

## **Casa de Esperanza (C)**

As Lupe Serrano reflected upon the heated conversation of the morning's management team meeting, she felt a sense of relief about Casa's organizational identity. By early 2003, she felt certain that she knew how to respond to the letter from the Minnesota Department of Public Safety – the agency's major public funder – mandating participation in the statewide data-base, Day One, that tracked shelter occupancy throughout Minnesota. That clarity had certainly not always been present.

From the agency's founding in the early 1980s to the late 1990s, Casa de Esperanza struggled with ambiguity of mission. Although the organization was founded out of the domestic violence movement to provide culturally appropriate services to Latinas, for many years these women were not the main recipients of services. As a result of a strategic planning process conducted in 1997-1998, the organization had emerged with new clearness about its identity. The organization would work to mobilize Latinas and Latino communities to end domestic violence. Initially, implementing this mission was painful for staff. But, many things had been accomplished in the intervening years. These inroads gave Lupe a foundation to draw upon in the current showdown with the state.

### **Shifting from “Programs” to Work Areas Defined by the Community**

With the initial decision to close Casa's shelter in early 2000 and reopen as a Safe Home, staff began to realize that they needed to think more deeply about how to develop program ideas that were grounded in the Latino community. If leaving their families were not the ways Latinas were choosing to stop violence, what were other strategies for getting intimate violence to stop? Casa's management team decided to begin a new initiative, *Fuerza Unida* (United in Strength), to bring Latinas together to answer that question. Rather than having staff develop programming

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*Jodi Sandfort, Associate Professor, Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota, wrote this case for the Center on Women and Public Policy as part of its 2003 Case Writing Summer Institute. The Center on Women and Public Policy and the Otto Bremer Foundation provided supporting funds. ©Jodi Sandfort 2004. Please direct comments and questions to her at [jsandfort@hhh.umn.edu](mailto:jsandfort@hhh.umn.edu) or [jsandfort@mcnight.org](mailto:jsandfort@mcnight.org).*

in more conventional ways, they wanted the stories women told about their lives to shape the agency's response. With funding from a community foundation, the organization formed a partnership with three other Latino agencies and embarked upon an 18-month process of research and planning which would fundamentally change how Casa viewed itself and its role in St. Paul / Minneapolis.

The project began with an appreciation of the diversity of the Minnesota Latino community and a desire to learn more about it. Between 1990 and 2000, the Latino community in Minnesota had tripled in size. While a portion of the community had long-standing roots in the state and worked as highly trained professionals, the new arrivals were recent immigrants from Mexico, Central and South America. Some of these immigrants had limited education or professional training; some others who did have professional backgrounds often had no ability to access these types of jobs in the U.S. because their degrees were not recognized. Underpinning the diversity of these families were shared strengths—commitment to family, willingness to work hard, dedication to learning what was necessary to thrive in their new community. It was these assets and the diversity of experience that United in Strength sought to document.

The organizations together developed interview questions and trained Latino interviewers to collect information. Wherever women gathered – English classes, schools, churches, laundromats, and markets—interviewers sat down to learn more about their experiences. In the end, nearly 170 women were interviewed. The four organizations and some community volunteers began meeting regularly to analyze the information in light of their current operations. What were the differences of experience among women coming to the U.S. from different countries? Where did they turn for help when they hit a barrier or experienced a crisis? Were organization intake processes aligned with how all Latinas – new arrivals and long-time residents – asked for help and became engaged? Were too many of the organizations offering the same services while other needs were overlooked? Reflecting on the process, Lupe Serrano felt that it was a very important for both the agencies and the women.

As nonprofit organizations, we need to be relevant and accountable to our community. This process allowed us to begin to walk down that road. Through the interviews, women were coming together to reduce isolation. They would walk away from the encounter feeling better, with phone numbers of others clutched in their hands.

This was a new way for Casa and the other agencies to work.

Together, the group developed an action plan and set about implementing it. For Casa, management began to see more completely the web of forces that caused domestic violence within their community. They realized that the degree of Latino acculturation often dramatically influenced family dynamics that could result, ultimately, in intimate violence. The interviews with newly arrived women, for example, revealed the stress of the immigrant experience. Many families experience the reality of poverty, long hours of work sometimes under unsafe conditions, and the challenges of day-to-day living—finding housing to rent, navigating bus systems in English, locating markets to buy familiar food. In this new environment, where men often are not able to play their traditional roles of protector and provider, some become angry, stressed, and out of control, which can easily be acted out violently at home. For women in these families, many who are monolingual Spanish speakers, seeking help to stop the violence might threaten the family unit. Women worry that men might be removed from the home by the authorities, leaving them alone in this country with little source of income for themselves or their children. Interviews with other Latino women who did not face the specific challenges of immigrant also revealed other complex forces operation in their lives. When experiencing abuse, some women were unwilling to seek help within the family because it might divide it and were unwilling to talk with someone outside the family because that is a breach of privacy. Like all battered women, Latina victims worried about the impact of violence on their children, either as witnesses or as targets.

