

CORRECTION TO THIS ARTICLE

An article in the Feb. 10 Loudoun Extra on the MotherNet/Healthy Families Loudoun program misspelled the name of program supervisor Maria Elena Vasquez.

Catching Families Before They Fall

MotherNet Helps Minorities Nurture Young Children

By Ellen Crosby
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For Deysi Marquez, a Salvadoran immigrant living in Leesburg, the emergency Caesarean delivery of her premature twin sons in May 2001 was a frightening and traumatic event.

Alex and Cristian, born during her 26th week of pregnancy, had heart problems and were immediately put on oxygen. Their father had returned to El Salvador to be with his family after an earthquake, and she had no way to communicate with him. And because she spoke no English, she had no way to communicate with her doctors, either.

Enter MotherNet/Healthy Families Loudoun, a nonprofit organization that provides free health and education services for minority families with children up to age 5. Although it had a full caseload, MotherNet/Healthy Families Loudoun enrolled Marquez so the twins would be able to come home with her instead of being placed in a foster home.

"The doctors thought I wasn't going to be a competent mother," said Marquez, 29. "They didn't believe in me, but MotherNet told them I could care for my children and they would help. I'm so grateful for everything they did because things were very complicated."

MotherNet/Healthy Families Loudoun has been helping Marquez and the children's father, Sebastian Parada, 39, for more than three years. The family initially received the most intensive level of services, which included at least six home visits a month and transportation for Marquez during the four months one or both twins remained in the hospital. Family support workers taught them such basic skills as bathing, feeding and changing diapers. There was also the more difficult task of monitoring the twins' oxygen supply.

"It was hard," Marquez said. "They told me, 'If you give them too much, they will die, and if you give them too little, they will die, too.' "

She recalled when an oxygen tank alarm went off unexpectedly and she didn't know what to do. What she did know was that someone at MotherNet would help.

"A family support worker called the company that made the oxygen tank, and we managed to figure out what button she had pushed. We translated everything for her and wrote it all down," said Maria Elena Velasquez, the program supervisor. "Our program is so flexible. We do whatever is needed."

Through a network of community referrals and partnerships, the program also helped the family with housing, food stamps and other medical issues. A former MotherNet employee who now works for Loudoun County public schools helped Parada get a job as a school custodian.

The bilingual program, which is part of the Sterling-based global nonprofit INMED Partnerships for Children, has helped nearly 17,000 families in Loudoun in the past 10 years. It is funded with more than \$1 million in grants from the Freddie Mac Foundation.

Without duplicating existing services, MotherNet/Healthy Families Loudoun has had a measurable effect on minority communities that can be difficult to reach through traditional channels.

Among its accomplishments: All babies born to mothers in the program have had healthy birth weights, and all the children have been up to date on their immunizations. No teenage mother has had a second child within two years of her first. Another significant statistic is that there have been no known cases of child abuse or neglect among the program participants.

"We're there to give children the most optimal start in life," said Judith Hanley, director of MotherNet/Healthy Families Loudoun. "We try to find kids prenatally where the parents have stresses, concerns, history or problems that will affect their ability to raise a child. These at-risk factors include social isolation, lack of language, lack of transport, mental health issues, unplanned pregnancies or domestic violence."

But with Loudoun's explosive population growth -- particularly the tripling of the Hispanic community between 1990 and 2000, now accounting for nearly 6 percent and possibly more of the population -- the nonprofit is struggling to keep up with the demand for services.

Shawn Flaherty, senior public relations manager for Freddie Mac, said about 185 Loudoun families are eligible for MotherNet/Healthy Families home visits, but with current funding the group expects to reach only one-fourth of those.

"This program is making a real difference in people's lives," Hanley said. "Without the grant from the Freddie Mac Foundation, we would not be able to serve all of the families we do, and in some years, we may not have been able to serve any at all."

MotherNet America was launched in 1994 when it succeeded the National Commission to Prevent Infant Mortality. The new program focused on education, health and support services, starting during pregnancy and continuing through the child's first birthday. In 1998, it joined forces with the highly successful Healthy Families America program, which has a national track record of drastically reducing child abuse and neglect, and extended its services to five years.

Loudoun's blended program is unique in the United States and, according to Hanley, is needed more than ever in a county with the highest birth rate in Virginia -- 20 births per 1,000 people in 2003 -- and is the fastest growing in the nation. A more alarming statistic, she noted, is the 30 percent increase between 2003 and 2004 in the number of complaints to the county's child protective services agency.

"Raising children is difficult," Hanley said. "We want to give extra strength and support to those who need us most. We want to help you be the best parent you can be. We're very strength-based, and one of our goals is to make families totally self-sufficient."

The case of Alex and Cristian and their parents has been one of the program's shining successes. The twins, who will be 4 in May, attend a special education preschool program at Frances Hazel Reid Elementary School in Leesburg five days a week. Marquez has moved beyond her early goals of learning to care for the boys and is now focusing, with the help of their family support worker, Glenda Velasquez, on problems related to delayed speech and language, a result of their premature births.

"They love school," Marquez said. "They really love English. That's my next goal, too. To learn English."

Without missing a beat, Velasquez said: "I've got some information on that. I've got a list of places where you can take classes."