



# Stories of IMPACT

## CASA DE ESPERANZA

### Building the Field of Community

**Engagement** is a collaborative initiative designed to magnify and elevate the power of community engagement to change the way problems are solved and resources are invested. Building the Field is bolstering the work of community engagement practitioners and encouraging other organizations to integrate community engagement into their work. As part of the project, the partners produced a film, *Community at the Center*, which discusses the core principles and values of this important work. They also host the Engaged Learning Series, which are community conversations on critical community engagement topics. This report is part of a series of tools and stories that document the partners' and other practitioners' expertise and learning. Find us at [www.buildthefield.org](http://www.buildthefield.org).

### Building the Field partners:

Casa de Esperanza  
Cultural Wellness Center  
Hope Community  
Lyndale Neighborhood Association  
Native American Community  
Development Institute  
Nexus Community Partners



**Casa de Esperanza**<sup>1</sup> was founded more than 30 years ago to serve the growing Latin@<sup>2</sup> population in the Twin Cities region as a shelter from domestic violence. Over time Casa de Esperanza has evolved from primarily being a service-oriented domestic violence shelter to using a more proactive engagement approach that puts Latin@ communities at the center of challenging violence in relationships. This innovative work has led to Casa de Esperanza's recognition and designation as the national resource center on domestic violence and Latin@ communities. As the national resource center, Casa de Esperanza engages in training, research and policy advocacy that reflects Latin@ realities. Locally and nationally, Casa de Esperanza believes community engagement is the best way to prevent, respond to and support Latin@s experiencing domestic violence.

Casa de Esperanza's long-standing commitment to mobilizing Latin@s and Latin@ communities to end domestic violence has developed into local and national initiatives that build capacity, infuse information and resources into the community, and strengthen connections between individuals and organizations. The Amig@s<sup>3</sup> network is a local initiative showing great promise as an innovative approach to ending domestic violence by building community leadership. The Amig@s initiative trains and supports a network of Latin@s and allies to learn about domestic violence, develop the leadership skills to educate others in the community, and be first responders to violence when it occurs. The initiative is the culmination of what Casa de Esperanza has learned about community engagement over time. But it's not the end—community engagement by its very nature must evolve. This story demonstrates the power of community engagement to transform an organization whose primary mission was to respond to violence into one that also prevents domestic violence in the Latin@ community.

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<sup>1</sup> Translates to *House of Hope*.

<sup>2</sup> Casa de Esperanza has chosen to use "@" in place of the masculine "o" when referring to people or things that are either gender neutral or both masculine or feminine in make-up. This decision reflects the organization's commitment to gender inclusion and recognizes the important contributions that both men and women make to our communities.

<sup>3</sup> Translates to *Friends*.

## AN EVOLVING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

The Amig@s initiative is the result of almost 10 years of trial, learning and adjusting. Like many organizations just starting out with community engagement, Casa de Esperanza didn't know exactly where to start. But the organization was committed to engagement because staff knew that only people—not organizations—could prevent violence. “We know Casa de Esperanza is not going to end domestic violence,” said CEO Patricia Tototzintle. “It will require the commitment of the whole community to say, ‘We’re not going to accept this in our families and in our communities.’ Community engagement bubbled up out of that idea.”

Staff decided to begin by asking what Latin@s thought—not about domestic violence, but about everyday life. They organized a set of listening sessions, meeting Latina women where they already were and where they were most comfortable, including private homes, laundromats and grocery stores. They asked Latinas about their hopes, dreams, daily experiences and needs—irrespective of their experience with domestic violence. The end goal was for the women to understand that as mothers, friends,

daughters and neighbors, all Latinas played a critical role in working to end violence.

“We wanted to encourage women to think of themselves, in the most culturally appropriate and liberating sense, as the backbone of the Latin@ community—as powerful matriarchs capable of framing issues, envisioning solutions and marshaling forces to build the community,” said Special Projects Manager Patricia Moen.