Through the *Fuerza Unida* project, staff also learned more about community strengths. They heard more about the entrepreneurial spirit of many people and the commitment to improving families' economic success. The key to reducing the incidence of domestic violence within the Latino community lay not in programs or the parameters spelled out in government contracts. It lay within the fabric of the community – in all its diversity and potential. To quote from a Casa application for funding:

Violence is a hard topic to discuss in any community, and the Latino communities are no different. As family is the core of Latino reality, we must provide family centered approaches for dialogue. Men have an opportunity to take an active role in redefining their roles, talking about cultural messages and supporting young men and boys in their decisions to be non-violent. The churches as well have an opportunity to engage community members to prevent domestic violence.

Two major areas of work emerging from the *Fuerza Unida* effort was engaging men and churches in prevention. These foci came from the research that enabled Casa's leadership to see Latina lives more completely and from their belief that the community, itself, could address the problems of domestic violence.

### **Becoming “Bicultural” Through Further Strengthening Operations**

In addition to grounding themselves in ways Latino communities could respond to intimate violence, Casa de Esperanza continued to improve its infrastructure to support the evolving work. Whereas initially the agency had relied upon consultants to provide some expertise, Lupe was able to directly hire more such staff as the agency secured more grants from private foundations and gifts from individual donors. She assembled a team of women skilled in finance, marketing and fund development, initiative development and supervision. The new leaders worked with a consultant to strengthen the team, divide responsibilities to capitalize on individual strengths, and create opportunities for peer learning. More day-to-day management moved from Lupe to a newly hired Associate Director.

The organization continued the practice of annual planning and improved their financial analysis. The staff increased use of databases for tracking clients, donors, and community information, and began thinking about how ongoing evaluation and research could bolster their effectiveness. They revisited again ways to articulate their goals, tactics, and outcomes aligned with the organizational mission and made modifications based on their deepening understanding (see Attachment). The management team worked day-in and day-out to realize these principles in their day-to-day operation.

One way this was particularly apparent was in human resource management. Given the turnover during the initial implementation of the strategic plan, managers had the opportunity with each new hire to think again about the type of people they needed to bring to the organization to rebuild it. For one, given the new agency direction, it was important to hire Latino staff who themselves knew the cultural values of the community. Second, management realized that being bilingual in English and Spanish was a skill that staff needed. Thus, it became a required characteristic in many job descriptions. Third, as funding became more diversified, management increased salary levels and benefits. This gesture was important in an organization that employed largely women. As one manager reflected:

Like with most domestic violence organizations, many staff had to work two jobs to make ends meet. This work is hard enough to have to juggle other responsibilities. It was not a healthy way to treat people.

The organization offered generous health and dental insurance with low employee contributions and supported flexible schedules to allow staff to respond to family circumstances as needed. The agency also created a vehicle for tax-deferred retirement savings. Finally, in late 2002, managers revised the employee handbook, framing all of their work – and all of their policies and procedures – in relation to the organization’s mission.

Over time, the organization began to function in ways that the management team referred to as “bi-cultural.” On the one hand, managers used fairly conventional nonprofit management tools – financial management systems and controls, annual work planning, information technology plans, employee handbooks. They held large fund-raising events, solicited individual donors, and wrote grant proposals to foundations. Yet, at the same time, they used these tools to advance the Latino-based mission of the organization. For example, the agency web site was completely accessible in Spanish and English. The fund-raising event, Latin Renaissance, was held at a prominent Minnesota cultural venue that both celebrated Latin culture and increased awareness in the mainstream, white community. This gala was a far cry from the more traditional fund-raising pleas sent by other organizations serving women being abused by their partners; at its core, it celebrated the cultural assets of the Latino community.

### **Further Refinement of Work Areas and Strategies**

Fueled by the new ideas from *Fuerza Unida* and the new operational improvements, staff continued to garner significant investments from private foundations and individuals that supported a growing refinement of the work. The management team began to explore scholarly writings that discussed the importance of social capital in bolstering community health and began articulating their work to prevent violence in reference to those concepts. They also realized that the *Fuerza Unida* process needed to be documented to enable other organizations to understand and replicate the approach.

