

## The LHA Initiative

# Breaking down barriers to better health care

Sometimes the best medical care does not begin with a visit to a physician or a trip to the hospital. Health care begins with knowledge, with understanding the relationship between lifestyle, habits and health. Sometimes, to quote an old adage, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

This perspective undergirds the Latino Lay Health Advisors Program, a joint venture between Wake Forest Baptist Health’s Department of Chaplaincy and Pastoral Education and Wake Forest School of Medicine’s Maya Angelou Center for Health Equity. The Health Disparities Initiative of the NC Health and Wellness Trust Fund provides the necessary financial resources for the project.

Latinos are now the largest minority in the United States. Growing Latino communities can be found in almost every major city in the country. Winston-Salem is no exception. Rev. Francis Rivers Meza, a chaplain supervisor in the Department of Chaplaincy & Pastoral Education, is one of the persons involved in efforts to make health care more readily accessible to Latinos in Forsyth County.

Working with Rivers Meza on this project are Dr. Jorge Calles-Escandón, professor of endocrinology and metabolism at Wake Forest School of Medicine; Jaimie Hunter, a doctoral student in public health at the University

of North Carolina—Chapel Hill; Dr. Rita Pichardo, assistant professor of dermatology at Wake Forest School of Medicine; Sarah Langdon, associate project manager with the Maya Angelou Center; Winona Gilbert, administrative secretary and webmaster at the Center; and Jennifer Gastelum, a second-year student at Wake Forest School of Medicine. This team designed the project and has overseen its implementation.

“Language and cultural barriers, as well as high rates of poverty within some ethnic groups, can mean disparities in access to health care services,” Rivers Meza explained. “What we have attempted to do is find ways to overcome those obstacles. Engaging local Latino clergy is one way to do that.”

“Religious leaders were chosen because a significant percentage of the Latino population has an ingrained respect for religious figures,” Calles-Escandón explained, adding that pastors or staff from local congregations with a large Hispanic membership were asked to select potential candidates to be trained as lay health advisors (LHAs).

“Our team approached the leadership of Calvary Baptist Church, Our Lady of Mercy Catholic Church, Misión Presbiterian—‘El Buen Pastor,’—Iglesia Pentecostal Nueva Vida and Green Street United Methodist Church,” said Langdon. “Each

of these churches was invited to propose candidates for the program.”

According to Calles-Escandón, this ecumenicity is one of the most noteworthy aspects of the project, which has brought together an “array of denominations—Pentecostals, Baptists, Methodists, Catholics and Presbyterians—in a collaborative effort to improve the health of the Latino Community.”

In the end, 10 LHAs were selected. A structured curriculum was created to educate and provide these candidates with the tools necessary to provide health education in the language and style most suitable to their communities.

The candidates received 60 hours of training over a three-month period. The focus areas of the curriculum were type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, obesity, hypertension and dyslipidemia. “The LHAs are now able to design and teach health education classes on the focus areas of the project in each of their congregations,” Langdon said. Moreover, as the LHAs implement their classes and discover additional needs in the community, the project team stands ready to provide additional training.

Carmen Vasquez, a lay health advisor from Calvary Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, is excited about the new horizons the program has offered her:



(L-R) Dr. Jorge Calles-Escandón (Program Director), Laura Zavala, Jonorys Beriquete, María Clara O'Neill, Francis Rivers-Meza (Program Co-Director), Carmen Vázquez, Andrés Miranda, Raul Andriano. Not Pictured: Guillermo Arellano, Aurora Partida, Teresa Colón.

## “The Latino Lay Health Advisors Program is a true blessing from God and will be a real ‘life changer’ for many Hispanics.”

“It has been a great blessing for me to be able to participate in the Lay Health Advisors’ training because it has broadened my health knowledge and given me the opportunity to learn about diseases affecting the Hispanic population in our community.” She added, “I have realized how important it is for our churches to approach the community and, as a ministry, provide the community with sound health support and education.”

It is also important to note that while the Department of Chaplaincy & Pastoral Education, the Maya Angelou Center, and local congregations are collaborating to train lay health advisors, the project also provides direct services. Health screenings took place earlier this year at each of the five participating congregations. Individuals identified as needing care received

assistance from the project team in locating health care providers and other resources.

An early and consistent advocate for the project, Dr. Larry Phillips, Hispanic coach and consultant on the multicultural ministry team of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, likes the progress he has seen to date. “I am grateful to Dr. Jorge Calles-Escandón, principal investigator, and his study team from Wake Forest Baptist Health for their vision and commitment to bring this ministry to life. The Latino Lay Health Advisors Program is a true blessing from God and will be a real ‘life changer’ for many Hispanics.”

Pleased but not satisfied, Phillips already envisions possible next steps. “My prayer is to see this Christ-centered ministry program serve as a model for others.”

## CareNet provides congregational resources for mental health awareness month

In observance of Mental Health Awareness Month during May, CareNet of North Carolina has developed a Congregational Mental Health Literacy Guide. The packet contains resources for congregations to use during each of the first four weeks of May. It includes scripture passages with resources for sermons, education, reflections on pastoral care, and spiritual practices.

Director of Center Development and Education Bryan Hatcher explained that the guide is user friendly and compatible with all congregations. “Our hope is to demystify mental health and help congregations engage in conversation about mental health and mental wellness,” Hatcher said. “We also want to help congregations consider ways to grow and strengthen their ministries of mental health and mental wellness.”

To request a copy of the Congregational Health Literacy Guide, contact Bryan Hatcher at [bhatcher@wakehealth.edu](mailto:bhatcher@wakehealth.edu) or call CareNet of North Carolina at 336-716-0858.