
CASE STUDY

Casa de Esperanza

Jodi Sandfort

Many nonprofit organizations struggle with the challenges of staying true to their mission in light of increasing reliance on public revenue streams. Casa de Esperanza, a mid-size nonprofit in St. Paul, Minnesota, faces these tensions. Although it was founded to support Latinas who experience domestic violence, public funding streams mandated a different approach. This case explores the trade-offs the organizational leaders must consider at a critical juncture in their development.

WITH THE COOL BITE in the autumn air contrasting with the smell of hot coffee, the house in St. Paul, Minnesota, seemed an ideal location to have a heartfelt conversation among the board of directors of Casa de Esperanza. Board members were gathered in the home of Kim Vanderwall, a consultant, to discuss issues that had plagued the agency for years. The time had come to make some hard choices about the future.

When Casa de Esperanza (House of Hope) was created in the early 1980s, it was founded to provide shelter and support to Latinas who were victims of domestic violence. Since first opening its doors, however, the agency's clientele were much more diverse. In fact, Latinas were often a small minority of clients staying at the shelter.

This fact had not impeded the growth of the agency. During the last three years, the executive director, Gloria Perez Jordan, had led the organization during tremendous expansion. The agency budget had grown by 41 percent, now hovering around \$1.2 million in 1997. In a typical year, they provided shelter to 145 women and an additional 175 children. They also operated a 24-hour crisis line, children's support groups, and transitional support to help women start new lives, free from their abusers. Gloria had worked to further refine

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the organization's infrastructure, including creating a management team to increase coordination and strategy, developing a fund raising plan to diversify revenue sources, and refining the board of directors recruitment process to improve chances of finding committed people to serve.

However, the continued expansion of Casa de Esperanza created some challenges and, in early 1997, the board had decided to go through a strategic planning process. For the last eight months, the leadership had experienced a lot of soul searching about its mission and strategies.

Now, Gloria and the board were grappling with the issue that had plagued the organization throughout its fifteen year history—is Casa an agency primarily committed to ending domestic violence, or is it an organization primarily committed to working within the Latino community? The implications of this decision would shape the direction of the organization for years to come.

As board members prepared for the gathering in the St. Paul home, a number reflected upon the path that had brought the organization to this fork in the road. Casa's experience was integrally connected to the increased realization throughout the 1970s and 1980s that intimate violence was a public problem.

Growth of a Movement and a Field

During the late 1960s, women throughout the United States began gathering in living rooms, community centers, and coffee shops, talking with each other about their shared experiences as women. These "consciousness-raising groups" gave women a forum to talk with each other about many things, from common, daily experiences to complex international affairs. As trust was built among them, some women began to share that their intimate partners sometimes became violent. In response to these chilling testimonies, others began to develop safe-homes, places where women and children could flee when violence erupted in their own homes.

At first, many of these safe-homes, or "shelters" as they came to be called, were run out of activists' homes. The need to provide women refuge was so great that women just responded; they did not wait for formal organizations to be established. As the need grew, though, leaders recognized that organizations needed to be formalized to provide the victims of violence short-term, safe shelter. Out of the consciousness raising groups, they developed a new type of organization—a collective—to more extensively develop and support domestic violence shelters. From the beginning, the ideal was to operate these collectives differently than the competitive, male-dominated organizations and bureaucracies that prevailed in the social service arena. These organizations were to be egalitarian, supportive of differences, and nurturing.

One of the first shelters in the U.S. was started in St. Paul, Minnesota. In 1974, a consciousness-raising group, Women's Advocates, that had previously written a divorce rights handbook and organized a legal rights information service, rented a one-room apartment to offer minimal shelter services to women and children fleeing violent relationships. They formalized into a collective that had a participatory, non-hierarchical structure, which included staff and ex-shelter residents on its board of directors. Two years later, Women's Advocates purchased a house to shelter more women, the first of its type nationally. The shelter had paid staff as well as volunteers, but opposed hiring professionally credentialed staff because of the more distanced approach they would employ; administrative responsibilities were shared among staff, volunteers, and members of the board of directors. Similar organizations sprang up throughout the country—in Pittsburgh, Boston, Cleveland, Iowa City. By 1979, there were more than 250 shelters in the United States, most operating under a non-hierarchical, egalitarian philosophy. Because of their origins in feminist consciousness-raising groups, they also shared a similar analysis of the causes of domestic violence: patriarchal power. In the ideology of the movement, domestic violence was the result of male dominance over women.

