This paper focuses on the *Promotoras para las Relaciones Sanas* ("Promotoras for Healthy Relationships") project developed and run by the Domestic Violence Prevention Program (DVPP) of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) in conjunction with the Central American Resource Center (CARECEN), both based in Los Angeles.
Promotoras

Using Promotoras in Domestic and Teen Dating Violence Prevention
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It was in 1979 when the US. Surgeon General’s Office first recognized violence, including family violence, as one of the public health priority areas for the nation. From that date, public health measures (e.g. epidemiologic research methods to characterize the problem and identify modifiable risk factors) began to be utilized as a tactic to prevent violence and achieve positive behavioral change. Over the course of the 1980s, the US public health establishment expanded its knowledge and its strategies for addressing violence as a public health issue, with the international public health community coming on board with this approach in the 1990s. Significant progress on developing effective strategies for violence prevention has been made in the last 30 years.

This paper provides an overview of one such strategy used specifically for the prevention of domestic violence, borrowing from a successful community-led primary health care promotion model used by other public health practitioners, and emphasizing the development of community leaders to prevent abuse at the grassroots level. This strategy is the Promotoras para las Relaciones Sanas (“Promotoras for Healthy Relationships”) project developed and run by the Domestic Violence Prevention Program (DVPP) of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) in conjunction with the Central American Resource Center (CARECEN), both based in Los Angeles, California.

BACKGROUND

History of Community Health Promotion

Throughout the history of primary health care, the need for low cost health interventions serving low-income, ethnic and nationally oppressed, as well as underserved populations has been an ongoing challenge. Research shows that in many different countries and cultures, communities have relied on different kinds of lay health promoters -- individuals who make services accessible to those who have typically been denied adequate and equitable health care from the professional medical system. These community-based models have been developed based on, and in the context of, each community’s specific health needs while being shaped by the community’s unique environmental, cultural, social, and political resources. These models have continued evolving and improving over time and have proven to be an effective strategy in addressing these needs.

These lay health promoters have been identified by many names: Village Health Workers; Primary Health Care Workers; Community Health Promoters; Medical Auxiliaries; Rural Health Motivators (Swaziland); Brigadistas (Nicaragua); Promotores y Promotoras de Salud (Latin America); Front Line Health Workers; and Barefoot Doctors (China) -- to name a few. These terms are not necessarily interchangeable since each has its own practical, historical, and political significance. These health workers have a range of backgrounds from trained professionals to volunteer community members and have been widely used for many different health issues.
In the United States, the term *promoter*, used to refer to someone in this sort of role, was first applied in the 1950-1960s in the Navajo nation as part of a strategy to deliver accessible and appropriate health resources to communities not being served by the traditional medical system. The World Health Organization launched the model internationally in 1978 through the Alma Ata Declaration as a vehicle for the delivery of basic health care services: “The people have the right and duty to participate individually and collectively in the planning and implementation of their health care.”

**History and Background: Promotoras de Salud Model**

*Promotoras de Salud* ("Promoters of Health") are community members trusted for their very close understanding of the community they serve. The *Promotoras de Salud* model emerged in Latin America in the 1950s in order to bring health care to poor populations. *Promotoras de Salud* have historically facilitated peer education through trainings conducted by popular organizations and church groups. In the US, the *Promotores de Salud* model was widely used in the 1980s to reach out to the migrant and farm worker communities. In California the model was used in the 1980s to work on AIDS/HIV prevention. In these models, *Promotoras* generally share the ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status, and life experiences of the community members they serve.

The strength and value of *Promotoras de Salud* come from their relationships in their community and the trust and respect they have earned. They may or may not be affiliated with community institutions, but either way they provide support, knowledge sharing, resources, and information. Overall, they provide leadership to support their community’s well-being. In the public health field, the *Promotoras* model is widely recognized as an effective model for delivering culturally-tailored and linguistically-sensitive health education and outreach within the Latina community. By disseminating information in their communities’ spoken language (Spanish and/or any indigenous language), and in a culturally responsive fashion, *Promotoras* link their communities, neighbors, friends, and families to health care and social services, educate them about health issues, and work with them to make services more accessible. As members of underserved populations, *Promotoras* are uniquely positioned to build on strengths and to address unmet needs in their own community. Overall, *Promotoras* mobilize their communities to address community problems through outreach and health education in community members’ homes, worksites, community organizations, schools, etc.

Popular education is a critical concept in the work of *Promotoras*, based on the principle that all people are knowledgeable based on their own life experience. *Promotoras* convey information to their neighbors in a participatory, interactive, and fun fashion. Depending on the organizations they work with, *Promotoras* may volunteer their time, draw a salary, or receive a stipend. *Promotoras* have been predominantly volunteers whose primary role is assisting with the delivery of educational material. However, in the last decade the number of *Promotoras* who are hired as staff has increased. Traditionally, *Promotoras* have been Latina women, but more men are entering the field, and the gender-neutral term “*Promotores*” is increasingly being used to be more inclusive.

