



LAES has developed a series of immigrant issue instructional modules entitled "Tierra de Oportunidad" for orientation to our complex society.

INSTRUCTIONAL AREA: *Managing Family Life*

Tierra de Oportunidad - Module 13

Issues In Accessing Services

Overview

Life in the United States is usually more rootless and separate from networks of family and friends than in Latin countries, with time pressures on economically-pressed working couples, due to housing patterns. And due to cultural assumptions, women end up bearing primary responsibility for seeking support from the formalized human service delivery systems which replace the informal support networks of rural Latino society. The strong pressures for women to assume the role of interacting with social service bureaucracies stem more from U.S. culture than any form of Latino "machismo", e.g., most bureaucracies conduct transactions with their clients during the nine to five working hours although most native and immigrant clients are from poor working families.

Formalized service delivery systems provide an important range of support services to families encountering a variety of problems. While the menu of services is broad, many services listed on the menu are hard to access for everyone, but particularly for immigrants. Access requires a long time on a waiting list, extensive documentation of eligibility or multiple interactions with eligibility workers. California's human services vary in quality and, in many cases, adopt authoritarian styles and establish intrusive requirements that examine families' lives in detail. Nonetheless, the support these formal service delivery systems provide represent important resources for women, their children, and, to some extent, to families as a whole.

Important services which are available at no cost or at reduced cost include pre-natal care and nutrition assistance, delivery, peri-natal care, immunizations, and special medical care for children with disabilities. Early childhood education programs such as Head Start and Migrant Head Start are likely to provide high-quality comprehensive service to children and their families but are difficult to get into. Other subsidized child care programs are also important resources but are also very hard to access. A wide range of other services -- home weatherization, lifeline rates on telephone service, and help with electricity bills -- is also available. Major public assistance programs -- Aid to Families with Dependent Children, Food Stamps, and Medi-Cal are likely to be the most controversial of programs but the benefits they provide are crucial to families' welfare.

Immigrant women face many barriers in accessing service systems -- language, unfamiliarity with "the rules of the game" and eligibility difficulties because one or more members of their families are not authorized to reside in the U.S. Some points are critical for immigrant women to remember in overcoming these barriers. Free legal aid and legal services programs throughout California will advocate on behalf of a woman, and outreach workers in many programs will provide advice and easy-to-understand information even when professional staff are unsympathetic. Some programs have ombudsmen or client advocates whose job is to help clients with the administrative complexities of the program.

Children born in the United States are eligible for all service programs, irrespective of their

parents' immigration status. All children are guaranteed the right to equal educational opportunities whether they are legally in the U.S. or not from kindergarten through 12th grade (though not at community colleges, or college).

Even women and children without papers are guaranteed access to some limited kinds of health care -- emergency and prenatal care. Women who are unsure of their rights because of their immigration status or the immigration status of their families should seek the advice of an immigrant advocacy group or legal services office.

Persons legalized under IRCA are now usually permanent residents and can petition to become citizens and for their wives and minor children to be legally admitted to the U.S. outside of the visa quota system. Although the citizenship process takes time and energy, it is the only way for families to guarantee themselves equal access to publicly-funded services.

Basic Skills Development

<i>Acquire and evaluate information:</i>	Securing information provided by pamphlets, informal sources of information such as friends, formal sources of information such as caseworkers and children's teachers. Securing information from mass media, print, specialized hotlines, as well as outreach.
<i>Analytic and Problem-Solving Skills:</i>	Weighing and comparing different perspectives on hard-to-understand information. Securing clarification of ambiguous or inconsistent information.
<i>Mathematics Skills:</i>	Estimating income and expenses. Planning a budget.
<i>Communications Skills:</i>	Improved ability to avoid confrontation with social services workers, to guide dialogue to address actual real-world problems, and to maximize social workers' flexibility in responding to problems.

Teaching Points

- 1. In the U.S., some support systems are complicated and highly bureaucratized. As the primary family member interacting with these support systems, women should learn the "rules of the game".** While individual social workers may be concerned, caring, and helpful persons, many of the key human services systems are highly legalistic and incorporate complex eligibility rules, formal processes for dealing with contingencies, and complicated but fair and legal procedures for overcoming problems. It is also critical to understand the full implications of each action, either communicated verbally or via an official notice, taken by a social or human service system.
- 2. Eligibility for almost all services is conditioned on family income so families should make it a priority to keep good records of income and expenses.** The particular kinds of documentation required to demonstrate eligibility for a program are often prescribed by law or regulation and, in terms of eligibility determination, most social workers have little leeway or opportunities to be flexible. Therefore, it is essential for families (and this may well mean women) to take great care to keep the best records they can of income and expenses -- on a monthly basis.
- 3. Some social service programs do have difficult questions which applicants should be on guard for.** In general, it is necessary for persons seeking services to

