



2012 Sapphire Award Honorable Mention (\$10,000) Excellence in Community Health—Individual



Josephine Mercado

Founder and Executive Director, Hispanic Health Initiatives, Inc.

Josephine Mercado is considered to be “the first person to focus attention on a needs assessment for the Hispanic community” in Central Florida. When she arrived in Florida in 1999, she saw a great need for more timely and suitable medical care for the underserved in Central Florida, especially the Latino community. She founded Hispanic Health Initiatives, Inc. (HHI) to educate this underserved population and connect them with community organizations and government agencies that could assist the community in receiving the appropriate medical care. HHI focuses on providing these services in a culturally sensitive manner.

“Language and cultural barriers prevented access to health care for her neighbors,” said Peter Willems, director of operations, HHI. “Her foresight has led to several, successful linguistic and culturally competent chronic disease education programs.”

Mercado has a “take it to the community” philosophy. She believes education and assistance will be more readily accepted if offered in a style, place and time convenient to the community. For example, health messages and services from HHI are prepared in a linguistically correct and culturally sensitive manner for the predominantly Latino community. Information is presented and health screenings are conducted on Saturdays or evenings, when it is most convenient to the community. Other community organizations in Central Florida have been influenced by her approach.

Her collaboration with local health entities, including social service agencies, as well as private, nonprofit, government and nongovernmental agencies and others, has allowed HHI to thrive. With the collaboration of volunteer nursing students from the University of Central Florida (UCF), Mercado developed and started a health risk assessment program. Assessment participants receive glucose, cholesterol, Body Mass Index and vision screenings.

She has also implemented a Peer Health Educator program: a six-week chronic disease awareness training session for local community leaders who, upon completion, go back to their communities to teach friends, family members and neighbors about disease prevention and general health topics. As a result of this training, peer health educators have been able to ease language and cultural barriers, and significantly improve communications between the medical providers and the underserved members of their communities.

“It’s Josephine’s belief that medically disadvantaged communities need health literacy programs and activities where they can learn how to prevent and self-manage chronic disease, as well as how to navigate the health care system in order to play an active role at addressing their health disparities,” said Willems.

Since the inception of HHI, more than 500,000 Florida residents have been served. Early detection screenings valued at more than \$400,000 have been conducted. In the future, Mercado would like to open a comprehensive community health and wellness center, focusing on linguistically and culturally competent health education, prevention skills and self-management of chronic disease.

For more information about Hispanic Health Initiatives, Inc., visit www.hhi2001.org or call (407) 339-2001.