

Spotlight on the Safety Net

A Community Collaboration

El Futuro

One afternoon in December a man applied big, bright decals to the windows at El Futuro, the bilingual nonprofit mental health clinic in Durham. The decals—multicolored sunflower petals—provided some privacy for patients in the waiting room just inside, and also served as a reminder of the clinic’s philosophy: to approach patients’ needs with multifaceted treatment that matches their varying experiences.

The people who seek help at El Futuro come from more than a dozen different countries. Many patients, though not all, are immigrants and refugees; 54% say they came to the community as unaccompanied minors (Smith L, executive director, El Futuro, personal communication, December 17, 2018). Many overcome significant personal and cultural hurdles to seek mental health care.

“With the sunflower, we are basically saying that the problems and situations we address are so multicolored, just like the people we help, who are from really rich ethnicities and backgrounds, and the treatment approaches have to be that as well,” says El Futuro’s director Luke Smith. The sunflower, along with the brightly painted walls of the clinic and the art hung on them, are also reminders for clinicians and patients alike to look toward *el futuro*.

When Smith moved to North Carolina from Arkansas for his psychiatric residency, he only spoke a little Spanish but often found himself being dragged into rooms to do crude translations for Spanish-speaking patients. When a colleague invited him to volunteer for bilingual psychiatric consultations at the Carrboro Community Health Center, he didn’t think his Spanish was good enough to be able to do such complicated work across a verbal and cultural divide. But when she left, he realized there was a vacuum.

“Nobody was doing this mental health piece for the immigrant community,” Smith said. So, he took up the mantel. He improved his Spanish by listening to *telenovelas* and studying vocabulary on index

cards on the way to and from work. He learned how to write grants, surrounded himself with the right people, and started El Futuro right there in the community health center in 2005. The clinic expanded to Siler City shortly thereafter, then opened its Durham branch in 2009.

El Futuro is like any other mental health clinic, with the addition of a focus on cultural competency. Clinicians see many patients with histories of traumatic events, depression, anxiety, stress disorders like PTSD, and substance use, and the clinic provides individual, group, and family therapy and psychiatry, higher-level care and medication management, and case management services. About 30% of the people who receive care at El Futuro are covered by Medicaid; the rest are largely uninsured. Funding for the clinic comes from a mix of grants; service revenue, including Medicaid; and donations, in that order (Smith L, executive director, El Futuro, personal communication, December 17, 2018).

All of El Futuro’s clinicians are professionally licensed, and most have an emphasis on providing trauma-focused care. They don’t have to be Latino, but they do have to speak Spanish. Smith and his colleagues have found that even when patients speak fluent English, they often prefer to talk about mental health concerns and solutions in their “heart language.”

“Most of our patients are low-income or struggle with transportation and getting time off work,” said Kerry Brock, director of advancement and strategy at El Futuro. “One of the things that’s a bit different

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and is a benefit for our patients is that we offer that whole array of services under the same roof.”

El Futuro acts as a safety net for providers as well. Through its La Mesita program, the clinic helps connect mental health providers serving Latino families across the state, offering cultural context and skills and training to help them provide the best care. Through La Mesita meetings, webinars, and other programs, Smith and his team also do their best to address the burnout and vicarious trauma that clinicians can experience.

Many of El Futuro’s patients come from cultures where seeking professional health care is a last resort. When they have a problem, they start by seeking help from within their families and communities. In an effort to meet patients where they are, clinicians at El Futuro strive to replicate a community atmosphere.

Patients report an average of 84% improvement in functional ability in areas such as work, school, and housework and 78% clinical improvement based on scales supplied by El Futuro, reports from teachers, and other data (Smith L, executive director, El Futuro, personal communication, December 17, 2018).

One former patient, named Lupita, moved to Durham from San Luis Potosi, Mexico, 18 years

ago. When she began experiencing symptoms of depression, she sought help from a local charity, which referred her to El Futuro. It was a relief that the therapists there spoke Spanish, she said, because it was much easier for her to express how she was really feeling.

“I saw things very narrowly before, but they helped me see things from a new perspective,” she said through her daughter, who interpreted our conversation.

Lupita’s daughter, too, has benefited from El Futuro’s counseling services, helping her to improve her self-esteem and feel less alone.

“The reason people come to the United States is they’re looking for jobs and education and peace and safety, and when they get sidelined by some mental illness of some sort all of a sudden the dreams they came here with are getting dashed and they don’t have a place to go,” Smith said. “We’re trying to help them back on the road to the future. That’s El Futuro.” **NCMJ**

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