



Photographs courtesy of Arroyo Vista Family Health Foundation

ARROYO VISTA FAMILY HEALTH FOUNDATION: COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTER IN LINCOLN HEIGHTS

IN THE EARLY 80's, THE NORTHEAST DIVISION OF LOS ANGELES was broadly considered the most under-served area of the city in terms of health care access. There was not a single Medi-Cal provider in the entire region, yet the wave of what has now become a flood of uninsured Angelenos had already begun to take root there. Arroyo Vista Family Health Center was founded in response to this growing need, and in 1981, opened as a small store front clinic in Highland Park. Within its first year, the clinic had logged over 5,000 patient visits, with no relief in site.

The Ahmanson Foundation was pleased to support Arroyo Vista's first capital campaign in 1984 when, after only three years of operation, it was clear that the need for the agency's services had grown exponentially. By the year 2000, Arroyo Vista Family Health Foundation had come to own and operate three major community health centers, three local clinics and two mobile units collectively serving over 120,000 patients in Highland Park, El Sereno, Boyle Heights, Lincoln Heights and the surrounding communities each year. This exemplary organization serves the uninsured, underinsured and indigent, offering a sliding scale discount payment program for families and individuals in need, and enrollment assistance to help those who qualify gain access to public insurance programs. Arroyo Vista provides both primary, preventive and specialty care, maternal and child health care and services, health education, nutrition and laboratory services at all Centers, and provides additional radiology, pharmacy services, dentistry and optometry at the Highland Park facility. In partnership with other community organizations, Arroyo Vista oversees a huge case management function that tracks, refers and serves patients whose complex healthcare needs run the gamut from diabetes to obesity.

With a primary Latino population and a growing Asian constituency, Arroyo Vista is distinguished by a multicultural staff that can honor and address the range of its patients' culturally-specific values and communications needs, whether they speak Spanish, English or Cantonese.



Additionally, the agency's clinicians – while trained in both the standards and emergent practices of Western medicine – are able to dignify the traditional health practices of many of its patients, by not prescribing services or medications that are contraindicated to herbal and acupuncture remedies for example, yet being mindful of and never compromising the overall health interests of any patient. No one is turned away.

The expansion of this organization has been strategic, owing as much to outstanding leadership as to community need. Lorraine Estradas, a nurse with a master's degree in public health, came to Arroyo Vista in the early 80's to work in the clinic, but quickly distinguished herself as a no-nonsense, visionary leader with exceptional organizational skills. As Arroyo Vista's very capable longtime CEO, Estrada imbues the agency's culture with two core values that define her approach. First, Estradas has assembled a loyal and long-term staff, among which each has a stake in defining and executing a consensually-derived standard for organizational excellence, both in terms of services and administration. "Cross-training" is a key example; most administrative employees understand each other's jobs, can articulate the functions of each department, and know what needs to get done in times of need and crisis, contributing "extras" when necessary, and sometimes eschewing traditional notions of job descriptions. As a result, the large staff understands the "big picture" of the organization, and works seamlessly as a team to ensure accountability, mutual support and smooth organizational operation. Second and perhaps most importantly, Estradas tells her staff, the provision of quality health services is as critical a component of community building as are

workforce development, housing, and social services. Healthy people portend healthy communities, and this belief is evident in every aspect of the organization and the way it interacts with peer agencies and neighbors.

Perhaps nowhere is this approach more evident than in the recent completion of Arroyo Vista's new flagship center in Lincoln Heights. The previous site opened in 1997 within what was thought to be a luxurious space of 6,000 square feet. Within eight years however, the projected annual patient load of 2,700 visits multiplied nearly eightfold to over 20,800, and the organization could easily have gone into crisis mode. Instead, the staff embarked upon a thoughtful strategic planning phase, whose outcome was the decision to try to purchase a larger building. As fate would have it, they looked neither long nor far. A local small business owner, grateful for the quality of both services and respect she had received as a patient over the years, turned out to have a cosmetically-challenged but otherwise solid 21,000 square foot building, which she offered to the agency at a below-market price. What was once a local Chinese restaurant and ballroom is now the cornerstone of Arroyo Vista's programs; the new Lincoln Heights Family Health Center is a large, beautiful, clean and very comprehensive health services center that, with plenty of room to grow, will surely meet its community's needs for many years to come.