

# *Reflections on a Community and Immigrant-led Home Health Care Program*

## *A Home Health Needs Assessment for New Mexico*

*December 31, 2020*



[www.encuentronm.org](http://www.encuentronm.org)

# Executive Summary

## Introduction

Demand for elder care services is on the rise as the Baby Boomer generation ages. While paid caregivers represent one of the fastest growing workforces in the country, there is a dearth of trained, culturally and linguistically competent providers nationally and more specifically, in the Albuquerque, New Mexico, Metro area. Encuentro, a nonprofit organization in Albuquerque, has designed an innovative education and training program that places the experiences and needs of Home Health Aides (HHAs) engaged in the workforce at the center of program development. The program prioritizes comprehensive training and promotes the leadership and economic opportunities of Latinx immigrant HHAs, creating an alternative to the low-wage, disempowered, and high-worker-turnover culture that characterizes the for-profit home health industry.

## Elder Care Needs

Trends indicate that the aging population in New Mexico is growing faster than that of the U.S. as a whole, and that the aging population is ethnically and linguistically diverse<sup>1</sup>. Directly related to the increased numbers of elders are the higher rates of disability<sup>2</sup> and the general poor health status<sup>3</sup> of New Mexican elders as compared to other states. As elders increasingly need care, options seem limited. Numerous social and economic benefits have been found within the home-based care approach, and Hispanic elders want to stay at home<sup>4</sup> and have a lack of confidence in institutional settings<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, options for covering the costs associated with hiring in-home care are few and can be expensive for elders on a limited income. When trying to provide financial resources to assist individuals and their families with in-home care services, States face challenges<sup>6</sup>. For example, a large percentage of public funding, such as Medicaid, is dedicated to care in nursing home facilities, which makes it difficult to compete with the nursing home industry for limited dollars.

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<sup>1</sup> New Mexico Aging & Long-Term Services Department (n.d.) New Mexico state plan for aging and long-term services, October 2017 – September 2021. Retrieved from [https://www.nmaging.state.nm.us/uploads/files/2017\\_2021\\_State\\_Plan\\_1.pdf](https://www.nmaging.state.nm.us/uploads/files/2017_2021_State_Plan_1.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> New Mexico Aging & Long-Term Services Department (n.d.) New Mexico state plan for aging and long-term services, October 2017 – September 2021. Retrieved from [https://www.nmaging.state.nm.us/uploads/files/2017\\_2021\\_State\\_Plan\\_1.pdf](https://www.nmaging.state.nm.us/uploads/files/2017_2021_State_Plan_1.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Landen, M. MD MPH (2015, September) Health status of older adults in New Mexico. *State Epidemiologist, New Mexico Department of Health*. [PowerPoint presentation]. Slide 15.

<sup>4</sup> Binette, J, Vasold, K. AARP Home and Community Preferences: A National Survey of Adults Ages 18-Plus, 2018. (2018, August) *AARP Research*. Retrieved from <https://www.aarp.org/research/topics/community/info-2018/2018-home-community-preference.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Fajardo, A. (2017, November) Special Considerations for Latinos seeking elder care. *Latino News Briefs. University of California Agricultural and Natural Resources*. Retrieved from <https://ucanr.edu/blogs/blogcore/postdetail.cfm?postnum=25646>

<sup>6</sup> Quinn, M. (2017, July) As demand for at-home care grows, states debate how to pay for it. *Governing.com*. <https://www.governing.com/topics/health-human-services/gov-seniors-health-community-home-care-states.html>

## **Encuentro's Response**

To address the demand for elder care services in the community, the HHA program has evolved as a multi-faceted endeavor providing (1) education and training, (2) building connections to economic opportunity, and (3) encouraging leadership development to simultaneously promote dignity and voice among immigrants working as caregivers.

### **Focus 1: EDUCATION: Comprehensive Training for HHAs in Their Primary Language**

The Home Health Aide (HHA) entry-level course is a culturally and linguistically accessible home health worker training program. The program was originally developed in partnership with Central New Mexico Community College in 2015 and is offered in Spanish, to maximize the learning comprehension needs of Encuentro's Latinx students for whom Spanish is their first language. Encuentro's HHA Program graduates up to 24 students per semester and is proud of maintaining a consistent 98% graduation rate. As of July 2020, 208 Latinx immigrants have graduated from the course. Programmatic reviews indicate that there is consistently high interest and satisfaction in the course, and that the flipped classroom and relationship-focused model is key to learning and engagement. Programming challenges identified by organizational leaders emphasized the difficulty developing and implementing a program involving both a small, community-based non-profit organization and a community college, due to varied institutional approaches.

