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New Studies Shed Light on Immigrant Healthcare Access in the Central Valley

Community Health Workers Connect Mexican Immigrants to Vital Resources

(January 13, 2010) – Two new studies conclude that Latino immigrants in California’s Central Valley would benefit from having advocates to help break through language, mistreatment, and other barriers to provide access to adequate healthcare.

The twin reports were released Wednesday, Jan. 13, by the Central Valley Health Policy Institute (CVHPI) at California State University, Fresno. The institute also announced establishment of a collaboration with other organizations to promote a public healthcare advocacy program.

Both underscored that the region is home to some of the most medically underserved areas in the state and that access to healthcare is worse for Latino immigrants, whether or not they are legal residents.

The studies also made the point that there is no sustainable funding to continue the advocacy programs conducted as part of the research.

The *Promotoras de Salud* (Community Health Worker) model was used in both studies, which focused on more than 400 people in Fresno County from 2007 to 2009.

The studies were funded by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) Hispanic Health Services Research Grant Program and by the Kaiser Permanente Fresno-Community Benefits Program.

The CMS project focused on legal-resident adults and elders, while the Kaiser study targeted mixed immigration-status families. Both measured the impact of a limited *promotora* intervention over three months.

In the studies, *promotoras* evaluated such family basics as enrolling in a health insurance program, establishing a medical home and getting a physical. The *promotoras* were successful in helping their subjects improve access to healthcare. Even among the mixed-status families, *promotoras* were able to link parents and their children to vital healthcare resources.

Of the undocumented children needing health care, 90 percent were enrolled in the Kaiser Permanente Health Plan.

Dr. John Capitman, the Sister Ruth Nickerson Distinguished Professor of Health Policy and executive director of the CVHPI, said, “Our studies demonstrate that Latino immigrants with access to care are more likely to have positive healthcare outcomes and positive health behaviors.

“We found, however, that there are significant ‘system of care’ barriers for immigrants in accessing needed care and that promotoras can help individuals overcome these barriers,” he added.

The studies concluded that people of all backgrounds need advocates to guide them through the increasingly complex healthcare system, but many Latino immigrants never get to the point of calling for an appointment.

One *promotora* participating in the research said, Latinos “think that because they were not born here in this country, it is not their nation ... they feel intimidated, as if they don’t have the right to receive this service. It also has to do with the fact that they are treated badly.”

Another *promotora* said, “In the end, they were more confident when talking to the doctor, asking questions.”

The Central Valley Health Policy Institute is working with partners across the state to advocate at the state and federal level to establish the *promotora* model as part of public healthcare.

Rosario Alberro, associate director of the Health Initiative of the Americas, said the special healthcare-access challenges for Mexican immigrants require a new approach. Her organization is adding a binational program on *promotoras*.

The California program Access to Care and the Health Initiative of the Americas are hosting an event in Sacramento highlighting the important role *promotoras* could have in public health emergencies among vulnerable populations.

The Central Valley Health Policy Institute was established in 2002 at Fresno State to facilitate regional research, leadership training and graduate education programs to address emerging health policy issues that influence the health status of people living in Central California.

For more information, including copies of the report and other interactive media please visit:
CVHPI.org.

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