While many new shelters were started in the 1970s, the demand for shelter far exceeded its availability. A 1979 Minnesota survey revealed that 70% of women requesting shelter were turned away due to lack of space. The scope of the problem demanded that women look beyond their own communities to learn more about the scope of domestic violence and share innovative responses to the challenges of providing safe haven. By the mid-1970s, state-level coalitions were forming and a national newsletter was created. Throughout the country, lawsuits were being filed against police departments resistant to becoming involved in "domestic disputes." Lawyers established women's legal centers and began using the battered women's syndrome as a defense for women charged with killing their partners. In many communities, activists began to organize public protests, such as Take Back the Night marches, that helped women express their collective power against the constant threat of male violence. All of these activities made public that which had recently been perceived as a private, individual problem.

By the early 1980s, state governments had begun to respond to this ground-swell of activities by allocating state revenues and discretionary federal funds, such as Title XX of the Social Security Act and Emergency Assistance funds, to domestic violence services. This increased public funding, in turn, supported the creation of additional services and shelters. Between 1979 and 1989, the number of shelters in the U.S. increased four-fold. Yet feminist groups started few of the newly formed shelters; during the 1980s, religious groups,

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YWCA's or other civic organizations increasingly began to operate temporary shelter for victims of domestic violence.

As more and more of programs received public revenue, subtle shifts began to occur in the original domestic violence shelters. Since federal funds were designated for services and not community education, more attention becomes focused on individual counseling for women and less on peer support and advocacy. To receive public contracts, shelters felt the pressure to employ credentialed staff and move toward more widely recognized social service models. To maintain these government contracts, they needed to provide evidence that their interventions were having the desired effect. The social work and mental health professions also were starting to recognize the growing awareness of domestic abuse. Slowly, as more staff socialized within these professional fields were hired, they began talking about "treatment" for "clients," rather than "empowerment" for battered "women."

Yet, increasing public awareness of domestic violence was successful. In the 2000s, stories about battered women, homicides by spouses, and police who fail to enforce protective orders appear daily on television and in newspapers. Public service announcements on television dramatize the seriousness of the problem and affirm the public's responsibility to report it. October has been officially designated Domestic Violence Month and a federal Office of Violence Against Women operates in the Justice Department. A national resource center supports the work of state and national domestic violence organizations through electronic networks, trainings, and legislative advances.

The recognition of domestic violence as a public problem culminated in 1994 with the passage of the federal Violence Against Women Act. This legislation addresses the problem of domestic violence through a number of mechanisms, including funding for women's shelters, a national domestic abuse hotline, training for federal and state judges, and criminal enforcement of interstate protection orders. The premise of the law was that gender-based violence has a systemic impact on women's equality and, thus, domestic violence violates a federally protected civil right.

Casa de Esperanza's Place within the Movement

During the 1980s, as the domestic violence movement grew in scope, a group of Latina women gathered in St. Paul, Minnesota to ask the question, "What types of services are available for our community?" While similar questions were being asked by women of color throughout the country, the action of these women was motivated by the well-established domestic violence shelters in Minnesota; activists in the state were leaders in the national development of the movement.

However, when they looked at the array of programming for women in crisis, the Latinas were discouraged by the lack of culturally appropriate services. They believed strongly that alternatives needed to be developed to meet the needs of all women. As one foremother said, “Women from diverse backgrounds required shelter. Yet, all of the shelters operated under the culture of the white community. All women needed to have access to safety, where they felt comfortable, where they could speak their own language and feel culturally at home.”