These conversations revealed a great sense of isolation among the women interviewed. Issues like legal status, employment, childcare, housing and transportation were preoccupying for Latinas. Casa de Esperanza staff intuitively knew that by supporting women in discussing and finding solutions to those issues, the organization could open up a pathway of trust and dialogue that would allow women to share their private concerns about and experiences with violence. Listening and learning resulted in a community engagement strategy focused on supporting the leadership of youth and adults, with multiple pathways for Latin@s to focus their energies.



### LISTENING SESSIONS

In early listening sessions, Casa de Esperanza asked Latinas:

- *What do you spend most of your day doing?*
- *What are your most important day-to-day needs?*
- *What is one personal achievement you are proud of and why?*
- *Who do you turn to when you have a problem?*
- *What are your personal goals, dreams or wishes?*
- *What would you need to reach that goal?*

The listening sessions revealed that Latinas see education and personal development as key to their success. Latinas wanted more time and emotional support to achieve their goals.

## AMIG@S: A COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY TO ADDRESS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The Amig@s strategy guides cohorts of Latin@ women, men and young adults through a year-long commitment that explores:

### LATIN@ IDENTITY

Casa de Esperanza's community engagement staff begin by engaging participants in learning about their identity as Latin@s, and considering how that influences their experiences. The cohorts explore issues around language and culture, particularly as they relate to the diversity that makes up the Latin@ community. Connecting with other Latin@s in a community institution is liberating for many Amig@s. For Omar Leal, a community engagement leader, the opportunity to spend time with other Latin@s after he moved to Minnesota for college was one of the things that drew him to Casa de Esperanza. "It gave me a sense of home and belonging," he said. "Until I was set free [from home], I never realized that was so important. For me, being here is a form of self care."

### LEADERSHIP

The Amig@s initiative also gives participants a space to recognize their own leadership. Often, this conversation requires participants to broaden their definition of what leadership looks like. Youth Amig@s Specialist Nallely Castro Montoya said that when she asks youth to provide examples of leaders, they often name famous historical figures like Cesar Chavez or Martin Luther King, Jr. Early on in the cohort, Amig@s are asked to consider the ways that they and people like them demonstrate leadership every day. "We teach youth to find different ways to see leadership within themselves," she said. "When they go home and babysit, for example, they are leaders."

### AWARENESS

Some, but not all, of the Amig@s have direct connections to experiences of domestic violence. Once the Amig@s gain more

confidence in Casa de Esperanza and in one another, they can more easily have direct conversations about the violence they may have personally experienced or may be aware of in their social network. Amig@s training doesn't simply focus on how to respond to incidents of violence—it teaches participants how to put themselves in the shoes of someone experiencing violence. "We try to help the Amig@s understand what it really feels like," said Community Engagement Manager Ivette Izea-Martinez. "We ask them, 'What would you do? Would you leave? What if you had to leave with children and you didn't know how you could support them on your own?'"

These conversations offer opportunities for Amig@s to internalize the difficult decisions faced by people who experience violence. They can also offer openings for those who have lived with violence themselves to talk to others in the cohort about their experiences. Leal said that these discussions are important because a large part of ending domestic violence is giving people the consciousness that it exists in the first place. The conversations emphasize that no one deserves to be abused. "With the youth, we remind them that as human beings they have the right to be in healthy relationships," he said. "The hope is that they are constantly sharing this information, acting in a way that is positive and contributing to violence prevention."