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**PROMOTORAS FOR HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS PROGRAM**

The Promotoras for Healthy Relationships Program was born out of an organic process after many years of providing community education with the Latina immigrant community around domestic violence awareness in Los Angeles. Even though in Los Angeles Latinas and Latinos make up at least 50% of the city population, Latina/o survivors of abuse, and people at risk, still face innumerable hurdles and barriers to access legal
and community services as well as to engage in prevention efforts focused on changing social norms. Specifically, the Pico Union area of Los Angeles, where the Promotoras’ efforts were focused, is one of the most densely populated areas in LA. It is a neighborhood dominated by poverty, overcrowding, gang violence, linguistic isolation, and family fragmentation. Many families have been torn apart by civil war and economic dislocation in their home countries. Parents work two jobs, households are overseen by single parents, and violence is a constant threat. Over 85% self-identify as Latinos/Latinas, and about 64% are foreign born.

As in many communities, domestic, sexual and dating violence usually go under-reported, and people often lack knowledge about available prevention, legal, and community resources. Discrimination, distrust, deficiency in culturally competent local service providers, lack of social networks, limited transportation, immigration status, lack of knowledge of the US judicial system, and fear of law enforcement combine to create an environment that greatly disadvantages low-income Latinas and Latinos in their ability to respond to situations of violence in their own lives. In addition, cultural norms regarding gender roles, violence, and victimization in the Latino/a community also represent an obstacle to prevention because many survivors, perpetrators, and bystanders alike believe domestic violence is acceptable; survivors may fear they will be held responsible for their victimization.

Based on this reality, the Promotoras para las Relaciones Sanas Program emerged with the purposes of:

- Providing culturally and linguistically sensitive information on domestic and teen dating violence prevention to Latina immigrants at risk.
- Educating, disseminating information, and providing support in navigating domestic violence, as well as legal and community resources.
- Increasing the capacity and awareness around barriers faced by Latina Immigrant survivors in, as well as developing and maintaining relationships with, domestic violence prevention organizations, school administrators, substance abuse programs, hospitals, churches and community centers, among others.
- Building leadership and capacity among Latina community members to prevent abuse.

**Curriculum Development**

The MALDEF Domestic Violence Prevention Program was launched in August 2007 thanks to a generous Verizon sponsorship. The Promotoras program was the result of a four-year journey that was originally conceived as “Know Your Rights” Program. Through our work, we identified that parent engagement in domestic violence prevention was the best possible strategy to reach out to those community members who did not feel comfortable approaching organizations for help. As such, we needed to find even more participatory, culturally, and linguistically relevant mechanisms than what had been attempted in the program’s first three years. Out of this aim, the Promotoras for Healthy Relationships Program was born. The implementation and development of the project was in the three phases.

The first was the development and implementation of the first domestic violence prevention curriculum “Healthy Relationships for the Latina Community.” This involved collaboration with a range of community-based, legal, and government agencies and touched on topics including: 1) introduction to domestic violence; 2) safety planning and healthy relationships; 3) financial education; 4) family law/restraining orders; 5) immigration law/public benefits; and 6) community resources. Later, we added three additional topics: 1) cultural aspects of abuse in the Latina community; 2) roots of violence: intersection of domestic violence with other types of oppression; and 3) dating violence prevention for parents and resources.

After participating in the MALDEF DVPP workshops, many parents (mostly mothers) who were natural leaders in their community wished to share the information received with friends, family, and other community
members, get involved in the domestic violence prevention movement, and recruit others in doing so. In response, we created an additional 8-session program based at a local elementary school with 15 mothers participating. In these sessions, we developed and implemented a domestic violence prevention campaign. The participants created their own educational material, hand-made pins and posters, and gave a presentation to about one hundred school parents and teachers in observance of Domestic Violence Awareness Month.

Finally, the comprehensive Promotoras for Healthy Relationships Curriculum and Program (2010-2012) was developed. A pilot Promotoras curriculum was developed in 2010, thanks to additional funding from Verizon to work in collaboration with the Dolores Huerta Foundation (DHF). The target population in this case was Latina farmworker women in the Central Valley. Based on the material developed for the “Know Your Rights/Community Education” workshops, we expanded the Promotoras curriculum to include leadership development and capacity building skills activities. This pilot curriculum was facilitated to a group composed of community members, as well as community organizers from the DHF “Vecinos Unidos” Program. They provided great input on how to utilize the MALDEF Promotoras curriculum, applying the DHF organizing model in order to mobilize the community around domestic violence. Although this first version of the curriculum was developed based on the cultural and specific needs of the farmworker community, the trainings in the Central Valley allowed DVPP to test the curriculum for the first time. Additions and subtractions were made that would be later used for communities in the Los Angeles region.

