

# L.A. Program Gives HIV Support Services, Education to Latino Community

By Jean Oxendine

Closing the Gap, HIV/AIDS • April 1999

“Although more and more Latino families are being affected by HIV/AIDS, denial continues to exist, and this allows the numbers to continue to rise,” according to Oscar De La O, executive director of Bienestar Human Services, Inc., in Los Angeles County. De La O hopes that increased media coverage, and the efforts of organizations like Bienestar will help lower the numbers. Still, some people are not getting the message, said De La O, who takes every opportunity available to educate the public, present the facts, and promote services.

Formed in 1989, Bienestar’s original goal was to help educate gay and bisexual men about HIV/AIDS, but the organization has expanded its services to meet the needs of the entire Latino community. With five service centers, Bienestar is the only organization based in the Latino community of Los Angeles that provides HIV/AIDS services. And, it is one of a handful of such organizations within the United States.

Bienestar’s HIV Prevention Programs target youth, women, gang members, substance abusers, gay/bisexual men, sex workers, heterosexual Latino men, recent immigrants, residents of housing projects, and transgenders. Interventions used include community and street outreach for substance abusers, teen workshops and gatherings, and HIV negative groups for gay and bisexual Latino men. Under the Client Support Services segment, case management services at all centers help people obtain public benefits and access other social services. Emotional support is provided by bilingual professionals, and includes population-specific support groups and individual counseling. Treatment education and advocacy, provided by counselors with strong medical backgrounds, help clients understand their treatment options, medical conditions, side effects, and treatment regimens. Self-help activities and peer to peer counseling sessions are provided to those who are HIV positive. One center operates a weekly food bank, which serves 433 HIV positive people.

Bienestar hopes to ensure that clients accept their HIV/AIDS diagnosis, go for medical care to treat the disease, and stick to their treatment regimens.

“The biggest fears and barriers to treatment are deportation and lack of trust,” said De La O. Mothers in treatment fear that word of their disease may get back to their child’s school, and the mother will be deported. “There are difficulties in sharing news of the diagnosis with family members, and family is very important in the Latino community,” said De La O.

A bi-monthly treatment information newsletter, “EXTRA,” produced by Bienestar, provides treatment information on Spanish, and 4,000 copies are distributed. Translation services are provided to clients that don’t speak English and need to communicate with their medical provider or to access services.

Bienestar’s staff and peer volunteers are bilingual and bicultural. All 64 staff members are Latino as are all members of the Board of Directors. Over 70 percent of the Community Advisory Board is made up of people who use Bienestar’s services. All of the prevention services staff have life experiences that “resemble those whom they serve,” according to De La O. More than 35 percent of Bienestar’s staff is HIV positive. Some are recovering from substance abuse problems. These counselors are sent to training through the county and other institutions. The mental health professionals are all licensed providers and have an understanding of community-based organizations.

Bienestar receives 95 percent of its funding from the government, a majority coming from the Los Angeles Health department, with money received from the Ryan White Care Act. In addition, the Office of Minority Health (OMH) provides funding to Bienestar, as the lead agency in a consortium of recipients. “We are proud to have competed successfully for the OMH funding, as that was our first attempt at submit a funding proposal ourselves,” said De La O. Bienestar hopes to one day become self-reliant, and not depend on the government for funding their program. But for now Bienestar is grateful for the assistance they receive in order to keep their program up and running, according to De La O.

*For more information on Bienestar, please call (323)727-7896. ❖*

