La Maestra taking a big leap; Medical clinic plans $15 million center
San Diego Union-Tribune - Tuesday, December 26, 2006
Author: Jeanette Steele

Medical clinic La Maestra has been operating out of ramshackle City Heights bungalows along Fairmount Avenue since 1990.

The homegrown nonprofit serves the uninsured and offers help in Spanish, Somali and 17 other languages to the polyglot City Heights immigrant and refugee community.

Now La Maestra is taking a major leap of faith and building a $15 million medical center on Fairmount. Not only will the 30,000-square-foot building give La Maestra more space, it will be the first gold-status "green" community medical center in the United States, officials there say.

Funding is coming from a $6 million private bond and about $4 million in privately donated money. The nonprofit still needs to raise at least $5 million, but it expects to break ground in May and open in December 2008.

"It's an incredible milestone in the history and development of this organization," said Chief Executive Zara Marselian, clinic founder.

On an ordinary day, more than a dozen people, mostly Latina and African women, pack into La Maestra’s main waiting room for services such as immunizations, cancer screening and mental health counseling. As many as 98 percent of clients are uninsured and receive low-cost care.

Quarters are cramped because the lobby was once somebody’s living room. This portion of the clinic used to be a tiny Craftsman -- Marselian’s former family home.

The rest of La Maestra’s property stretches down Fairmount. Marselian bought or rented as many consecutive buildings as she could over the years. The styles are a jumble: some former houses, some small office buildings.

It’s not exactly how a medical facility serving 23,000 patients a year would plan to grow.

"Some people say, 'What a maze.' Yeah, we didn't dream this up this way," Marselian said. She gestures to one of the clinic’s tiny exam rooms: "We’re lucky if you get your own room and don’t have share it."

But Marselian has big hopes for the new facility. No more wires and cables running between buildings to make sure computers can communicate. No more sending patients out onto the sidewalk and down the street for another part of their treatment.
Everything will be under one roof. There will be a conference room that holds up to 200 people.

Financially, it’s a big move for La Maestra, which has always gotten by on resourcefulness and frugality.

The clinic had $7.3 million in revenue last year. Nearly all of that was from government grants, according to tax filings. Among its expenses are the salaries of 147 workers, making it the largest private employer in City Heights.

The clinic plans to pay off the $6 million bond debt from operating revenue. It will use cash in the bank and money from selling land to help finance the construction project, in addition to donations. This month, the clinic got a $500,000 grant from Price Charities, which also sold it the land for the new center.

"Green" construction, which sometimes raises the cost of building projects, is not adding to the price tag, Marselian said. She has persuaded donors to give deep discounts or free products.

Solar power is one element of green building, as is using local or recycled products. Gold is the second-highest level in the green certification process.

La Maestra's board is proud to be making a mark with the environmentally friendly status. The idea came from Alexei Ochola, an African immigrant who also sits on its board.

"This green thing just grabbed me and wouldn't let go," he said. "We’re going to be the first kid on the block."

Marselian added, "In City Heights, of all places. You'd expect to see it out in Scripps or La Jolla or somewhere."

The new medical center will add to the budding revitalization of the Fairmount Avenue corridor.

The city's redevelopment agency built an office complex at the corner of Fairmount and University Avenue. La Maestra's dental offices rent space for an annex there. There's also a senior housing project being constructed next to the future La Maestra site on Fairmount near Polk Avenue.

The new clinic will have retail space at street level. Marselian wants to lease to tenants in health care businesses and maybe get discounts there for patients.

Marselian, who is in her 40s, started La Maestra as an immigrant amnesty and training program. The Spanish word means "the teacher." Her family has firsthand experience to
draw from: Her mother and sister immigrated from Yugoslavia.

The organization morphed into medical and dental services and has satellite offices in El Cajon and National City.

Marselian says she is serving a population that otherwise might have to leave coughs unchecked and cavities unfilled.

"You know they will come here because we speak their language and are in the neighborhood," she said.

Now they will have a nicer place to come.

Caption: 3 PICS
1. Yonis Muya, 5, was examined by Dr. Javier Rodriguez as his father, Hussein Muya, and sister, Binti Muya, 3, waited in the pediatric clinic at La Maestra on Fairmount Avenue in City Heights. The clinic plans to move. 2. Fardowsa Mohmed waited with her 15-month-old son, Abdullahi Mohmed, for an appointment at La Maestra clinic in City Heights. The medical facility serves 23,000 patients a year. 3. The lobby once was part of the home that belonged to the family of La Maestra's founder, Chief Executive Zara Marselian, who made the clinic larger by buying and renting adjacent buildings. 1-3.

Nancee E. Lewis / Union-Tribune photos

Edition: CO,C
Section: LOCAL
Page: B-1

Index Terms: CHARITIES; COST; ENVIRONMENT; HOSPITALS; HOUSING; POVERTY; BIOG. INTERVIEW. PROFILE.; Zara Marselian; La Maestra

Record Number: UTS1981318
Copyright 2006 Union-Tribune Publishing Co.

***Reproduced with permission granted by San Diego Union-Tribune***

Full-text obtained via NewsBank