By the end of 2010, the MALDEF DVPP closely collaborated with CARECEN to implement the Promotoras program with their constituency. The funds for this specific project came from CARECEN's own budget. A revision and adaptation of the curriculum created for the project developed with the Dolores Huerta Foundation was necessary to make it relevant to the Los Angeles Westlake-Pico Union Latina community. This redesign was possible thanks to the collaboration between MALDEF’s DVPP and CARECEN’s experience fostering leadership development within the Pico Union community. The purpose of the project was to develop a cadre of Promotoras who would facilitate trainings and provide support at CARECEN headquarters. The target populations for the program were: 1) the large flow of immigrant Latinas visiting CARECEN’s offices seeking to adjust their status based on VAWA and U-Visa immigration remedies; and 2) the women that the Promotoras themselves knew through their children’s schools, LA School District parent committees, and other areas of community involvement.

CARECEN was responsible for recruiting participants, and did so through their existing Parent Education Program situated at the “Raul G. Borbon” Parent Center. Some of the participants had already participated in the MALDEF DVPP workshops years earlier. However, through this new initiative, about 17 community members and leaders completed the first phase of the project, 8 completed the second phase, and two very committed community leaders graduated as official MALDEF-trained Promotoras for the CARECEN “Raul G. Borbon” Parent Center. Most Promotoras were monolingual Spanish speakers; two were bilingual in English and Spanish. Only five out of 17 -- those who had participated in a previous MALDEF training, as well as those coming from our previous local elementary school project -- had prior experience and knowledge on domestic violence prevention. They were on average 36 years old, had an average of 3 children, and were all foreign born with and without legal immigration status. Most of them had experienced abuse in their lifetime, and some had been CARECEN Legal Department clients. CARECEN co-coordinated, co-designed and co-facilitated different components of the curriculum.

**Training**

The Promotoras participated in a comprehensive 14-session training intended to prepare them to become aware of domestic violence dynamics, community and legal resources, prevention strategies, and eventually to prepare them in fulfilling their role as Promotoras. The curriculum consisted of the same topics developed in
phase one and two of the community education curriculum but with step-by-step instructions on how to present the information to the community. The curriculum also included information on Promotoras’ model and role, leadership development, and planning and facilitating meetings. Training activities consisted of pairing Promotoras in teams and having them role-play and present the curriculum units to their Promotoras peers. Although the MALDEF-developed curriculum was used as a foundation, Promotoras were encouraged to co-design, make recommendations and develop their own material for their presentations. Also, Promotoras had exposure to different community resources, holding meetings with and participating in presentations facilitated by different community organizations. In order to coordinate legal rights presentations, the Promotoras developed relationships with the CARECEN Legal Department. Additionally, a great success story in this respect is that the Promotoras co-designed the content, and one of them co-facilitated with me a workshop highlighting their work as Promotoras at the California Partnership to End Domestic Violence (CPEDV) Connecting the Dots 2012 Annual Statewide Domestic Violence Conference. xi

The curriculum addresses how cultural, linguistic, immigration status and oppression issues affect the way that the Latina community deals with the violence in their lives. The curriculum uses diverse strategies to break literacy and linguistic barriers, and confronts backward cultural messages that prevent the community from talking about domestic violence. The Promotoras analyzed traditional sayings with sexist implications in order to deconstruct gender stereotypes inherent in their culture. xii They prepared skits in Spanish to present in forums and workshops to depict abuse scenarios, and followed them with sharing resources for their audiences. The audience would recognize abusive conditions and benefit from learning where to go for help.

After training pre- and post-tests, the Promotoras showed increased knowledge of domestic violence dynamics, signs of abuse, community and legal resources, and facilitation and organizing skills. Also, Promotoras increased their ability to use tools such as word processing, PowerPoint, and internet (social media) to prepare, promote, and organize workshops. The Promotoras strengthened their resourcefulness and manifested their passion to help others through the process of creating the mission and vision statements that would guide their work within the community, and they also strengthened their creativity by creating their own written material.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

The process of training the Promotoras to communicate effectively on domestic violence prevention was challenging, as it required transforming deeply held preconceived notions of “victim blaming.” Also, an important challenge was that some participants who were survivors were being triggered at the moment of facilitating. Although we lacked the resources to implement it, we recognize that participation in a survival support group should be a requirement for all participants in a Domestic Violence Promotoras Program.

