

Training the trainers

NRHA exceeds Clinton Global Initiative goal educating community health workers

By Lindsey V. Corey



Attendees participate in group activities to learn about diabetic eye care during the NRHA Community Health Worker Training in June in El Paso, Texas.



Gerardo Torres

A year ago, Gerardo Torres didn't know a thing about blood sugars and had never heard of a promotora. But after being diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, this handyman became one.

The doctor's words terrified the otherwise healthy 40-year-old immigrant. So he sought out free classes to educate himself, classes he says could have prevented his diagnosis.

Today, Gerardo volunteers as a promotora – or community health worker – educating other Hispanic-Americans about disease prevention and management.

"It's a way for me to give back to my community," he says. "I think it's very important for our community to be aware this can be prevented. You don't have to deal with pills, injections and the aftermath of a diagnosis. You can prevent this."

Gerardo, who is successfully managing his diabetes

with diet and exercise, says sharing his story "makes a big difference" to people he meets at health fairs and classes, to his neighbors and for himself.

"People are surprised when I tell them I have diabetes," he says. "That and being a part of the community and understanding the culture really help them to relate, and it gives me more incentive to be healthier so I can show them they can be too. I want to be an inspiration for them."

Building a community of community health workers

Gerardo was one of 98 promotoras to participate in one of three trainings this year organized by the National Rural Health Association to help recruit and retain community health workers in rural and underserved areas along the U.S.-Mexico border.

NRHA is working with the U.S.-Mexico Border Health Commission (BHC), the Office of Rural Health Policy as well as state partners to help enhance access to care, as part of a Commitment to Action that stemmed from NRHA's participation at the 2011 Clinton Global Initiative-America (CGI) meeting.

"Since April, NRHA has provided community health workers like Gerardo with training and follow up," says Amy Elizondo, NRHA's program services vice president who attended the CGI meeting. "The trainings have covered topics such as leadership, cancer prevention and diabetes care, and through

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the community health workers, will support the growing needs within the rural and underserved areas of along the border.”

Trainings were led by Emma Torres, a longtime promotora and a BHC member, in English and Spanish. Native American tribal representatives also participated.

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Gerardo Torres, volunteer community health worker

“The work they do and how they mobilize their community is incredible, and I think I was able to validate that,” she says. “It was very powerful that they felt needed, recognized and gained an understanding that they are part of a bigger movement.”

NRHA secured funding travel expenses for community health

workers to attend each training, support for facilitators and support for completing evaluations of the trainings to assess outcomes. The association’s initial goal was to train 60 community health workers working along the border. Trainings took place in Denver in April, in El Paso, Texas, in June, and in San Diego in August.

NRHA plans to expand its efforts in 2013 to train promotoras in some of the poorest counties along the border to more directly track the impact of these workshops.

“The National Rural Health Association is both humbled and excited to be able to offer this opportunity to participants who may not otherwise have this experience,” says Alan Morgan, NRHA CEO.

Emma is grateful for the opportunity too.

“Having a national association and the Clinton Global

The making of a promotora



Emma Torres immigrated to America from Mexico when she was 11 and quit school just a year later, barely able to speak English.

That didn’t matter much on the farm,

That’s where her family worked and where she would meet the man she married at 19.

Five years later he died of leukemia, and Emma was left with a 4-year-old little girl and a 3-week-old son.

“Among the dark times, the hospital social workers were my angels,” she recalls. “I was amazed at how they helped me. And I thought, if I got to live my life again and choose, I would be a social worker.”

Fearful but determined, Emma enrolled in night school.

“That’s when I realized I wasn’t that dumb,” she says. “When you have no formal education, you think you’re pretty dumb. But I had a lot of other education and motivation to learn about prevention and health promotion after my husband’s death.”

The single mom went on to earn her master’s degree in social work and founded *Campesinos Sin Fronteras*, a community-

based organization primarily helping with migrant workers in Somerton, Ariz. Along the way, she became a volunteer promotora, or community health worker, before there was a word for it.

Today, Emma seeks out others like her, those with a desire to help their neighbors lead healthier lives. She tells them her story, leads workshops and makes connections to education and health care that have the power to change lives.

“A lot are parents and naturally have an interest in improving children’s health or preventing obesity; there may be a cancer survivor who wants to educate their community or a person that wants to help because their parents died of diabetes,” she says. “A lot of them come to me and say, ‘I know how to do this; help me serve, and help me learn more’. I hope to help them understand how critical and important they are to their communities.”

