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Chicanas Making A Difference in Social Services

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Evelyn Gonzalez

Chicanas Making A Difference in Social Services

I have a headache already... The day has begun. I start getting text messages and phone calls at 6:00am from co-workers either calling in sick or reporting that they will be late for work. I walk into the Merced County Human Services Agency close to 8:00am and before I can reach my desk, I am bombarded with questions from co-workers about difficult cases, clients in the lobby, and why certain workers from our unit are still not there. You see, today is ten day. In the world of eligibility workers working in social services, ten day is the biggest day of the month. This means that every quarterly report needs to be processed per State regulations. We live by State regulations. Federal and State funding is lost if we are out of compliance. Financial sanctions are imposed and less funding equals less resources for our county and that is unacceptable. Merced County with a population around 250,000 is one of the poorest counties in California with an unemployment rate that is more than double our current Nation's rate. Merced County also has one of the lowest levels of educational attainment. With this background information in mind, I aim to tell the story of four courageous Chicana women who work at Merced County Human Services Agency as Family Service Representatives II (eligibility workers) in the Spanish bilingual unit, working directly with Spanish-speaking only clients most of which are undocumented in programs such as Cal-Works, Food Stamps, and Medi-Cal. These women considered themselves middle-working class.

Each woman was interview separately using an interview protocol that consisted of open-ended questions which were in regards to their career choice in social services; challenges working in social services, their thoughts about working in social services, and their thoughts

about what they believe was the future of social services. Although each woman had a different story to tell, they did share some commonalities. They all viewed education as a virtue. They all believed that keeping cultural traditions alive was an important part of their lives. This includes celebrating every important milestone for each member of the unit by bringing Mexican food and inviting other people from different units to enjoy the celebration. Their giving and understanding nature is what makes this a unique bilingual unit. Each of these workers carries a caseload of about 400 families. These women work directly with undocumented clients that compose the majority of the Spanish cases, since Merced is considered an agricultural area where field work is the most common type of employment. These four women hear firsthand the issues that undocumented clients face living in this Country. My research demonstrates the impact that Chicanas have on social services.

I began my story with Ernestina Saldana, a 53 year old woman with an inspirational story. Ernestina was born in Mexico. She came to this country as an undocumented woman around 25 years ago. She considers herself Mestiza since she has a mixed racial ancestry. She also considers herself a Chicana because her parents were born in Mexico but she is now a U.S. citizen. Although she considers herself middle class per today's standards, she is a single parent living paycheck to paycheck. She received her master's degree in public health engineering from Marcella University in France and her doctorate in civil engineering from Universidad Autonoma de Nuevo Leon, Mexico. She began her career path towards social services by first being a teacher, then a counselor, investigator, and a program manager. Even though she had much experience before working at the human services agency, she began her career with us as an extra-help receptionist and moved up to an eligibility worker. She has been with us for the past six years. The challenges that she faces working in social services cannot be compared to

others. You see, some years ago, Ernestina was in a tragic car accident that left her paralyzed from the waist down. She is confined to a wheelchair. She deals with a higher level of discrimination due to her disability. Besides the high expectations that come with being an eligibility worker, in addition to dealing with child abuse, domestic violence, immigration issues, and high levels of fraud, Ernestina has to deal with clients and co-workers' ignorance in regards to her disability. Although her challenges are great, she enjoys her job knowing that she is empowering people to better their lives. I have heard her quite a few times encourage her clients who are legal permanent residents to seek citizenship because she can relate. At the agency she is seen as a pioneer to those with disabilities who also belong to a minority group. She derives satisfaction by working with people in the community and feeling that she is useful and has a purpose.

I then move to Angela Rubalcava Martinez. She is a 60 year old woman who takes the role of a mother figure in our unit. She was born in California to immigrant parents from Mexico. She describes herself as Chicana. Angie (as we call her), graduated from high school and attended one year of college at the local community college to learn how to be a secretary. She always tells us stories about her younger days and how women were expected to get married and have children and how a woman only went to college just to learn how to be a secretary. Throughout the years she has worked as a secretary for law firms and credit bureaus.

She chose a career in social services not just because it was a better paying job but because she enjoys preventing welfare fraud. Welfare fraud costs California millions of dollars each year. Her interrogation skills have prevented and brought to light cases of fraud. Angie's challenge in working in social services is to exercise patience. Her frustration stems from the idea that in cases where there are two parents in the household (mother and father), for the father

not to work. She states that growing up in a Chicana family, the traditional view was that of a patriarchal household where the father provided for his family. It is very hard for her to understand how a man would depend on the safety net from the state instead of work. However, she is thankful for the safety net for the well-being of the children. She calls it a paradox. She believes that social services are beneficial to those in needs, but she thinks negatively of those individuals who take advantage of these programs.

I asked her what she believes the future holds in social services and she promptly responded that she believes that social services will cease to exist in the next ten years, especially since our governor is cutting more and more cash aid assistance. She wishes that welfare rules in California mirror other states whose welfare fraud is not as high as ours. She is also looking forward to her retirement which is two years away.

Then there is Rosalinda Mansfield. She is a 42 year old Chicana woman who went to college and received her degree in business. A career in social services was not her first choice. She started working in social services since it was a better paying job and she had customer service experience. Her challenges working in social services have been the shock of cultural change. She was raised in Mexico to a family in el distrito federal (Mexico City). When she returned to the United States as an adult, she was flabbergasted to learn that many of the undocumented people that she works with are illiterate. She finds herself explaining to her clients how to complete simple forms or deciphering what a notice of action states although it is written in Spanish.

Her thoughts about working in social services are that it has been an enlightening experience. She loves making a difference and motivating families to get out of the vicious cycle

of welfare and to be productive people who would be a benefit to the community. She stated that she puts aside her true feelings to help those who really need her expertise. She works hard to educate her clients not to just wait for stuff to come to them but to actually be productive. She gets really frustrated when she finds out that the clients she has helped were found to be committing fraud. She believes that the future of social services is unpredictable. She also stated that she would've loved to get her degree as a social worker but due to her health issues and those of her husband, that dream has been lost.

My last interview was with Maribel Percival, my youngest interviewee at the age of 40. Maribel has her associate of arts degree in Business Administration from Merced Community College. Maribel is a Chicana woman with strong leadership skills. She is very knowledgeable in regards to politics and keeps herself updated about any changes in the welfare system. She chose her career in social services because she wants to make a difference in a person's life and guide them to the road of self-sufficiency. Her challenges in working in social services have been that it was not what she had expected. She strongly believes that the government does too much hand-holding and there is no repercussion for clients remaining in the welfare system for many years. However, she likes working in social services since different personalities make the work experience unique especially with co-workers. Maribel is a very social person who enjoys being festive and shows her creativity by bring different dishes to share with her co-workers. She believes that being an eligibility worker is not only about working with clients but also to cohabitate with the people she works with. When I asked her about the future in social services she believes that one day all the welfare branches (meaning family services, employment and training, and social services) will all combine so one worker will have the education and expertise to be an eligibility worker, welfare to work worker, and social worker. She also

strongly believes that California should model other states whose welfare recipient numbers are lower. As for herself, her goal is to one day be a supervisor.

In conclusion, these four Chicana women are making a difference in social services by being proactive in the work they do. The challenges they face each day working in the welfare system is one that needs to be commended. They are the voices to those clients for whom the English language is a barrier. They serve as guidance and as a safe haven in a county where 25% of the population was born outside of the U.S. and where more than 50% of the population, Spanish is the language spoken at home. I am proud to represent these four amazing Chicana women, who are well-educated and have aspired to make a difference in social services.