

# La Maestra Community Health Centers

SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA

## CIRCLE OF CARE JOINS FOOD, FAMILIES, HEALTH

From its beginning as a community-based literacy project, La Maestra Community Health Centers (LMCHC) has rooted care in the social determinants of health. Now serving low-income residents of San Diego, with a population that includes homeless, refugee and immigrant patients, LMCHC has a design model it calls “Circle of Care.” The focus is on compassion and self-sufficiency through community advocacy, community development, community promotions, networking and collaboration.

*Literacy, employment, housing and food access have always been integrated into La Maestra Community Health Centers’ Circle of Care. Through 15 years of persistent transformation, the center now offers garden spots, fresh food, a food pantry, holiday meals and resources for immigrants, refugees, homeless and other urban underserved in San Diego.*

The “Circle” has individual health at its center, growing outward into well-being. It includes the recognition of housing, job training, food assistance, medical care, eligibility assistance and legal aid within the model.

The food pantry began when LMCHC realized their patients needed more consistent access to donated food and that they could ensure quality and availability. Formally registered in California, it operates three

mornings a week and includes special services to assist those with homeless situations and chronic diseases or dietary needs. Health educators and volunteers link pantry users to other needed services.

Zara Marselian, founder and CEO, shares that the pantry requires a lot of oversight and paperwork. Despite coordinating with churches and farmers, the food still was not always available or fresh. That changed when they partnered with Feeding America. (see Feeding America in Food Oasis Partners At a Glance, p. 40)

La Maestra collaborates with a church to provide food for a hot meal, which then gives them access to Feeding America resources. The food quality is consistently high and they supplement with donations from bakeries and other garden food producers.

Community gardens are the newest features. LMCHC has the only true garden in their designated food desert. Patients and community members can lease one of the 36 plots for \$36 per year. Gardeners feed their families and also use produce in local restaurants and sell it in the local farmers market. Micro-enterprise is another of LMCHC’s emphases, and this combination of food production with marketing fits right in.

Education, nutrition, business skills, exercise and community building are all benefits of the gardens. Children, mothers and seniors all participate and share cultural favorites, explaining the uses of different herbs and spices. What has been labeled a desert is flourishing with growth and health.

## SENIORS FIND SUPPORT AND COMMUNITY AT FOOD PANTRY

One of the surprises to La Maestra staff is how the food pantry has become a social venue for the area's seniors. The doors don't open until 9:00 am, but by 7:30 am there is a group of people in line. They aren't just waiting—they are visiting, sharing recipes and, sometimes, sharing secret concerns.

La Maestra staff notice that a number of seniors will not mention problems like elder abuse to a doctor, but they do tell their neighbor. They share with volunteers and staff who mingle with them at the pantry. Many of the seniors also serve as volunteers at the pantry and are trained to facilitate helping anyone in need of clinic care get connected into

the center through a warm hand off. It is a safe and culturally appropriate setting for those in need.

Health educators assist clients in food selections from the pantry that are tailored to their housing and health conditions. Recently, a man walked up to staff at the pantry who were discussing health selections and told them they had changed his life. Despite a 4th grade education and homelessness, he said he now understood how to manage diabetes and lost 45 pounds while receiving integrated food and health care from La Maestra. He felt hopeful and healthy.

The pantry produces more than meets the eye.



## INTERVENTIONS

**STRENGTHENING A LOCAL FOOD PANTRY IN COLLABORATION WITH OTHER FOOD AND SOCIAL SERVICE PROVIDERS, AND LEVERAGING THE COMMUNITY BUILDING THAT HAPPENS THERE (ESPECIALLY FOR SENIORS)**

**FOOD DELIVERY IN PARTNERSHIP WITH A LOCAL CHURCH**

**COMMUNITY GARDENS IN FOOD DESERTS, WITH PRIVATE LEASING PLANS (36 PLOTS/\$36 YEAR)**

**EDUCATION IN NUTRITION AND HEALTH, PLUS BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT CLASSES**

## PARTNERS

**FAITH COMMUNITIES**

**FEEDING AMERICA**

**FOOD BANK**

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**I WANTED TO LET YOU GUYS KNOW YOU CHANGED MY LIFE.**