In response to this need, and with some initial funding from the Minnesota Department of Corrections, five women formed the Hispanic Battered Women’s Community Education Project. By 1982, they had changed their name and incorporated as a nonprofit agency, Casa de Esperanza. Like many of the early shelters, Casa’s leaders formed themselves into a collective, based on feminist beliefs. Board members were actively involved in all aspects of the organization’s operation, from developing the space to running support groups and serving meals at the shelter. They leased space from the YWCA, trained volunteers, solicited donations from the community for furniture, and opened the shelter doors in June. The number of women and children housed at the shelter immediately exceeded expectations and they struggled to respond adequately to the need.

In the first six months of the shelter’s operation, over 140 women and children were given shelter. However, the vast majority of those assisted were Anglo and African-American. The staff and board of directors were surprised that only eleven percent of those sheltered were Latina because, from their own experience, they knew that family violence was not uncommon. They knew that within the Latino community, there was a real need for education, prevention and safe haven. It was the whole premise upon which the collective was formed and the shelter opened. As one early board member said, “We had been frustrated for years at the lack of access for Latinas to culturally appropriate shelter services. Then when we created them, women did not come.”

While the Latinas did not come in large numbers to the shelter, other women—particularly women of color—were showing up at the front door, needing support and services. The trauma of domestic violence weighed heavily in their lives. Their children had basic needs, often overlooked in their tumultuous family circumstances. Given that less than one-in-three of the calls Casa received for shelter could be met, it was clear to board and staff that the African-American, Hmong, and Anglo women seeking a safe haven needed it. Perhaps over time, the board thought, more Latinas would realize that seeking shelter was an option when they experienced domestic abuse.

By 1984, Casa de Esperanza had grown sufficiently to purchase a three-story home on St. Paul’s east side through a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development program. With six bedrooms,

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the house gave Casa the capacity to shelter thirteen women and their children at one time. The agency also hired its first executive director, Isabelle Perez, and began to formalize its programs. The agency's core services resembled those in most other domestic violence shelters. In the Women's Program, they offered support groups, advocacy in existing human and health services, supportive listening, and goal setting. Staff and a cadre of volunteers operated a 24-hour crisis line that responded to calls from the community for support and shelter. Staff also developed a Children's Program that provided sessions for children to explore their feelings about the violence in their homes. Children's advocates helped meet kids' concrete needs, securing clothing and medical services while they were at the shelter. They also offered structured daily activities, such as therapeutic dance and Spanish classes. Finally, staff realized that, during their stays at the shelter, women would need to develop new skills to allow them to leave their abuser and live new lives. As a result, they developed a women's empowerment program which provided resources to foster independent living, including securing and maintaining housing, employment, education, and social support.

To support these programs, the board and executive director turned to the newly available government funds and solicited private, philanthropic funders. Yet, in the early years, these resources were limited. In 1982, the agency had an initial budget of \$30,000. Four years later, with the expenses involved in purchasing the house and running the shelter, their operating budget remained nearly the same. Although they sent letters to private foundations and wealthy individuals throughout Minnesota, these attempts to raise contributions yielded modest results.

In part, the fund-raising challenge mirrored the precarious position of the agency in the larger community. On the one hand, Casa was not like most other domestic violence shelters. Because of Minnesota's leadership in the movement, many shelters were well established. They formed coalitions together, advocated for increased public funding, and staged public protests. To Casa's founders, the leaders overlooked the key role that race and ethnicity played in how women experienced intimate violence. The whole motivation for establishing Casa de Esperanza was in reaction to the gaps in this system.

As significantly, the Casa board and executive director confronted resistance within the Latino community to speaking openly about the problem of domestic violence. As in other communities, exposing women's experience of family violence challenged many cherished images of peaceful domestic life. In the small Latino community in St. Paul and Minneapolis, the message of Casa's leaders was met with hostility and animosity. By discussing publicly what was believed to be a private matter, these women brought attention to their husbands, brothers, and fathers, themselves already the victims of prejudice and racism. Many worried that

Anglos would see the women's assertions as confirmation of machismo stereotypes.

