

## **Bienvenido Program: Good Mental Health for the Latino Immigrant Ligonier, IN**

In the past ten to fifteen years, the migratory process of Latinos to the United States of America has brought with it many changes to American culture. The 2000 census revealed that there was a great increase in the number of Latinos throughout the entire country and that not only urban centers have received the majority of the immigrants, but rather that rural areas have also been impacted (2000 Census). The migratory process of Latinos has forced many communities to change their way of granting health services to the community in general.

*Northeastern Center (NEC)*, a community mental health center, located in Northeast Indiana conducted a needs assessment in Ligonier, Indiana to determine what the mental health needs of the Latino community might be. Out of 149 questionnaires completed, the data revealed that 29% of participants reported feeling depressed two to four times per week. 13% revealed having suicidal thoughts. 48% considered alcoholism to be severe and 45% considered drug use to be severe among the Latino community of Ligonier. 94% had never received mental health services in Ligonier. 45% wished to have more activities in the community. Places frequented by Latinos in the Ligonier community included churches, the Noble County Foundation and the Public Library. Alcoholism, drug addiction and domestic violence were the most important issues.

With the data that was gathered, *NEC* decided to establish a plan of action that would help to fulfill the needs of Latinos in Ligonier and Noble County. *NEC* set itself to the task of creating a curriculum which would fulfill the needs of Latinos regarding the migration experience process. During the subsequent nine months, *NEC* personnel began to create different individual and group exercises that were aimed at generating a mechanism to open dialogue about migration experiences. Some participants served as collaborators in the process of creating the lessons and recommended appropriate words or phrases for this particular community.

As a result of the on-going dialogue a strengths-based educational curriculum was created to enhance awareness of mental health, clarify a participant's personal goals for an enhanced quality of life, and develop skills to reduce risk for emotional and behavioral risks associated with mental distress. In particular, *Bienvenido* seeks to reduce reliance on alcohol, tobacco and other drugs for individuals at risk for abuse and dependence due to stresses associated with immigrant traumas and ongoing marginalized community social status. The *Bienvenido* curriculum is appropriate for use in various community settings, including behavioral service settings, schools, and outpatient mental health centers.

The *Bienvenido* curriculum is based on an expectation of short, intermediate and long term outcomes that reflect greater sense of empowerment. The healing element for this model is based on four premises:

1. Assisting clients in their acknowledgement of the potential trauma they have suffered during immigration and current stigmatized social status helps them to recognize sources associated with maladaptive behavior;

2. Educating clients about mental health and enhanced quality of life introduces the potential of hope for a better standard of living;
3. Using a group format for presentation of information and group discussion creates a supportive peer network;
4. Increased community integration and social status will follow greater awareness of behavioral risks and assets.

Each module of the nine week Bienvenido curriculum provides information about topics related to development and sustenance of mental health and enhanced quality of life. Modules are ordered to first introduce participants to potentially new knowledge about mental health, clarify their understanding of risk and protective factors associated with mental health and quality of life, and develop skills to enhance effective social functioning and community integration.

Participants are encouraged to describe their immigration experience, and group discussion provides acknowledgement and support. Acculturative stresses and local values of cultural diversity are topics that provide examples of on-going risks for emotional distress, and potentially adverse behavioral consequences. Application to daily functioning is addressed by modules on anger management and effective communication. Clients are encouraged to seek mental health as a family goal.

Since October of 2003 almost 120 participants have participated in the Bienvenido Program. The material has been well received by participants and participants express they have been able to express their migration experience. One of the participants commented, "Nobody had welcomed me to this community. For the first time, somebody welcomed me."

In light of the Latino community's positive response to the Bienvenido Program, *NEC* decided to create a training program for local leaders in order for other leaders to be able to implement the Bienvenido Program in their respective communities. *NEC* has collaborated with individuals and organizations for training in the Bienvenido Program. In the year 2004, four facilitator trainings were carried out in the state of Indiana; 39 facilitators participated in the four trainings. The curriculum has been implemented in a mental health center, two high schools, community based center, and an adult literacy organization. In 2005 *NEC* gave a short presentation to the Indiana Commission on Hispanic/Latino Affairs (ICHLA) regarding the Bienvenido Program and its Latino behavioral health initiatives in Northeast Indiana. In 2005 *NEC* met with the Director of Policy and Data at the Office of Minority Health, US Department of Health and Human Services, to discuss the creation of the Bienvenido Program. Counsel was given by Dr. Teresa Chapa, Ph.D., that *NEC* should conduct a formal program evaluation in order to better understand outcomes measures.