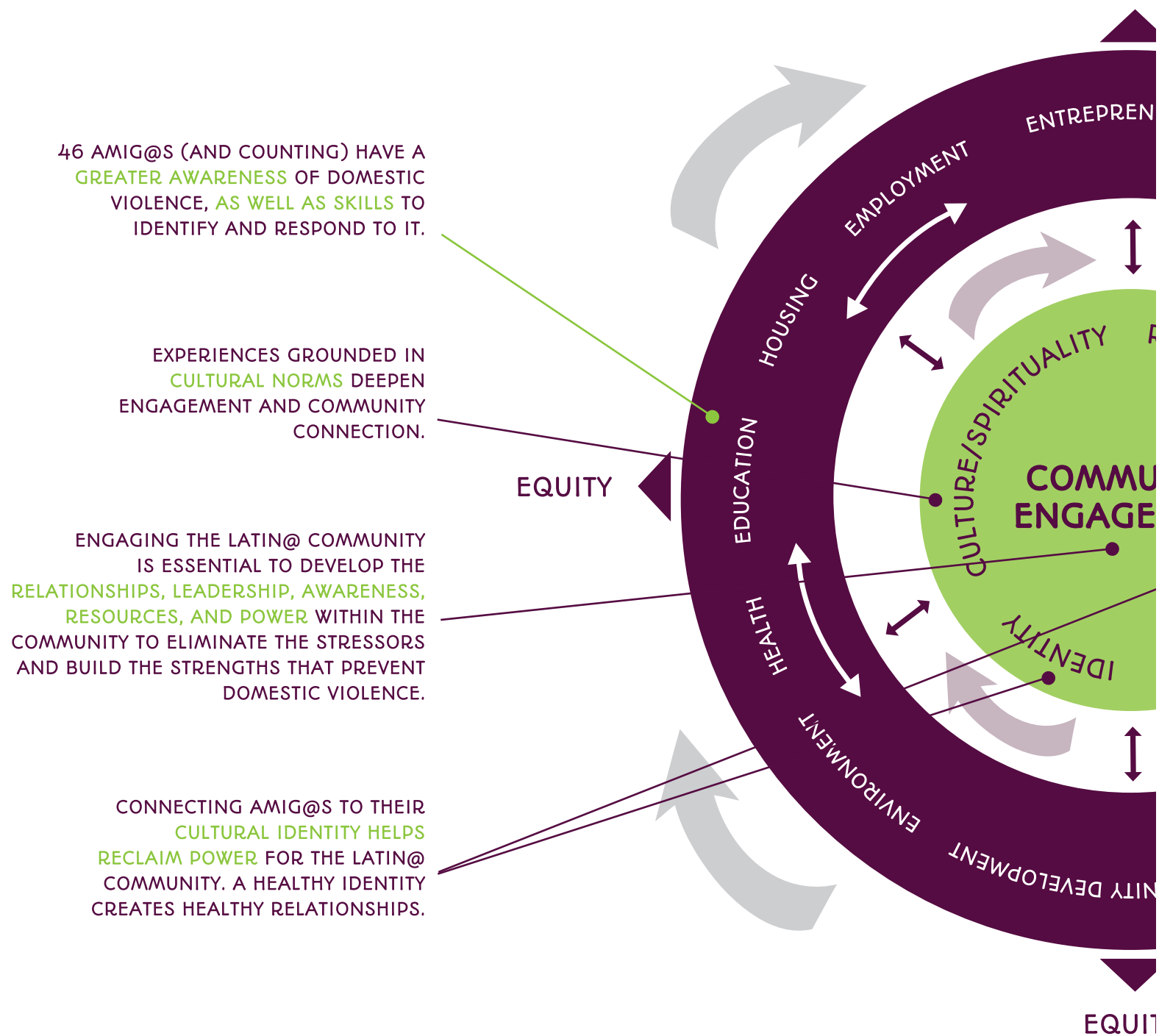
As Amig@s build their leadership capacity and knowledge about domestic violence issues, many of them provide direct support to people experiencing violence. The reality is that for most people facing domestic violence, informal networks of support like friends and family are utilized to address a myriad of circumstances. But individuals or families who are separated from their networks of support as a result of immigration or relocation must create new networks. The Amig@s connect families that are isolated with others who can provide support, which facilitates