These forces buffeted the organization. Did the agency, as stated in one early version of the mission-statement exist to "eliminate oppression and its violence against women and children?" Or did it have a unique responsibility to work within the Latino community? This distinction was the focus of many heated board and staff discussions. It also held many important operational implications. Was it necessary for shelter staff to be bi-lingual in Spanish and English? Did the executive director need to be bi-cultural, able to relate to the different norms and value embedded in the Latino and Anglo communities? Against what criteria were staff evaluated during their performance reviews? What language should be used to describe the organization in annual reports, marketing information, grant proposals, and direct mail solicitations? Most significantly, should women in crisis be turned away from the shelter because they were not Latina?

Receiving Government Contracts

The key to Casa de Esperanza's fiscal solvency lay in the resources available through the public sector. In 1988, the agency's second executive director, Pamela Zeller, enabled the organization to gain access to Minnesota's general assistance program. This per diem reimbursement, negotiated with the county, was given for costs incurred from offering women and children shelter from domestic violence. Each shelter could bill for these costs, up to a capped annual amount. Overnight, Casa became able to support its core operations.

Receipt of the per diem, though, was not without its consequences. For one, to receive public money, the organization needed to document its work. Staff developed intake forms for their various programs [see Appendix for attachment] and created an organizational chart and personnel policies. Secondly, county funding was only available for women who were legal immigrants; when applying for the general assistance support, women needed to present identification papers and other documents that some Latinas did not possess. Since Casa was committed to serving the Latina community in all its diversity, the agency absorbed the costs of sheltering undocumented women.

Finally, and most significantly, the county required that women in crisis be served on a "first come, first serve" basis. While this policy met women's immediate need for shelter, it did not allow Casa to reserve certain shelter slots for Latinas. As a result, if the shelter was full to capacity and a Latina called in the crisis line, staff faced a disconcerting problem. There was no room at Casa for the woman in need. Yet, most mainstream shelters could not serve women who did not speak English because their staff were monolingual. Given that few Latinas sought shelter, the irony of having to turn away those who did call was profound.

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In response, more and more shelter staff began to question whether or not the organization should continue to embrace a Latina identity. Clearly many women needed shelter. Women of color, in particular, were often referred by other shelters to Casa's doors because of its reputation for more "culturally competent" programming. Perhaps the organization was more multi-cultural than Latina. As one long-time staff member remembered, "Many of us felt that we needed to serve all women, equally. The public money required that of us. But, more importantly, it just didn't feel right to turn away those in need."

Yet other staff and the board of directors felt committed to serving Latinas. They decided to expand their services beyond the shelter and, in 1989, began a community education and outreach program to reach more Latinas. Some women began a "culture circle" where they shared oral histories and created materials for education that touched upon community values of family and religion. With Casa staff, these women and other volunteers organized *Rompiendo el Silencio* (Breaking the Silence), a day of workshops, entertainment, and a march that over one hundred people attended. Staff and volunteers also began to network with other Hispanic organizations to increase awareness about the problem of family violence. These community education efforts, however, were not supported by public dollars; they depended upon support from individuals, United Way, and private foundations.

Deepening Programs and Continued Expansion

As domestic violence became more recognized as a public problem throughout the 1990s, Casa de Esperanza participated with other domestic violence shelter in coalitions and public advocacy. Like many shelters, it continued to operate its core programs—women's and children's programs, empowerment, transition to independent living, and community outreach and education. Yet Casa had a commitment to addressing the diversity of women's experiences. As a result of seeing many types of women seeking shelter, staff started a lesbian outreach program. This program included the production of a provocative movie, "My Girlfriend Did It," advocacy services to women battered by women, and training for other social service agencies around homophobia.