provide the information legally required to determine eligibility, but it is not wise to consider social workers as confidantes or general-purpose resources for solving the full range of problems. If a woman does not understand a question on a form or in an interview, or if that question seems strange or confusingly worded, she should insist that the social worker explain the meaning of the question fully. Social workers are required to explain fully the implications of each action they take. If they do not, it is good grounds for appealing to their supervisor or seeking the assistance of a legal services provider or community organization advocate. Most actions by the complicated human services system can be appealed, within the regulatory constraints of the program, and women should not hesitate to exercise their appeal rights.

8. **Outreach workers are more likely to be Spanish-speaking and genuinely concerned about the welfare of families seeking services than professional staff. Outreach workers should be seen as important resources.**
"Professionalism" often, though not always, limits compassion and concern. Paraprofessionals -- teachers' aides, migrant education outreach workers, translators in hospitals, social service aides, community organization staff -- are important sources of information about the "rules of the game" of various social systems.
9. **"Referrals" is a process intended to insure that a person who is not eligible for help from one agency will get it from another. Referrals seldom work well without the "client's" active involvement.** While referrals are officially considered to be a way to facilitate a person's access to another program than the one they have originally contacted. At a minimum, a referral should include an assurance that there really will be a service provided, easy-to-understand directions written down for reference as to how to get to the new office, an accurate idea of when the new agency office is open, and a general idea of what kind of services are available and what the eligibility guidelines are. The client, in this case an immigrant woman, should hold the person who has referred her to a new program accountable for making sure she gets help instead of getting a run-around. Women should be urged to be persistent in getting the service they are theoretically eligible for. That persistence should include requesting that agencies not place an undue burden on her to come back time and again to provide additional documentation, that agencies explain why there may be a delay in getting service, and why an applicant is not considered eligible for service if she is refused help. As in the case of seeking help directly from an agency, women should insist that the language used by the social service workers she is in contact with be clear, lucid, and intelligible without too many "big words" -- no matter how long it takes.
10. **Agencies, teachers, and social workers who are committed to quality service can often provide important information, advice, and counsel, even if they cannot do anything directly to help someone.** Women seeking help with the problems they face should understand how unusual it is for a social worker to genuinely and candidly admit that they can not be of any direct assistance but that they would like to help however they can. This advice, counsel, and information can be valuable even if there is no direct, tangible benefit a social worker can provide her or his client. Service systems which have a reputation for being most flexible, understanding, and committed to doing what they can, outside of very narrow program guidelines, include emergency hotlines, legal services offices, grassroots community organizations and, in some cases, the school system. Church-based groups, homeless shelters, and mutual self-help groups are also likely to show and follow through with genuine concern despite having very few resources.
11. **Women seeking help have a basic human right to be treated in a respectful and dignified way.** "Human service" providers are frequently rushed in interacting with the people they are to help. Women should demand respectful treatment and be

prepared to explain that they do not know the system, and need help.

Some Specific Service Entitlements to Point Out to Immigrants

1. **Medi-Cal is available to pregnant women, irrespective of immigration status.** California is now trying very hard to expand Medi-Cal coverage for low-income women in a new program called Baby-Cal. Health care providers hold information they receive in strict confidentiality.
2. **Children born in the U.S. are citizens and eligible for all public health services and public assistance support.** Children who are not born in the U.S. and who do not have legal immigration status are still eligible for many kinds of help which are not conditioned on immigration status.
3. **Children are guaranteed equal education opportunities under the law, irrespective of immigration status.** Parents have the right and duty to assure that their children get the best possible education. Not only can children without papers go to school, their parents can and should demand that they get effective high-quality education, including effective educational support for learning English.
4. **There are shelters for women who are victims of domestic violence.** Almost every community has a shelter for women and their children who must leave their homes because their husbands are treating them badly. But many of these shelters do not have bilingual staff. It is wise for immigrant women to contact an immigrant rights group or have a friend who speaks English help them if they have to leave home.
5. **Seeking help from the police.** A woman can seek help from the police if she is a victim of a crime, if she is raped, if she is harassed, or if she is threatened by a man, without risking deportation. Police have no right to ask a victim her immigration status.
6. **Some free child-care and childhood development programs are available and when a family pays a child care provider those costs are tax-deductible.** Head Start is an important program and well-known but there may be other child care or child development and pre-school education programs available in the community. Families who can benefit from deducting child-care costs on their income tax, however, need to keep records of what their child care costs are.
7. **California libraries are more and more commonly providing at least small sections of books, manuals, and pamphlets in Spanish.** Using libraries is free and the information they have available is often very helpful to families. Some libraries have storytelling and reading programs for children. If at all possible, families should get in the habit of using the free resources the libraries represent and whenever possible urging librarians to secure more materials in Spanish.
8. **For low-income families with children, it is important to submit a federal income tax return each year, because the tax return is the basis for the Earned Income Credit.** Filing a federal tax return is important for a number of reasons, including the legal requirement to do so. In terms of support services for families, the Earned Income Credit is important to low income families, i.e. those with incomes below about \$20,000 per year. Credits can be more than \$1,000. Also important is the California renter's tax credit. Free assistance in filling out tax returns is available from the Internal Revenue Service, although waiting lines for call ins are long. Some community groups provide free tax preparation assistance. Keeping good records is the basic foundation for filing an accurate tax return.