In June 2006, *NEC* contracted with Dr. Delia Saldaña, PhD, of the University of Texas Health Science Center, San Antonio, Texas, to undertake a formal program evaluation of the curriculum with the intention of measuring the effectiveness of the interventions. Our principal goal in the evaluative process has been to improve the curriculum and to gain a better understanding of knowledge gain, attitude change, and possible behavior change as a result of participating in the Bienvenido Program. We

hope to gain knowledge on what areas *NEC* must continue to develop in order to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate interventions with Latino immigrants.

In September 2006 two additional Bienvenido Facilitator Trainings were held with leaders from Indiana and Pontiac, MI. The Bienvenido Program has been featured in the National Association of Social Workers Specialty Practice Section Newsletter and Journal of Rural Mental Health. *NEC* has given presentations in Colorado, Texas, and Indiana regarding the Bienvenido Program and has received verbal support from various Latino behavioral health researchers across the country. Also, this writer was one of three keynote speakers on the National Teleconference sponsored by Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Reducing Stigma and Discrimination. The Bienvenido Program was highlighted as well as the work that has been done to increase number of Latinos at *NEC* community mental health center.

In October 2006 *NEC* entered into a conversation with the Learning Generation Initiative (LGI) of LaGrange, IN. It was agreed that *NEC* would train LGI's adult literacy teachers in the Bienvenido curriculum. LGI would submit a grant proposal to the Office of Community and Rural Affairs (OCRA) with hopes of receiving funding to expand their work in the Northeastern region of Indiana. In December 2006, *NEC* received word from LGI that their grant had been approved by OCRA. *NEC* and LGI will partner in the training of 50 adult literacy teachers in the Bienvenido curriculum and *NEC* will provide technical support for program implementation in 2007.

In May 2007, the Bienvenido Program evaluation was completed. The evaluation process has helped *NEC* better understand the effectiveness of the Bienvenido Program. The data sheds new light on the impact of a preventive mental health intervention (Bienvenido Program) with Latino immigrants. Examination of the data indicates that participants changed in a positive manner in increased understanding about mental illness and handle stress better. Dr. Delia Saldaña, Ph.D. writes,

“One of the outstanding strengths of this program is its reliance on community networking and team building. This endorsement of “it’s our community” is an innovative and rare approach to responding to addressing individuals with emotional or behavioral problems. The second distinctive characteristic of this rehabilitative program is to treat participants not as stigmatized and monitored individuals who were referred to this “treatment” program, but rather as a group of people who has the choice of recognizing and using their strengths that can contribute to a better community. While male clients are typically referred for drug-related misdemeanors, heavy emphasis is placed immediately on recognizing individual indigenous identity, heritage, values and the impact of acculturation and Latino status in a primarily Caucasian community. Many acculturative stresses are addressed that contribute to substance abuse or its consequences such as domestic violence, social isolation, academic risks for their children, and fragmented access to healthier supports that could potentially be quite useful.”

Dr. Saldaña adds, “The Bienvenido Programs’ success is a credit to many individuals. It is this momentum that can carry the success of this program to the

many communities in the U.S. that have little to no knowledge of how to implement effective community interventions that address the social consequences of untreated substance abuse or mental problems. Emphasis on community-supported, strengths based ways in which to engender a culture of change is certainly worth pursuing.”

On September 17, 2007 NEC was contacted by Dr. Margarita Alegría, Ph.D., asking if it was interested in participating in a research grant proposal they are submitting to the National Institute of Health (NIH). Alegría informed that the proposal is directed at gaining an understanding of the policy mechanisms that are important in reducing disparities and improving access to high-quality behavioral health and educational services for minority adolescents. If the Center for Multicultural Mental Health proposal is successful the research will involve consensus groups and in-depth interviews with key policymakers, service providers and community advocates.

In October 2007 the Division of Mental Health and Addiction (Indiana) informed Northeastern Center that it would sponsor two trainings with behavioral health clinicians across Indiana. The facilitator training project will involve connecting with 31 mental health centers in Indiana and 14 stand alone addiction centers. The opportunity to partner with the state of Indiana allows various communities to be better prepared for addressing the mental health needs of Latinos and Latino immigrants.

In October 2007 Northeastern Center was invited by the Hispanic Mennonite Church to participate in a national teleconference with their Executive Committee. It was decided that Northeastern Center and Mennonite Central Committee, U.S. would work to develop a pilot Bienvenido Facilitator Training project with several leaders of the Hispanic Mennonite Church. The potential to partner with a faith-based organization is exciting because it allows Northeastern Center to again enter into another setting where Latino immigrants are present. The dialogue with the Hispanic Mennonite Church continues and a training date for March 2009 in Pennsylvania has been set.