They also began to move forward on more focused prevention efforts. For example, the *Fuerza Unida* data revealed that many women did not have basic information about problems they encountered, in spite of a rich social service infrastructure in Minneapolis. In response, Casa created a Resource and Information Center (*Centro de Informacion y Recursos*) at a large,

Latino market. The bakeries, butchers, small video and gift shops, travel agents and restaurants there were a compelling draw for the diverse Latino community. To capitalize on the high volume of families that walked through each day, Casa rented space on the first floor, bought furniture and equipment, created a database for tracking resources, and dedicated a staff member to coordinating the effort. Day-to-day operations—responding to people’s questions about driver’s licenses tests, rent problems, kindergarten screening processes – was carried out by a team of volunteers who were eager to practice Spanish and provide such tangible support to families. By providing this type of information, staff believed that they were reducing the stress in families’ lives that can sometimes lead to violence.

Another effort built from *Fuerza Unida* utilized the important role of religion in Latino communities. To develop a response to domestic violence that built upon this asset, staff gathered clergy from nine Latino congregations and brain-stormed how to move beyond the traditional assistance they offered to battered women, such as information and encouragement to call a crisis line or shelter. They developed a process whereby committed congregations entered into covenants with Casa to develop Congregational Response Teams. These teams were comprised of well-trained volunteers who learn how to support community members perpetrating or experiencing domestic violence. While Casa staff provided ongoing case consultation, training, and support to the teams, the volunteers facilitated support for women and other faith-based education, to intervene early in the conditions that can lead to domestic violence. By early 2003, seven Latino congregations agreed to participate and staff actively worked to involve others.

To Lupe Serrano and other senior managers, these and other initiatives illustrated a deepening commitment to mission. As in many services organizations, however, Casa staff struggled with the inherent tension between believing in the mission and drawing upon it to guide daily work. For managers and staff involved in this type of community building activities—education programs or systems change work—there was little contradiction. As the Associate Director said, “We now can take the kind of stances that we need, to push for what makes most sense for Latinas. We hold up our strategic plan, mission and vision and use it as a guide to give us direction and ground us.” The family advocates, though, whose job it was to work with women trapped in situations where they are receiving daily beatings, were not able to seize upon the management elements with the same resolve. While they believed in the ideal,

their jobs – slogging through the daily consequences of violence – made them question how realistic it was to mobilize the community to end the violence. At staff meeting, managers worked to both hold out the vision and support the day-to-day challenges of work in the field responding to brutality.

Casa's ambitions were not small. Emerging out of *Fuerza Unida*, the organization believed it was poised to do work with significant consequences. As written in a grant proposal in late 2002:

Casa de Esperanza is trying to change the field of domestic violence. We believe that the strongest chance to achieve this is to place the primary responsibility for change in the hands of everyday people. We are trying to change attitudes and behaviors. We are trying to change mainstream systems by holding them accountable for serving ALL battered women, including those whose primary language is not English. We are trying to change the way that many Latinas, Latinos, and mainstream individuals accept domestic violence as 'part of our culture.' We are trying to create a better community for our children and our families.

A few months later, an event would raise Casa's desire to change the field of domestic violence to a new level.

### **The Day One Center Mandate**

In March 2003, Casa received a letter from the Minnesota Department of Public Safety that stated that all shelters programs needed to participate in the Day One Center as a condition of receiving funding. When Casa had closed their shelter in late 2000 and began operating the Safe Home, the organization had ceased participation in the referral network. When they negotiated the terms of the arrangement with the Department of Public Safety during 2001 to re-open as the *Refugio*, they had not rejoined the network. Now, two years later, the state was requiring participation.

From the state's vantage point, Day One database was a key element of the Minnesota's domestic violence system and a potential national model in the domestic violence field. It provided a way for a battered woman or professional to assess shelter bed availability statewide with a single phone call. From Casa's vantage point, though, the system did not allow them to maintain a particularly open door to Latinas needing short-term stays. Management felt that to blindly comply with the mandate would compromise the integrity of Casa's work. Participation in the network did not seem to forward the agency's mission to end domestic violence within the Latino community.

The mandate also re-opened a wound significant during Casa's first twenty years. Although Day One was premised on guaranteeing women access, it did not serve women who spoke languages other than English. Casa, in fact, operated the state's only 24-hour crisis line in Spanish; in 2002 they responded to over 4,000 calls, 80 percent of which were in Spanish. For years, Casa's leadership had tried to negotiate with the state and Day One about the inaccessibility of the domestic violence system to communities of color, immigrant and refugee women, all to no avail.

After considerable discussion, Lupe and the Board of Directors felt that moment presented an important opportunity to raise, again, this issue of accessibility for all women. Casa's leadership – in partnership with two other domestic violence shelters serving women of color – agreed to participate in the referral network only if they could work in a new, committed way to improve all women's access. While there remained possible negative consequences for Casa's operations, it seemed worth the risk if, together, they could finally address this long-standing problem for women of color in Minnesota.