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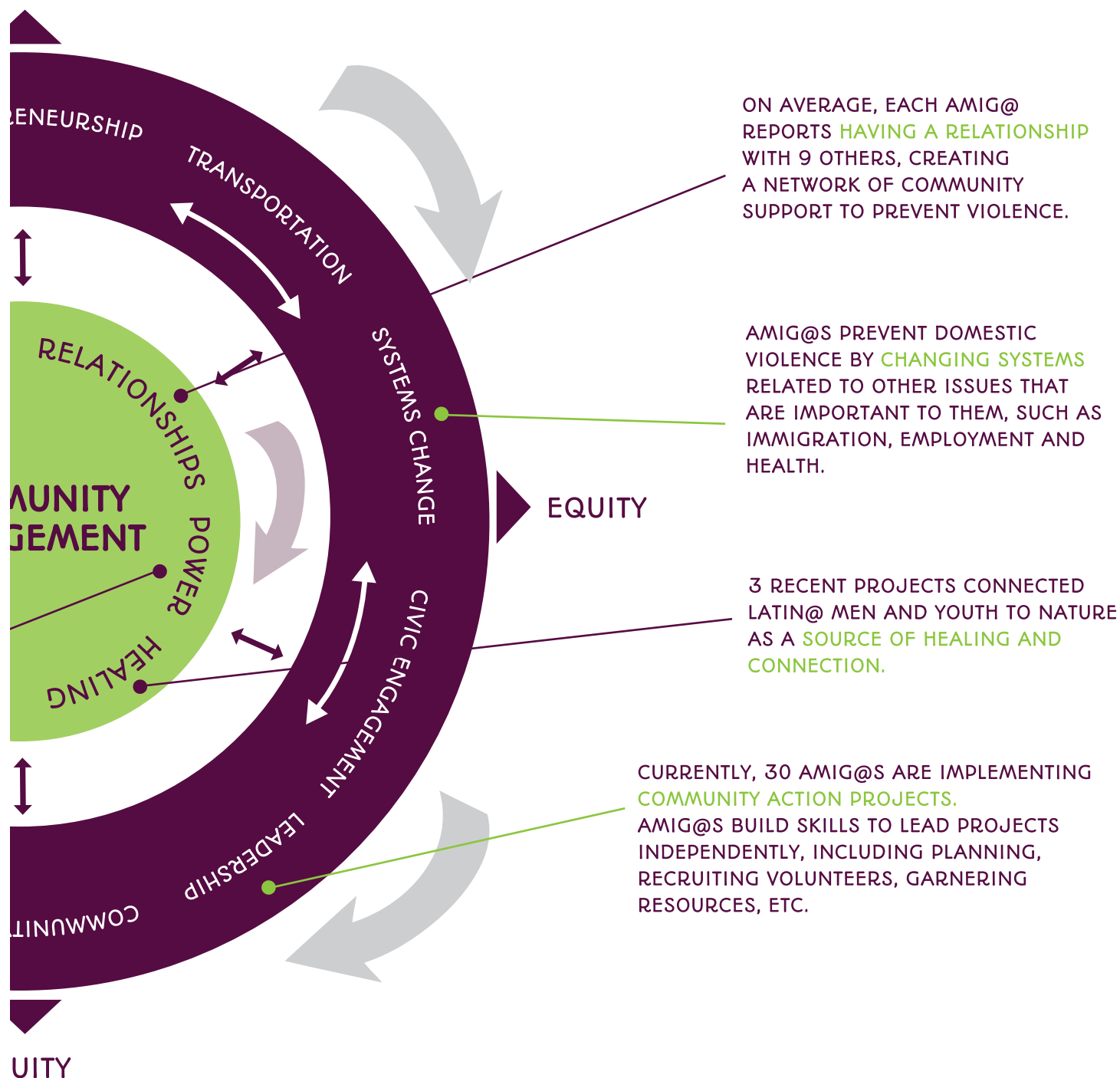
## Stories of IMPACT

## THE MODEL AT WORK: CASA DE ESPERANZA

This story is an example of how impacts build upon each other, as shown by the **Impacts of Community Engagement model** developed by the Building the Field of Community Engagement partners.



