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How One Promotora de Salud Combines Skills and Service to Serve South Los Angeles Residents

By Lauren Walters

Every month, Juana Calel volunteers for a 4-hour drive to Tijuana to donate bags of clothes and personal care supplies to refugees from Centro America.

Juana immigrated to Los Angeles in the late 90's looking for a community like her former home in Guatemala. Juana was an elementary school teacher, and her father was a community health promoter who aided his neighbors in getting medical services from Guatemalan clinics. Her father's passion for helping people influenced Juana to follow a similar path. After arriving in Los Angeles, Juana began volunteering at a neighborhood health clinic and then was hired as a Promotora de Salud, or a community health promoter, with Esperanza Community Housing Corporation where she could marry her life passions: teaching, advocacy, and health promotion.

Since 2001, Juana has been coaching South Los Angeles community members on health. Because Juana speaks Mayan Ki'che, a dialect from Guatemala, she can advocate for Guatemalans in the area with language access issues. Juana addresses the intersectionality between health and housing and provides crucial health outreach and engagement. Esperanza promotoras like Juana have performed home-visits to over 3,000 households and submitted referrals to state and county resources, such as housing subsidy services and income assistance programs, for community members. Promotoras also provide consultation for residents exposed to housing hazards like mold and vermin. Juana also gives residents tips for healthier eating. She educates on the health benefits of eating more vegetables and fruits and provides households with resources and recipes to improve nutritional practices. In addition, Juana has worked with the Department of Public Health's Champions for Change/Nutrition Education Obesity Prevention Program (NEOP), which promotes healthy eating, exercise, and food security with the goal of preventing of obesity and other chronic diseases.

Now, Juana is a trainer and an assistant to the Program Director of the Community Health Promoter Program. Because she enjoys community engagement, she continues to work alongside community health workers and volunteers. She feels a great sense of accomplishment for all her community advocacy work in the past 23 years. Today, she's making plans for her next trip to Tijuana, with 500-bags of clothes and supplies for Guatemalan and Centro America refugees. Juana beams with happiness about her positive impact on the Mayan Ki'che' community, the residents of South Los Angeles, and is a treasured member of our Community Public Health Team.