While the agency's second executive director did much to diversify the organization's funding—including securing government and United Way funding—there was much to be done when Patti Tototzintle arrived at the agency in late 1992. The board, in fact, hired her as an interim director to help identify major areas needing managerial attention. First, she tried to tease apart the appropriate roles for staff and board. Like many domestic violence organizations that began as collectives, the board of directors had been very involved in the operations of the shelter from the beginning. They

all had regularly volunteered to work with women and children at the shelter or community outreach activities. While this type of engagement provided the necessary hands to get the jobs done, it also made the boundaries between staff and board roles difficult to gauge. More and more staff began attending board meetings, offering their opinions during discussions about key issues. This development made it increasingly difficult to see who was governing the organization. Second, while the receipt of public and United Way funds necessitated the creation of some written policies, most had not been implemented in day-to-day operations. For example, hiring and other personnel issues, such as sick or vacation time, were handled informally. Patti needed to create clear expectations with staff about the policies and make sure that they were equally applied.

Thirdly, the agency did not have the fiscal systems in place needed for an organization with a significant budget. A formal audit had not been done of the agency's books for over a year. The board of directors was not regularly seeing financial statements. While Patti could identify the problems of financial management, she did not have the expertise to implement the changes herself. As a result, she hired a controller to develop the needed systems. This investment paid off. From 1992 to 1998, the organizational budget continued to grow, from \$500,000 to \$1.2 million, fueled by increasing government resources.

During these improvements in operations, key issues of organizational identity continued to plague Casa. As Patti Tototzintle remembered, "Some of the staff defined us as a battered women's organization. Some of the staff defined us as a multicultural organization. Much of the board thought of us as a Latina organization. We needed to figure it out." There were many facts that continued to propel Casa from its original mission. Less than 20 percent of women served by the shelter were Latinas. There was not 24-hour bilingual access to services because Spanish speakers were not able to staff the crisis line around the clock. The lead shelter manager believed strongly that the agency needed to be accessible to all women. The housing manager, in fact, did not even speak Spanish. Since most shelter users were African-American, managers tried to recruit staff from that community.

At the same time, there was growing distinction between the shelter services and Casa's community education and outreach work. Staff of this program operated out of another location, in the heart of St. Paul's Latino neighborhood, providing education about family violence at cultural fairs and community gathering spots. They offered general interpreting, ESL tutoring, childcare, and general advocacy for women and worked with children in several elementary and junior high schools delivering bilingually a family violence curriculum. They hosted a weekly support group for monolingual Spanish-speaking women and helped group members develop posters and brochures to promote community awareness of the consequences of domestic

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abuse. Over time, staff worked to help women file orders for protection against their violent partners and assemble evidence to argue custody cases. This work seemed grounded in the Latino community of St. Paul, connected to the daily needs of women. And yet, because of limited funding, the services were done with minimal staff support. In 1995, for example, an intern helped to coordinate activities and twenty-five volunteers carried out the programming. However, increasing contributions by the United Way and a government contract for “prevention” programs, allowed them to hire more staff. Yet, community services continued to be only one-third of the agency budget.

Through this community work, Casa de Esperanza encountered many other Latino nonprofit organizations. In contrast to the male-led organizations focusing on employment, housing, and immigration issues, Casa’s programs seemed, according to one early leader, “fringe and feminist. We were the lone voice who took the perspectives of mothers and children.” Yet when these other community organizations formed a leadership association, Casa’s executive director came to the table. Their work in the community education and outreach programs made it clear that Casa shared many common concerns with these organizations.

In fact, when Gloria Perez Jordan, Casa’s fourth executive director began in 1995, it seemed clear that the allegiances with these other Latino non-profits were more important to the agency than relationships with other domestic violence organizations. Although the domestic violence shelters formed coalitions for policy advocacy, Casa purposively played a back seat role. “We were,” explained Gloria, “fighting other battles.” Largely, these battles lay in trying to make the mainstream domestic violence organizations more culturally competent. For years, Casa had been the shelter to which other organizations would refer women of color. To Casa’s leadership, it became increasingly clear that this practice allowed the other organizations to side-step responsibility for serving a diverse clientele. “At some point,” Gloria explained, “there was no excuse for them if they weren’t culturally competent the next year or the next.”