SAMPLE LEARNING ACTIVITIES

1. Invite local public health department staff to make a presentation on health services for women. Encourage class participants to ask questions and share their problems of access with the staff representatives.
2. Invite women from grassroots cooperative organizations such as Mujeres Unidas y Activas in the San Francisco Bay Area or the Red De Defensa Laboral in the Los Angeles area to talk to the class about their organization, their personal experiences in accessing services, and their strategies for overcoming the problems they've faced.
3. Work with class participants to prepare monthly budgets of income and expenses. Expense categories in the budget should include at least the following categories to make them as useful as possible for answering program eligibility questions: shelter costs, with rent or mortgage, electricity, water, garbage, broken out; work-related costs, i.e., transportation, child care; health care costs, including prescriptions, special treatments; food costs and debt payments. Are there other categories that class participants think are important and should be recorded?
4. Work in class with participants to set up a home accounting box -- perhaps an accordion folder -- with file folders for receipts, pay stubs, bills, and for important correspondence from public agencies.
5. Role play an eligibility interview for AFDC, Medi-Cal, or Food Stamps with a county social services agency. Ask women who have themselves gone to an eligibility interview to play the role of the eligibility worker. If there are no volunteers, the instructor can role play the eligibility worker.
6. Lead class participants in a discussion of which human service agencies in the community are: a) most important to their lives, b) provide the best or worst service, and c) why. Write a class letter to either the agency agreed to be the best congratulating it on its good service or to the agency agreed to be the worst listing the problems people have encountered.
7. Invite a maternal-child health care provider to a class session. Lead a discussion of different perspectives on the importance or unimportance of prenatal care, deliveries in formal settings such as hospitals or informal settings with midwives (*parteras*). At the end of the discussion, ask the health care provider to address class participants' concerns or misconceptions, if any, and, in short, to make a pitch.
8. Invite a local school representative to the class to talk to the class about the problems they feel they have as an educator in serving students well and ask class members' advice in suggesting ways in which educational services to immigrant children can be improved.
9. Role play a good referral from one service agency to another and, also, a bad referral and discuss the differences.
10. Discuss and list the kinds of behavior on the part of human service providers which communicate respect and bolster dignity in contrast those which communicate disrespect, indifference, or hostility. List at least three of each.
11. Invite an emergency hotline representative to talk about the kinds of people at the other end of the phone line when people call and what happens when a call comes in.

RESOURCES

- National Immigration Law Center
1636 West 8th St., Suite 215
Los Angeles, CA 90017
(213) 487-2531
(training sessions, definitive materials on benefits eligibility)
- Immigrant Legal Resource Center
1663 Mission St., Suite 602
San Francisco, CA 94103
(415) 255-9499
(training sessions, definitive materials on benefits eligibility)
- Children Now
(800) 829-1040
(information line in Spanish on Earned Income Credit)
- Volunteer Information Tax Assistance
IRS (800-289-1040)
- Local phone books have a wealth of information on services available in local communities. Look under the "Government" heading or under the name of the specific service of interest, e.g. "Family Planning".

ESL Commercial Textbooks

- Choices: Discovering Your Community, Contemporary Books
Unit 6, I Checked Out This Book
- The ETC Program, A Competency-Based Reading/Writing Book, Book 5: Language and Culture in Depth, Random House
Chapter 5, Getting Help

Authors: Ed Kissam and Holda Dorsey

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