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Dominican “Miracles” Doctor Helps Latinos Get Health Insurance

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Shortly before Massachusetts enacted the Health Care Reform Law in 2006, a Dominican doctor at Boston University already was starting a program to enroll immigrant families in health insurance.

Called the Latino Health Insurance Program, its goal was to enroll 40 immigrant families when Dr. Milagros Abreu (known in immigrant communities as "Dr. Milagros") launched it in 2007 for the Boston University School of Public Health.

But demand for health care was so great in the state's Latino communities that within six months, 230 families in East Boston, Lawrence and other areas became insured through the program.

The program started after Dr. Abreu conducted a series of focus groups of Latinos, with the help of church and other community groups.

Results of the focus group studies revealed that 37% of Latino children aged 18 or younger, in East Boston and Jamaica Plain (two areas of Boston), were uninsured.

"People who don't have information can't make the best decision," said Dr. Abreu.

To get families enrolled in health insurance, Dr. Abreu has been applying in the U.S. the same community skills that have worked in several Latin American countries: getting help for communities, and informing them of resources that benefit them, through their own members.

Dr. Abreu trained 14 community leaders, immigrants from five countries, to work as case managers or liaisons to bridge the gap between the families and health care providers.

"Many in our community, especially the less-educated ones, don't know how to access health care providers," said Ana Sanabria, a Dominican case manager who has lived in the U.S. for 20 years.

Sanabria said the community's response to Dr. Abreu's program has grown steadily since it started in 2007.

After several meetings with the congregation of Iglesia Crista Nueva Vida church in East Boston, word of mouth picked up, and getting more families enrolled in health insurance became just a matter of time.

Early this year, the project broke the "1,000" mark of newly-insured families.

Now, the Latino Health Insurance Program is getting a new boost: funding from MetroWest Community Health Care Foundation (one of the funders for EthnicNewz.org's ethnic-health reporting initiative).

With the new grant, Dr. Abreu will be able to expand the program to at least 300 more Brazilian and Hispanic families in Massachusetts, in the general areas of Framingham and Marlborough.

"The need is huge, but now the future is promising," said Dr. Abreu. "With the new [2006 health care reform] law, we see that educating the community is urgent. And having their own people assisting them is priceless."

The first step in getting families insured is interviewing them to determine their current health condition.

Inquiries focus largely on when their last doctor's visit took place, and if they already have a primary care physician.

Then, the program refers them to a health care plan that they can afford. Some who missed the state's enrollment deadline last year face a \$219 penalty fee, but they could qualify for a waiver through Dr. Abreu's program.

Next, appointments with local health centers and hospitals are set up.

New enrollee Santos Rivera, 74, who had prostate cancer, was able to receive urgent health care through Dr. Abreu's program.

As a retired factory worker who produced vests for the U.S. military in Maya Guez in Puerto Rico, Santos Rivera, who now lives in the Boston area, had contributed to Medicare his entire adult life.

Dr. Abreu helped Rivera get health care through MassHealth, a state-subsidized insurance plan, and arranged an appointment for him at Boston Medical Center.

"Without her, I don't know what would have happened to my father. She even picked the most perfect doctor," said Zoraida Rivera, one of the elder Rivera's six children and a teacher's assistant at Chelsea Public Schools.

At Boston Medical Center, the elder Rivera has just completed chemotherapy sessions at an affordable cost, thanks to the intervention of Dr. Abreu. He will start radiotherapy treatment next month.

For the hundreds of newly-insured patients in the Latino Health Insurance Program, it is perhaps no surprise that "milagros" in Spanish translates into "miracles" in English.

On Friday, April 18, Dr. Abreu will hold a ceremony for her project at Assembleia de Deus Bethesta on 100 Concord St., in Framingham, at 7 p.m. For more information, please call 617-567-0295 or 617-638-6727.

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