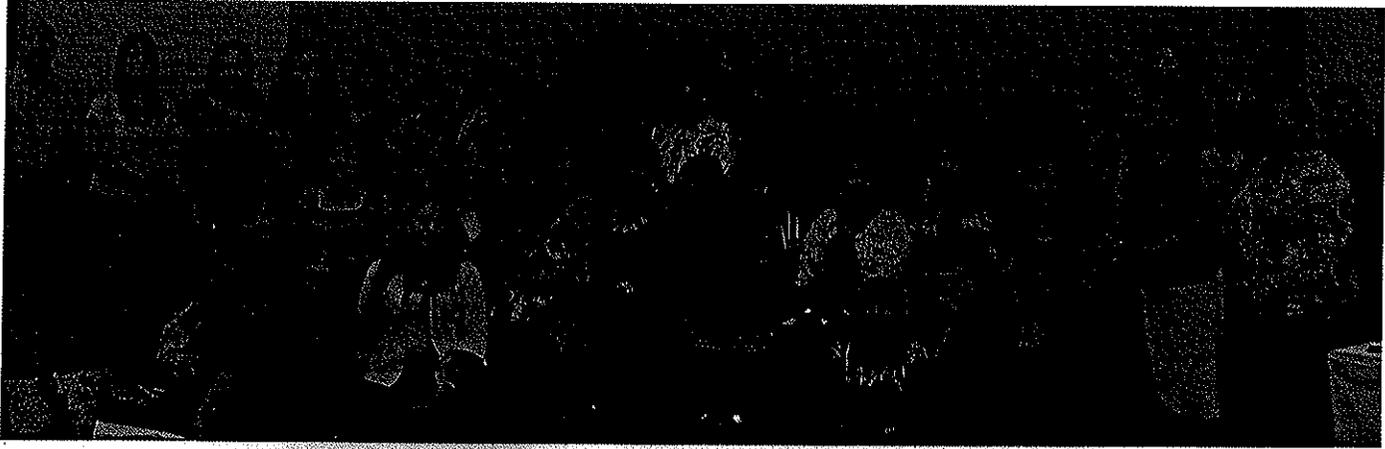
She arms them with purpose, confidence and information.

“They’re smart and natural problem-solvers, and they can take the knowledge I share and share it further,” Emma says. “This is a model that works with our population. I know. I’ve seen it change my life.”

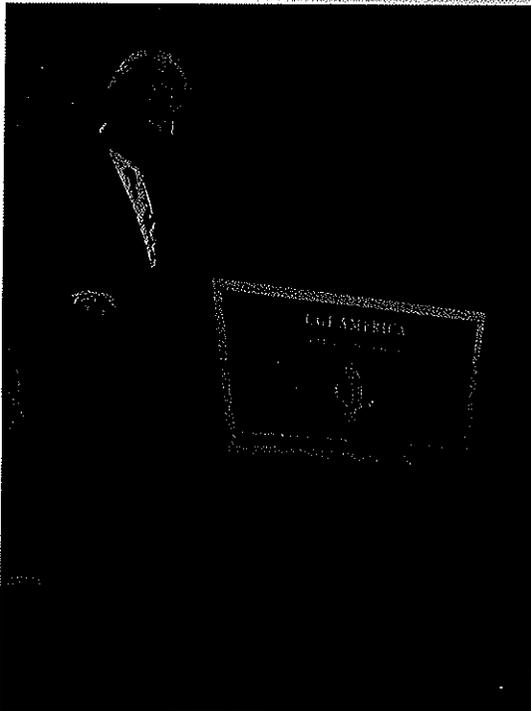
Once a promotora, always a promotora, Emma says of the path she paved 25 years ago.

“Promotora means health promoter,” she says. “It doesn’t matter what level you are. I am proud to be on the U.S.-Mexico Border Health Commission, and I continue to be a health promoter.”

— *Lindsey V. Corey*



Above: Community health workers from New Mexico and Texas receive training in leadership, diabetic eye care and HPV prevention in June in El Paso, Texas. Left: President Bill Clinton commences the second annual Clinton Global Initiative-America Meeting in June in Chicago.



Initiative behind this model is so powerful," she says. "This is community empowerment about helping people help themselves. It's the American way I learned when I came to this country: I will help you to help others. That's what promotoras do. And it works."

Ancient concept gaining momentum

Emma, who has been a promotora for more than 25 years, says she's thrilled the ancient concept is gaining momentum and support from the medical community, who now realize promotoras don't give medical advice but rather promote healthy choices, connect neighbors to physicians and encourage treatment compliance.

"It's a very grassroots model that initiated here in

Arizona about 25 years ago, but it's a very old practice where people in villages help themselves, identify people with natural leadership who are already natural helpers, and they respond to help their community. Latinos and Native Americans have done this forever," she says. "We have come a long way from being seen as 'those tobacco women' to getting national attention because research is starting to show our impact in reaching and helping minority people in economical and culturally competent ways."

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Emma Torres, community health worker training facilitator

Emma says Gerardo is one of those "natural helpers."

"I don't recruit promotoras through newspapers or anything," says Emma, who founded Campesinos Sin Fronteras, a community-based organization in Somerton, Ariz., working primarily with migrant workers. "I still use the old-fashioned model that we began with in 1987. I speak directly to the population that we need to serve, people who have the respect of the community, who really know them and can reach them. They are already serving in a way, so I train them so they are better prepared to serve their communities."

Gerardo says being a promotora is the most rewarding thing he's ever done, and he wishes more men stepped up to the task.

"It's unique to be a man in this job, but we are affected by these illnesses too. It's not a women's issue; it's a public health issue," he says. "My favorite part is when I see the people later and the little changes they have made in their lives that are making a difference." 