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Forum brings Latino community, health services together

The new Feather River Community Arts Center was abuzz Jan. 26 with conversations, some in Spanish, some in English, and some flowing between the two, when about 60 health and human service providers and Latino community members gathered at the center in Portola for a bilingual forum.

The Sierra Institute for Community and Environment, which facilitated the meeting, presented outcomes from its two-year project – Proyecto Salud (“health project”) – a participatory assessment to understand and improve health and healthcare access among Plumas County’s growing Latino community. The project was supported by a grant from The California Endowment, and guided by a local advisory committee and a lot of community participation.



Proyecto Salud director Katie Bagby, Joyce Scroggs of the Family Violence Prevention Coalition, Latino Association of Portola president Carmen Lopez and daughter Ashley hold up a poster signed by forum participants

The day opened with an interactive activity to practice meeting and greeting in Spanish, mingling people and languages from the start. Participants were encouraged to practice speaking in both languages the best they could, and project assistant Danna Rapacilo provided interpretation.

The morning session included presentations by Project Director Katie Bagby and community members– the first introduced Proyecto Salud and its participatory process, the second presented findings from the assessment.

The Sierra Institute uses a process called “participatory research,” that involves community members in every step along the way. For example, a team of 10 community members helped design and distribute a survey to their friends and neighbors – ninety-three in all. The goal of participatory research is not only to produce a report, but also an engaged and active community, ready to work together to improve health.

Along the way, Proyecto Salud did lots of relationship and community building. For example, with a group of Mexican American women and Janet Canty of the Feather River Community Partnership, the project formed a weekly group – la Colaboracion de Mujeres para Salud y Nutrición (the Women’s Collaborative for Health and Nutrition) – to work on projects that support health and wellness in their families and community. At the morning session, the Women’s Collaborative delivered a touching presentation about how they’ve enjoyed building friendships and what they’ve accomplished together. One woman remarked, “We don’t have to feel alone. We share the same worries and hopes for raising our children. Together we find solutions to our problems.” The Women’s Collaborative is completing a bilingual community cookbook to share Mexican culture with Plumas County. The cookbook, *Sabores de Mexico* (Flavors of Mexico), can be ordered at the Feather River Community Arts Center or by calling the Sierra Institute at 284-1022. A donation of \$10 is requested to help cover production costs and support future activities of the Women’s Collaborative.

Katie Bagby also presented assessment findings. She found that the majority of adults and about 25 percent of children have no health insurance at all. Many don’t know what services are available and where to go when they need help. Seventy-five percent of the survey respondents said they need someone to interpret or translate for them when they go to the doctor. The overwhelming majority bring a friend, neighbor, or child to interpret for them. Very few indicated that clinics, hospitals, or other health service provided interpretation services, though there are a handful bilingual healthcare providers in the county. Bagby highlighted that when someone’s health is at stake, it is important to have *fluent* interpretation and translation, by an adult. She commented, “We can’t place the burden of translation on bilingual children. People are learning English, but it takes a long time to learn a new language and be able to discuss the nuances and complexity of health and healthcare.”

Survey participants revealed a strong desire to learn English. English classes are the number one activity *by far* that participants want. Finally, survey participants indicated a strong desire to participate more and be a part of the community they live in.

After the presentations, Public Health Director Hank Foley remarked that Proyecto Salud and the Latino community inspired him with their heart and commitment to community. He announced that he would dedicate a portion of his budget to build language capacity within his agency and the community. Dr. Foley serves on the advisory committee for Proyecto Salud.

After a hearty lunch provided by Tacos Tonila and Casa Carmelita, Janet Canty and Katie Bagby led participants in a process to identify important issues and work in small groups, brainstorming ideas and resources. Lots of creative ideas were generated to improve healthcare access as well as wellness. In one group, fathers including Carlos Garcia of the Plumas National Forest explored ideas for youth leadership development in the national forests. In another, Virginia Jaquez of Feather River College and others identified ways to strengthen translation and interpretation services and offer English as a second language. Other topics included dental health for children, community leadership, cultural understanding in the schools, physical activity, and helping people know how to access health services and other resources. At the close of this activity, participants signed up for the topics they want to keep working on.

The Sierra Institute has applied for a second round of funding to facilitate planning and implementing collaborative projects that address the issues identified. The day closed with confirming commitments to work together and presenting a handmade poster participants had signed throughout the day. The poster symbolizes two arms coming together to make things better – one arm is the Latino community, the other is the health and human services community.

County Supervisor Bill Powers was unable to attend due to other county obligations, but contributed financial and moral support for the forum. He remarked, "Proyecto Salud represents a rediscovery of the wealth of community involvement that enhances and improves our senses of happiness and is quickly becoming a wonderful new source of energy."

For more information about Proyecto Salud, contact Katie Bagby at 284-1022 or kbagby@sierrainstitute.us.