La Maestra clinic gets $105,000 surprise; One of 10 to win national award
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When Zara Marselian found out that her San Diego-based family clinic, La Maestra, had won a $105,000 national award, she quickly thought of ways to spend it.

"We just opened two satellite clinics in El Cajon and National City, and the funds will go there, (to cover) uninsured medical visits," she said.

Marselian is used to scraping together grants, donations, government funds and revenue from services to cover La Maestra's $6 million annual budget.

But the award from The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which claims the title as the nation's largest philanthropy devoted to improving health care, came as a surprise.

"At the end of March, the foundation called and said we had been nominated and they wanted to visit. They spent two days at our site," Marselian said. She said her chief of operations, Ale Areizaga, had submitted the nomination without telling her.

After the foundation sorted through 800 nominations, Marselian learned at the end of April that La Maestra was one of 10 health and social-service organizations in the country to earn the foundation's annual Community Health Leadership Program award. Each of the 10 receives $105,000, and each leader a $15,000 personal award.

That, Marselian said, will help her two daughters, ages 11 and 16, go to college.

"This is the biggest philanthropy award we've gotten. It's the first award we've received with unrestricted funds," she said. "That is really cool -- we need more of those."

La Maestra Family Clinic operates from eight buildings on Fairmount Avenue near Orange Avenue in City Heights. It offers medical and dental services, job training and placement, legal aid and immigration counseling, a pharmacy and an Internet floral delivery service.

The services are aimed at the working poor whose employers don't offer insurance yet whose incomes exceed government limits for assistance.

Marselian, 44, was born in San Diego, the daughter of Yugoslavian immigrants.

"I always seemed to gravitate toward services for people in need," she said. "And I like challenges, so this is the place to be."
She said that as a community college teacher in 1975, she saw a wave of South Vietnamese immigrants who needed help, not just to learn English, but to get needed social services and to assimilate into American culture.

She later helped found La Maestra as an immigration amnesty and training program, then added a medical clinic in her home in 1991.

The clinic has grown to serve the 50,000 residents of City Heights with a paid staff of 104 doctors, dentists, counselors, teachers, social workers and others who speak a spectrum of 19 languages.

"The foundation said they were impressed by the comprehensive services we provide, impressed that we had grown so quickly and impressed with our cultural diversity," Marselian said.

She and the other nine award winners are scheduled to accept their honors in Washington, D.C., on June 16.

"These committed people have stepped into the breach, providing services and attending to the needs that our larger health-care system is unable to meet," said Catherine Dunham, director of the foundation's Community Health Leader Program.

The program has given 120 awards to community leaders in 44 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico since 1992. Other winners this year are in Florida, Illinois, New York, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Missouri and Wisconsin.