On November 15, 2007 Northeastern Center received the Clarian Health Award for Excellence in Hispanic/Latino Health Care. Clarian honors one organization that demonstrates outstanding service and commitment to the health care needs of the Hispanic/Latino Community. Northeastern Center and the Bienvenido Program were selected as the recipient for 2007.

In January 2008 seven Bienvenido groups were launched in Northeast Indiana. Locations included places such as Salvation Army, LEAP of Noble County, St. Patrick's Catholic Church, Learning Generation Initiative, and Northeastern Center. 82 participants participated in the Bienvenido classes. Several comments from students were:

“I have learned many things. The Bienvenido classes have many interesting things such as learning how to escape from depression, not feel alone, and provides many elements that help to share with family and others.”

“My life has improved now that I don't feel depressed when I practice the things I learned in the course.”

“That it is very good. Very helpful and if you have the opportunity to participate in the course it will be the best opportunity you can take to improve your life.”

“I learned to have a better family relationship. I learned to solve problems or conflicts at work, with regard to differences of opinion. I learned more to help the community and get involved in it.”

“The program has improved my life in the aspect that I now have other skills that help me to give my children better information on such subjects such as drugs and seek help when I need it and not fall into depression.”

“I would recommend this program because it provides information that helps us have a better standard of living and tools to achieve this and achieve our goals for a better future for our family, especially our children.”

In April and May 2008 Northeastern Center trained 23 individuals from Indiana in the Bienvenido Curriculum. The Division of Mental Health and Addiction sponsored the training. Participants were from community mental health centers, health centers, community-based organizations, and churches. Participants were from the following cities and towns: Batesville, Kokomo, Terre Haute, Gary, Merrillville, Warsaw, and Indianapolis.

In July 2008 Northeastern Center received notification from the Baltimore Medical System of its desire for the Bienvenido Facilitator Training. A Facilitator Training will be held in September 2008 in Baltimore, MD.

In July 2008 Northeastern Center launched the Bienvenido radio program. The program is produced by Bienvenido Facilitators and Northeastern Center staff. The goal of the program is to promote the Bienvenido Program and offer mental health education via radio to the Latino community.

In September 2008 Northeastern Center traveled to Baltimore to conduct a two-day training with the Baltimore Medical System. This training marked a significant event in the Bienvenido Program. For the first time, the program will be implemented in a state outside of Indiana. Having the Bienvenido Program implemented in Baltimore affords Northeastern Center an opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of an intervention created in a rural setting and its potential impact in an urban setting. A fidelity checklist model has been created to observe facilitators deliver class lessons and also give feedback to Northeastern Center.

In September 2008 Northeastern Center was nominated by the United Way of Fort Wayne to the Community Defined-Evidence Based Project to be considered as one of many behavioral health programs that intervene with Latino immigrants. The Community-Defined Evidence Based Project seeks to identify programs across the country that are successful in the community's eyes and help to increase access to mental health services in the Latino community.

In October 2008 various Bienvenido Facilitators have moved to action by meeting with local school officials and other community organizations to work at implementing the Bienvenido Program. West Noble High School has begun a new Bienvenido group with nine high school students. Two other Bienvenido Facilitators will start Bienvenido

groups with the Hispanic/Latino Health Coalition of Elkhart County and Osolo Elementary (for parents). Bienvenido Facilitators will visit Silverwood Mennonite Church to thank children of the congregation for giving of their Summer Bible School funds to the Bienvenido Program at Northeastern Center. The opportunity to engage children with Bienvenido Facilitators brings about awareness of mental health issues as well as migration issues in our community because stories are being told by Latino immigrants to children who perhaps have not experienced harsh difficulties or experienced migrating to another country.

Finally, the program evaluation implementation steps are in motion with various trainings on the horizon. It is our intention to continue providing emotional and educational support to Latino immigrants, leaders, and community members. Our Bienvenido Program mission will continue to seek increase access to mental health services, improve the mental health, and quality of life of Latino immigrants.

For more information contact:

Gilberto Pérez Jr., MSW, ACSW, QMHP  
Bienvenido Program Director  
Northeastern Center, Inc.  
PO Box 290  
Ligonier, IN 46767  
260-318-5042 mobile  
[gperez@nec.org](mailto:gperez@nec.org)  
[www.nec.org](http://www.nec.org) (click Latino services)