

HOMELAND SECURITY AND DISASTER PREPAREDNESS: OUR PARTNERSHIP WITH BIENESTAR

Cassie Morton, San Diego City College

INTRODUCTION

San Diego City College is ten miles away from the busiest international border crossing in the United States. The cities of San Diego and Tijuana deal with a host of border issues, many of which relate to homeland security and emergency preparedness. The Swine Flu pandemic scare was a recent example. Local healthcare professionals have seen a significant increase in HIV among the Latino/a population in recent years, particularly among migrant workers and sex workers. San Diego City College has about 15,000 students and is rapidly becoming a Latino dominant college.

Bienestar is a grass-root non-profit community service organization established in 1989. Bienestar originated as a direct result of neglect and non-existent HIV/AIDS services for the Latino community. Since its establishment, Bienestar has evolved into a multi-service, multi-center agency, offering services throughout Los Angeles County, San Bernardino County, and San Diego. Their team is comprised of bilingual and bicultural staff and volunteers that are demographically, culturally, and linguistically representative of the communities they serve. Their health models have set the standard of excellence for peer-driven services throughout the United States and Latin America.

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THE PARTNERSHIP

San Diego City College has been a service learning community partner with Bienestar for several years now. Students taking Health and Sociology classes make up the majority of service learners there, and the campus has a strong partnership with this agency. Antonio Munoz, Regional Lead at the mid-city San Diego branch of Bienestar, shared the following observations:

The partnership between the Latino community service and advocacy organization, Bienestar, and San Diego City College benefits both the organization and City College students. The collaboration between these two entities has allowed students to reach out to the community and gain awareness of issues that apply to them as young citizens in the United States. Involving City College students in Bienestar is also a useful outreach approach for the organization, because the demographics of City College students make up an important part of the Bienestar's target population. Young people of college-going age become infected with HIV at a higher rate than other age groups. The involvement of college students has given Bienestar greater access to the college campus.

BENEFITS OF THE PARTNERSHIP

Involving young people in an organization is a way of achieving one of the organization's goals- educating the community in order to enhance the well being of underserved communities. Students who become involved in the program learn more about HIV and other diseases themselves, while promoting the services offered by Bienestar. The college youth have more influence over their peers than older adults.

Student volunteers provide Bienestar with an opportunity to conduct peer driven outreach. In many cases, young adult volunteers can have a deeper influence on their peers than an older person might.

Bienestar strives to find volunteers who are representative of the communities they serve, and for

this reason, City College students have become valuable assets. Many City College students speak a second language and represent the underserved communities here in San Diego. The added benefit of their age being the same as the target communities of Bienestar makes them all the more valuable as volunteers.

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CHALLENGES OF THE PARTNERSHIP

The partnership between City College and Bienestar does face challenges. One of these is scheduling. It can be difficult to determine how many volunteers will be available, and because they are volunteers, Bienestar can't always count on having the number of workers they need at a given time. A student volunteer always has other primary responsibilities such as school, work, or family, and volunteering may sometimes come last. This can present a scheduling challenge for the organization and the student volunteers.

Another challenge this particular partnership faces is the very nature of the issues Bienestar is dealing with: HIV, sexually transmitted diseases, the lesbian, gay, bisexual transgender population (LGBT), and sex workers. These are all topics that can be uncomfortable to discuss openly. One of the challenges of the Bienestar staff is making both student volunteers and community member patrons comfortable with each other. Some student volunteers are conservative and have to adapt in order to be comfortable dealing with issues such as HIV, or when working the LGBT community. In turn, patrons, be they LGBT or teenagers seeking advice about HIV testing, may feel uncomfortable opening up to student volunteers with these private issues. Ultimately, both sides need to learn to trust each other for this volunteer program to succeed.

Though the partnership faces challenges to its success, both Bienestar and the college are overcome by the benefits derived for students, the organization, and the community as a whole.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Cassie Morton is a faculty member in counseling and grant management at San Diego City College, in San Diego California. She has been involved with workforce development, Tech Prep and Middle Colleges, and service learning for many years at the district office level and more recently at City College. In addition to her work advising students, she manages several middle college grants and coordinates a faculty internship program. She has a BA from UCLA in Cultural Anthropology and a MS in Counseling from San Diego State University.