

Border Vision Fronteriza

Tapping Into Community Workers and Volunteers

By Houkje Ross

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To conduct effective outreach to families, you need to know where they live, work, go to school, and play, says Eva Moya, senior project coordinator for Border Vision Fronteriza (BVF). One of the best ways to do this, she adds, is through community health workers and volunteers that live and work in the communities they serve.

The Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) funds BVF, which is administered by the University of Arizona Rural Health Office. BVF enrolls children in SCHIP and Medicaid programs along the four U.S.-Mexican border states of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California.

BVF has been highly successful. According to a BVF progress report released in the fall of 1999, more than 800 community specialists and volunteers have visited approximately 3,807 families and 6,519 children to discuss Medicaid and/or SCHIP and to educate families about the availability of primary health services.

Between April and September 1999, BVF sought to enroll 4,500 children in SCHIP or Medicaid. The project exceeded that goal and enrolled 10,325 children. BVF had the help of community health centers, border area health education centers, community or state government agencies, health councils, public schools, and state border health offices.

The program's success is due in large part to its use of highly trained volunteers and community specialists. The community specialists are considered experts in their field and natural leaders in their communities. "They are the heart and soul of the project," says Moya. "They take the lead in crafting their own strategy for their community and doing the best with what they have."

Volunteers or Promotores work under the guidance of community health worker specialists and of partner organizations. They receive only basic training in children's health issues and the SCHIP program. As of April 1999, there were about 524 promotores and 52 community health specialists.

Specialists are individuals who have been working in the communities in existing health and human service organizations, or have had a good track record of being involved in the community and civic activities, says Moya. About 95 percent of these individuals are women. They range in age from 17 to 65. Many of these individuals come from working poor communities and have experienced being uninsured or under insured," says Moya. They are culturally, linguistically, and socioeconomically representative of the community being served.

The specialists receive between 40 and 100 hours of formal training that includes understanding the different laws and regulations, knowing who is eligible for each program, and understanding how to fill out forms, referrals, and documentation. Training also includes education and outreach skills, children's health, pediatric care, immunizations, and how to recognize emergencies.

The University of Arizona's Rural Health Office is responsible for overall coordination of the project. BVF is the only U.S.-Mexico border multi-state initiative that has a unified data collection system. Core BVF partners, which include a variety of community health centers, projects, and foundations from each of the four states involved, help support BVF initiatives either fiscally or by assisting with recruitment, placement, and training.

For more information on Border Vision Fronteriza, contact: Eva Moya, senior project coordinator, (915) 585-7612; or by fax, (915) 833-7840; or moyae@usmbha.org. ❖