The Harvest to Health (H2H) training, begun in 2018, has two primary goals: (1) to improve food security and nutritious eating among elders and the HHAs themselves, and (2) to cultivate a home health workforce that is highly trained in understanding senior food and nutrition needs and evidence-based strategies for elder care. The H2H courses run three times per year and intends to train 180 HHAs over the course of the four-year grant. Programmatic successes as identified by staff include a high degree of interest in the course among HHAs, and the establishment of new organizational partnerships. The primary challenge thus far to the H2H Program has been the moderate capacity to respond to program needs and opportunities as they present themselves due to funding limitations.

### **Focus 2: ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES: Connecting HHA Graduates with Dignified Work Opportunities**

Encuentro has continually prioritized student feedback in its program development efforts. Data from these efforts has yielded important findings on topics such as low wages, discrimination, safety issues, lack of control over schedules, and wage theft. Many graduates highlighted a "patchwork" strategy to financially support their households. One primary gap identified through HHA feedback is the need to connect HHAs with individuals in the community seeking to hire a caregiver directly.

In response, Encuentro developed a matching registry called EnCasa Care Connections (ECCC) in 2018. Since its inception, 142 clients have requested interviews with HHA candidates for caregiving services, and HHAs report that ECCC provides them with access to work that pays better and fits their schedules. ECCC is still in its infancy and although efforts seem promising, program staff report that it is challenging to match service and scheduling needs. In addition, involving HHAs in leadership efforts has been a challenge due to limited administrative capacity. In the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic, registry activities slowed considerably, though they have returned to a more regular pace again. Feedback from HHAs and potential clients has helped shape next steps for the program development such as the creation of a web-based platform and the recommendation of background checks for all HHAs.

Encuentro has also developed an Internship Program for HHA graduates, which provides paid opportunities to practice their new skills and become more familiar with the role of the HHA in home settings. Because internships are subsidized for clients, the program also presents an alternative solution to address the in-home care needs of low-income elders. To date, 29 Encuentro HHA interns have delivered almost 2,000 hours of subsidized, high-quality care to low-income seniors in Bernalillo County while benefitting from supplemental income that also provided hands-on experience. Similar to the ECCC Program, Encuentro staff reports that matching interns to families is complex and takes a significant amount of time. Additionally, while there is interest and demand, there is limited funding to expand internship opportunities.

### **Focus 3: LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT: The Key to Improving Working Conditions and Care Within the Home Health Industry**

An overarching goal of the HHA program is leadership development, and Encuentro has facilitated an environment that encourages input and collaboration from HHAs in all aspects of program development. Leadership opportunities are integrated throughout the HHA Program. As HHAs graduate and engage as leaders, they improve the HHA program while also strengthening Encuentro's relationships with organizational partners, funders, and the community.

Additionally, Encuentro offers graduates of the entry-level HHA course the opportunity to attend quarterly meetings to share challenges, successes and resources with each other, learn about volunteer leadership opportunities in other organizations, and participate in continuing education opportunities. Feedback from participants in the quarterly meetings indicates that the HHAs enjoy meeting together and engaging in peer learning, and that they value the Certificates of Completion received for the continuing education. Additionally, program staff report that the quarterly meetings provide a crucial mechanism for program feedback. Staff also note some challenges with quarterly meetings including difficulties finding presenters that are fluent in Spanish, building facilitation skills within HHA graduates, and allowing for sufficient socialization time in meeting agendas.

## **Growth Opportunities**

Encuentro has identified the following areas as programmatic growth opportunities:

1. **Targeting the South Valley.** Encuentro can explore a niche demographic of elders that share many similarities with the HHAs, including language and culture, by expanding the paid internships to lower-income elders in this area.
2. **Adding a social work component to the HHA model.** The objectives are to 1) create a support group for HHAs, and 2) use the social work resource and referral model to further support elder clients and identify systems barriers affecting the in-home elder care system.
3. **Leveraging the leadership qualities.** Encuentro seeks to expand on leadership opportunities so HHAs are co-designing and implementing relevant program content.

## **Conclusion**

Through the HHA program, Encuentro, along with allies at a national and local level, seeks to change the way home health is viewed, operationalized and valued, and believes a worker-centered approach that includes education, economic opportunities and leadership development is the best way to lead this change. Part of this effort requires that Encuentro will continue to explore and support policy recommendations that address the education and workforce development needs of Latinx immigrants in New Mexico. As the only New Mexican organization exclusively focused on training and connecting Spanish-speaking HHAs to elders needing in-home care, Encuentro can play an important role in documenting and addressing growing trends among Hispanic/Latinx elders, and in lifting up the realities of low-income and less visible elders in our city.