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stronger social networks that last well beyond any services an institution could provide.

## COMMUNITY ACTION

A requirement of the Amig@s initiative is that each participant must commit to completing a community action project. The Amig@s identify what interests them, and the staff at Casa de Esperanza help support them in aligning their interests with domestic violence prevention or response. “Whatever the Amig@s choose to do, we talk through how the project might connect with those who are experiencing an unhealthy relationship or violence,” Castro Montoya said.

For example, one young woman in the most recent youth cohort was very interested in working with animals. Castro Montoya talked with her about how many domestic violence shelters cannot accommodate pets along with the family. The young woman decided to become a foster home for pets to support families that are in transition, as well as to work with local animal shelters to find a solution to providing short-term homes for pets.

Other ways Amig@s have built community leadership to resist violence include:

- **Connecting immigrants to information about health insurance**
- **Creating a parent engagement network at a local school**
- **Connecting youth to sexual and mental health resources**
- **Organizing events for Latinas focused on healing and self-care**
- **Providing emergency childcare**

As Izea-Martinez describes it, every change that people can make to contribute to a healthier community is a violence prevention strategy. “The Amig@s initiative does not just help the participants,” she said. “It helps everyone in our community.”

## BUILDING POWER TO END VIOLENCE

The Amig@s initiative is so powerful because it builds a network of youth and adult leaders committed to preventing violence



Staff and Amig@s raising awareness on the airwaves

in their communities. Slowly, a system of community support has developed that is much greater than Casa de Esperanza staff alone could provide. Casa de Esperanza worked with an evaluator to develop a network map, which showed a web-like set of relationships among 46 Amig@s who have participated in the initiative during the last two years. On average, each leader reported relationships with nine others.

These leaders have each developed the power and skills to reach into the community to end violence in ways that are relevant and authentic because they are based in their own relationships. In this way, Amig@s are able to challenge systems of oppression by putting power back in the hands of the Latin@ community to solve problems, rather than relying on social services or outside institutions. A nonprofit program alone could not play this role—it requires the leadership and engagement of community members.

With each evolution of Casa de Esperanza’s strategies, community engagement has become more engrained in the organization’s overall work. Today, all Casa de Esperanza staff understand why community engagement is an essential part of violence prevention. “Most of us now see community engagement as the best way to end domestic violence,” said Tototzintle. “It’s not a program or a work area. It’s how the work gets done.”

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AS STRATEGY FOR DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PREVENTION

Community engagement is a dynamic, complex and constantly evolving process. The following are some of the primary lessons Casa de Esperanza staff believe makes the community engagement work successful:

### LISTENING

Listening was the genesis of Casa de Esperanza's community engagement work, and it has been a recurring strategy employed whenever the organization was at a crossroads. Listening to Latin@s directed the organization's mission away from a direct service model. The result was a more dynamic model that has developed more individual, organizational and community capacity. Casa de Esperanza has written a manual on its listening strategy, which can be found alongside other resources on community engagement at [www.casadeesperanza.org](http://www.casadeesperanza.org).

### DEVELOPING COMMUNITY LEADERS

The Amig@s project is designed to lead with and not for community members. The Amig@s design and implement their projects from start to finish, writing work plans, developing budgets, identifying needed resources, creating presentations and materials, and doing whatever else is necessary to succeed. Staff is there to support Amig@s, but not to do the work. In this way, the project truly builds community and organizational capacity.

