. We call those employees 'cultural liaisons,' and they tell us what challenges they're facing in their communities. That's important since many have stayed in refugee camps, and they know about the specific cultural issues that exist."

Marselian explained that special cases exist between each group of refugees, and liaisons act as translators. The organization does an immense amount of training to help with the professional development of its employees. Often times, staff members come to the organization with past experience working in the refugee camps or abroad in the medical field. Since employees' English language skills may not be proficient enough to pass the equivalency exams in the US, La Maestra created programs that train employees to be medical







assistants, medical receptionists, health educators, and more. Nurses translate and act as cultural liaisons all while meeting eligibility requirements for government-sponsored coverage programs.

"We've done that with staff in our mental health services unit as well," said Marselian. "For example, we have an employee from Southern Sudan. He was a nurse in refugee camps, and although he had a certification in Kenya, it wasn't applicable in the US. We discovered he wanted to be a marriage and family therapist, and we helped him get there. This year, he has been accepted into a doctoral program for psychology."

Funding has been a challenge for the organization in recent years, yet Marselian said the organization continues to find innovative ways to meet the needs of the community. For example, she's working on finding the funding to create a mobile dental clinic.

"We know dental issues are the chief causes for children missing school," she said. "We're going to school campuses and are offering medical services on site. The clinic offers cleanings and sealants to children who otherwise wouldn't be able to get them. One of the schools already had a dental clinic, but we're planning to purchase a mobile dental clinic for the other schools. This would allow us to offer dental services to many locations without incurring the build out costs at each facility." +



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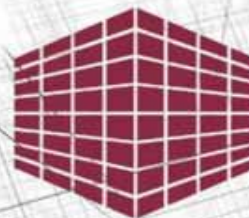
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