

Lessons in healthy eating help families fight obesity trend

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A Florida nonprofit is proving there's an appetite for healthy eating among Hispanics who are at risk of medical complications from a poor diet.

More than 1,000 people took advantage of education and training offered during the past two years in Wimauma by the nonprofit Hispanic Services Council. At least 275 of them stuck around for a six-week nutrition course in 2019 and 2020.

The sessions are offered weekly, along with a twice-a-month distribution of free foods and vegetables.

Lorena Sánchez is one of the people taking advantage of the program, called Bridges to Health. Sánchez, 23, came to the United States from Guatemala three years ago and lives with her husband and their five children, ages 1-8, at The Groves, a low-income apartment complex in Wimauma.

The lessons she is learning enable her to feed her family food that is healthier as well as budget-friendly—black bean and vegetable quesadillas, for example, as well as carrot and tuna salad, turkey tacos, chicken burgers and cranberry-walnut coleslaw.

"It is help that we all welcome because it is good to know what is best for our children and for us, too," Sánchez said.

The Hispanic Services Council, founded in 1992 by a group of social service professionals, helps provide educational, [health](#) and civic engagement services to Hispanics in Hillsborough County. It operates on a budget of \$1.5 million a year, most of it from government grants, and gets support from Hillsborough County, the United Way and Florida health insurance providers.

More than three in four people living in Wimauma, the South Hillsborough farming community, are Hispanic and one in three were born outside the United States, according to Census figures.

The lessons in [healthy eating](#) are taught by [social workers](#), known as promotoras de salud, who understand the challenges their students face.

They are seven women from Peru, Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico and Venezuela, including Mexico-born Velia Huitron, 70, who started volunteering with the Hispanic Services Council in 2011.

"I feel good supporting all these people who, for the most part, are women who have a lot of responsibilities," Huitron said. "The change we seek for them depends on the effort and commitment of each of us."

Bridges to Health gets help in its [food distribution](#), the first and third Thursday of each month in Wimauma, from the YMCA Veggie Van—a mobile marketplace that also visits Lacochee, Sulphur Springs, Tampa Heights, Dover y Plant City.

"This food delivery method helps to remove barriers to individual access, and expand food distribution capacity," said Veggie Van program director Elizabeth Roman.

The social workers meet with groups of five to 10 parents, sharing recipes, emphasizing the importance of cutting down on fat and encouraging more fruits and vegetables in the family diet.

"Prevention is essential in this type of work," said Rocío "Rosy" Bailey, project director at Bridges to Health.

Many health problems disproportionately affect Latinos, such as diabetes, heart disease and obesity, Bailey said.

In a nation where obesity is widespread, Hispanics suffer even more, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health. Among people 20 and older, 80 percent of Hispanics

are obese compared to 70 percent among non-Hispanic whites. Among [high school students](#), Hispanics were 50 percent more likely to be obese than non-Hispanic whites.

Obesity exposes people to dozens of complications, diabetes as well as high blood pressure, high cholesterol and hypertension.

The Bridges to Health program aims to expand its impact by enrolling more Hispanic people in health coverage plans, Bailey said.

Aracely Morales, 34, was born in Mexico and suffers from diabetes and high cholesterol.

The mother of girls 10 and 13, Morales was the first in line to receive two boxes of fresh vegetables Thursday. She wants to help her family improve its eating habits and reduce the consumption of sugar and pastas.

Her medical condition demands it, too. Morales drinks a green smoothie every morning to keep her blood sugar levels under control.

"I've been learning all of this with the help of the program," said Morales, a farmworker. "You never finish learning."

Accompanying Morales on Thursday was her friend Xiomara Uriza, a 28-year-old Nicaraguan immigrant, who welcomes the fruits, vegetables and grains the program enables her to include in the diets of her sons, 9 and 4.

People in her neighborhood would like to eat healthier food, Uriza said, but many don't have access to a vehicle so they can drive to a store and buy it. The closest grocery store, Aldi, is a 40-minute walk.

"That is why this help is very important," she said.

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