### SHARING INFORMATION AND CREATING SAFE SPACES

The Amig@s are essential to ending violence in the Latin@ community because they expand the network of people talking publicly and privately about the issue. Amig@s have presented about domestic violence issues, healthy relationships, and Casa de Esperanza's services at community events. They share resources with individual community members and raise awareness among community members through their daily interactions. The work of preventing and addressing domestic violence happens subtly, but frequently, as Amig@s navigate

through community spaces and interpersonal relationships. The activities that Amig@s have created have engaged business owners, nonprofit organizations and schools in looking at domestic violence in new ways. Through these efforts, the Amig@s raise awareness to a new level and elevate many opportunities to make change.

### BEING FLEXIBLE, RESPONSIVE AND PRESENT

Putting leadership in the hands of community leaders requires staff to be responsive to what Amig@s participants need and value. Casa de Esperanza must be flexible enough to respond to community-driven ideas as they emerge. Izea-Martinez said that one of the most important parts of her job is to build a two-way relationship with community leaders. "Community engagement is reciprocal work," she said. "If it matters to the Amig@s, I am present. If it is something that the community values, I will take the time to be there. We are here to work side-by-side with them."

### BUILDING CAPACITY TO RESPOND TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The Amig@s training cracks open the door of a person's awareness of the prevalence of violence and how it may present in daily life. This work has moved several Amig@s to be more attuned to seeing dynamics within relationships that may be red flags indicating violence. Some Amig@s have changed the way that they pay attention to cues indicating violence—for example, by being more careful about the type of phone messages they leave if they suspect violence is present in a relationship, or by changing the language they use with a friend who may be experiencing violence.



## DELFINA'S STORY

When Delfina Rojas came to Casa de Esperanza, she didn't consider herself to be a leader. "I had a vision of what I wanted to do, but I didn't know how to start," she said.

When Rojas joined the Amig@s initiative, she said it "opened the world" to her. She had previously worked with other nonprofit and university programs, but she did not feel supported in talking about her passion to end domestic violence. At Casa de Esperanza, she felt comfortable talking freely about the issues she cared about, and she developed relationships with other women who wanted to make a difference. "It opened the doors," she said. "I got more involved. I got to know more people. And it helped me get to the level where I am now."

For her community project, Rojas developed a series of charlas, or community forums, to talk about domestic violence issues with dozens of people in her social network. She has since become involved with a number of community groups, including working with local law enforcement and being active on international human rights issues.

Most recently, she joined an organization working to pass legislation that would allow undocumented immigrants to obtain a Minnesota driver's license. When she stood up to speak about the issue at a community meeting, she spoke about the connection between a lack of transportation choices and domestic violence in immigrant communities. "If I don't have

a license, violence can enter the home," she said. "If a mom can't work and have money, they don't have food. If the dad doesn't have a license he can't get to work.

If you get a ticket, you have to go to jail and you can't take care of your family." Each of these is an additional stressor that can trigger violence in a home that is already under significant stress. Rojas said that she is involved in the driver's license issue because Minnesota is home to many Latin@s and she will continue to fight for their rights. "We are here and we aren't going to leave," she said. "I'm going to stay here for the victory."

As an Amiga, Rojas has gone from feeling under-confident in her abilities to being able to create her own avenues for leadership and to strongly articulate the link between domestic violence and other issues facing the Latin@ community. "She is now so active in making connections," said Izea-Martinez. "As staff, we can't be everywhere. But the Amig@s initiative creates more voices working for violence prevention in the community."



## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IS A COMMITMENT TO CONTINUOUS LEARNING

Community engagement is not static. Casa de Esperanza continues to learn and shift its strategies to meet the realities of what Latin@s are experiencing in the community. The organization has learned that the best way to do this is to commit to learning, to being entrepreneurial and to taking risks.

The Amig@s project demonstrates how a social service agency can weave intervention and prevention efforts together by

embedding community engagement strategies throughout its work. Casa de Esperanza has found that responding to the strengths, realities and ideas of community members has brought the organization closer to its mission and its goals than service provision could alone. "We are beyond solely serving as a resource for Latin@s experiencing violence," said Moen. "Amig@s is a prevention strategy that engages Latin@ families in creating positive social change."