Lack of funds for the project and personal financial hardship were continual challenges for the project and its participants -- including lack of funds to provide some sort of compensation for low-income women putting in many hours for this work. After some time participating facilitating workshops and providing support to the community, Promotoras would have to engage themselves in expenses for child care and transportation, which was difficult without having an income. Promotoras who are heads of their own household and/or have children also found it difficult to sustain giving time and energy in spite of their dedication to the project.

A simultaneous asset and challenge in the project was the diversity in levels of literacy, education, community work experience, and language skills among the group. Lower literacy participants obviously had difficulty in all the tasks that required writing -- writing agendas, creating written materials, evaluations, etc. -- but on the other hand were helpful in developing material and activities that would be accessible and appropriate for low-literacy populations.
Successes

- Latina Immigrant women organized and facilitated prevention workshops.
- Survivors shared their experience in a structured way through trainings.
- The project was informed by community experiences.
- Promotoras were well-positioned to link their own community with available resources.
- Promotoras dismantled myths about domestic violence.
- Promotoras had the ability to bring survivors to the legal services provided by CARECEN, while the Legal Services Department could refer clients to participate in the Promotoras project and/or events organized by them.
- Promotoras crossed-fertilized their work around domestic violence with other issues in which they are involved like schools and education with School Districts.
- Promotoras engaged other parents in their community in social change work.

This journey, as expressed by the Promotoras, has been very rich. They benefited greatly by developing their own leadership. They feel more ready than ever to engage in their communities through the experience of public speaking, planning, and organizing of the project, etc. The Promotoras shared that this training enhanced their self-esteem and provided life motivation. They felt they grew as people by increasing their knowledge, identifying abuse dynamics, and relating to more people in their community. Promotoras reflected on how the work needs to be done WITHIN the community, rather than WITH the community.

CONTINUED WORK

Promotoras are still living in their communities, some more actively engaged in community sharing than others. The Promotoras Program at CARECEN continued providing support to survivors in the CARECEN Parent Center, and facilitating summer school sessions to Pico Union parents on domestic violence prevention. Unfortunately, the program could not continue in a structured fashion due to lack of funding. (Government and private funders have only very recently recognized the value of the Promotoras/community mobilization strategies for domestic violence prevention, and will hopefully invest more heavily in it in the future.) Promotoras, although not working formally, are equipped to work with the community on an ongoing basis and in informal ways when encountering neighbors, family members, and other mothers in schools. CARECEN continues to seek funding, and plans to continue supporting at least one Promotora and training others for future work in the community.

Promotoras as Seeds of Change in Their Communities

Implementing a Promotoras project can greatly benefit any domestic violence counseling, legal aid, or leadership development organization. Promotoras’ understanding of their community’s culture, needs, and fears, their relationships and trust in the community, their language skills, and their desire to transform the status quo make them exceptional agents to promote violence prevention efforts. Providing written information to immigrant Latinas is not enough; a more personal approach is required for them to feel comfortable in reaching out and seeking help.

This work needs to be done with men in the community as well. Working with men will assure that the prevention efforts are not isolated to the segment of the population who has traditionally been victimized; in
order to create a community free of violence, men and all community members must take leadership in this work. In order to involve men, the Promotores program would require collaborating with established men’s groups such as day laborer programs or batterer’s intervention programs, where men would be trained to lead campaigns to challenge cultural norms around domestic violence and men’s roles in it, and to expose the underlying sexism and male dominance in the culture that allows domestic violence to happen. It should be noted that one of the blind spots of this program is that in its attempt to confront violence that emerges from traditional male-female gender roles in the Latino community, it fails to address domestic violence among LGBTQ couples as well as how LGBTQ family members are targeted because of their gender and/or sexual expression.

Although the Promotora model has existed for decades, this strategy is gaining more and more attention from domestic, sexual, and dating violence initiatives to outreach to community members and families who have traditionally been isolated. Hopefully with the small seeds the Promotoras plant in the community, more community members are motivated to help eradicate the violence epidemic.

For more information about this project, please contact Ana Paula Noguez Mercado, at anapaulanoguez@gmail.com.

REFERENCES


For example, the learning objectives for session two of the curriculum include discussing different examples of community and/or interpersonal violence; identifying root causes of violence; and becoming familiar with the Social-Ecological Model to better understand the factors that influence violence and the need to develop strategies that address those factors. It also includes identifying strict gender roles and stereotyping roles in domestic violence, as well as recognizing the role of media perpetrating these roles.


\*\* E.g. “La mujer de la casa el hombre de la calle” (“Women belong home, men belong to the streets”), “Jalan más un par de tetas que una yunta de bueyes” (“A pair of tits has more power than a pair of oxen”), and “Mujer sola, compañía quiere” (“Woman who is alone is assumed to want [male] company”).