The board of directors struggled to make sense of their positions within the Latino and domestic violence communities and the contradictions embedded in their own programming. Since they believed Casa was, first and foremost, an organization focused in the Latino community, they questioned why there was not 24 hour-a-day access to the shelter for Spanish speakers. With the Latino population in Minnesota growing significantly, they knew that more and more families were in need. They wondered aloud if the practices of support groups and transitional services—standard programs at most domestic violence shelters—made sense in an organization trying to serve Latinas who were not likely to seek support from strangers or leave their batterers to “transition.” They also listened to the increasingly insistent statements of staff members that official Casa documents should reflect what had been fact for many years—Casa was a

domestic violence organization serving women of many cultures. It was multicultural.

The board also worried about the agency's dependence on government funding streams. From 1993–1996, the government funds constituted around 80 percent of the overall agency revenue. Because of the value they placed upon community programming, for which there was limited government funding, the board knew that the agency needed to proactively develop a strategy for diversifying revenue streams. Moreover, the agency had to face the reality that because of the increased population, more Latinas coming to the shelter were undocumented and, therefore, ineligible for the per diem reimbursement from the county.

In July 1996, the Casa de Esperanza Board hired a private consultant, Kim Vanderwall, to assess the external environment, explore Casa's strengths and weaknesses, and develop a plan to move the agency towards more varied funding. Working with a fund development team comprised of board, staff and community volunteers, the consultant conducted interviews with existing and prospective funders. She created an ambitious plan to strengthen fundraising infrastructure and improve external communication, which included increasing private contributions 356% by 2001 and creating a more healthy revenue mix. To do so, the agency would need to devote more resources to fundraising and communications efforts.

Yet, during this process, Gloria and the board realized that fund development alone would not be adequate to address the contradictions woven into the fabric of the organization's operations. Just by looking at how the board had articulated the agency mission of the years—and how it had changed along the way—they saw how deeply the ambiguity about the agency's identity was woven into the organization [see Appendix for attachment]. As Gloria Perez Jordan said, "We had reached a point of frustration. We realized that trying to get along and go along wasn't going to do it any more." Something needed to be resolved.

Since leaders were pleased with the fund development plan, they retained Kim Vanderwall to take the organization through a strategic planning process. They felt that this outside helper was important to act as neutral party, collect information, facilitate meetings and the board retreat, and create documentation of the plan. Similar to the fund development process, though, they formed a planning team to meet monthly from May 1997 to January 1998 to function as advisors. During June and July, Kim collected information about the organization from various people. She held focus groups with monolingual Spanish-speaking ex-shelter residents and Latinas participating in the organization's community support group, Comadres. She interviewed non-Latina ex-shelter residents by phone and sent surveys to staff, Latino agencies, battered women's agencies, and lesbian outreach program advisors [see Appendix for attachment].

In August, staff, board and planning committee members gathered to participate in a retreat to review and draw conclusions from

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the information gathered. In this meeting, it became clear to all present that “who we are/who we serve” was a major dilemma for the organization; it had caused conflict among the various stakeholders and created contradictions in daily operations since the beginning of the organization. While the agency described itself as Latina, the majority of women who came through the shelter services were not. At the retreat, it became clear once again that some stakeholders felt the organization should be Latina; others felt the organization should be considered multicultural. As one person present at the retreat recalled, “There were many people in the organization carrying torches. The problem was, they were not all carrying them in the same direction.”

So now, in October, Kim gathered senior leadership and the board for a meeting outside of their typical, more formalized meeting space. In this setting, they all knew that they had to resolve the issue that had long plagued the organization. Was Casa principally a Latina organization or a domestic violence agency operating a shelter?

[This case study will be continued in the next issue of *Nonprofit Leadership and Management*, Volume 15, Number 4, Summer 2005.]

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Appendix: Evolving Organizational Mission

1987

Casa de Esperanza is committed to providing a safe, supportive environment in which women and their children can heal, affirm their own strengths, regain control of their lives, examine their situation, and make their own decisions.

1993

Casa de Esperanza exists to eliminate and prevent oppression and its violence against women and children in the Latina community and the community at large.

1998

To eliminate violence against women and children in the Latino community and the community at large.

2000

Battered Latinas and their families find education and support in their own communities to live healthy functioning lives.

2001

Mobilize Latinas and Latino communities to end domestic violence.

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