

La Puerta Waco seeks to connect Hispanics to resources

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WACO—First Baptist Church in Waco launched La Puerta Waco, a community ministry to connect Hispanics with legal and social services, about two months ago. But Israel Loachamín has been preparing the groundwork two years, since he joined the church staff as associate pastor of ministry in Spanish.

Early on, he and his wife, Emily, wanted to put into practice skills they had learned at Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary and the Diana R. Garland School of Social Work.

"The first year was all about establishing a foundation," he said. "But we also wanted to learn what problems ... (members of First Baptist Church Waco en Español) were dealing with as Hispanics."

Assess strengths and identify resources

So, working from a strength-based model, the couple sought to establish relationships with the congregants, hear about their problems and empower them to develop solutions for the issues they faced.

The Loachamíns found support from Matt Snowden, senior pastor at First Baptist Church, who encouraged their ideas and became an advocate for them to have the resources to undertake their calling.

Through the assessment process, the Loachamíns learned many issues Hispanics in Waco face are due not to a shortage of available services but

to lack of information about them.

Rather than duplicate services already offered in Waco, the Loachamíns set out to establish a clearinghouse for information about resources.

In addition to providing information, First Baptist Church Waco en Español seeks to accompany people as they interact with social and legal agencies, advocate for them, and make sure they have the tools necessary to address those obstacles.

Some issues relate to immigration. Most concern education, health care, job opportunities and economic issues.

Establish partnerships

As a new ministry, the Loachamíns acknowledge they have a lot to learn, but they have hit the ground running. So far, La Puerta Waco has partnered with the Waco Independent School District, Texas Women, Infants and Children (WIC) in Waco and Heart of Texas Region MHMR Center. La Puerta Waco also co-founded the Waco Immigrant Resource Task Force with several local organizations.

The partnerships have proven beneficial for clients seeking resources, as well as the nonprofit organizations that offer aid, since the organizations often do not have money to promote those resources.

In the near future, La Puerta Waco hopes to establish a program of bilingual volunteers to assist Hispanics in filling out forms, providing transportation and interacting with public servants, immigration officials and attorneys.

“We have seen that interactions between Hispanics and cops or lawyers tend to go a lot better when they have someone there to advocate for them,” Emily Morrow Loachamín said.

Already, the Loachamíns are seeing an increased connection between some English-speaking Hispanic members of First Baptist in Waco and the Spanish-speaking congregation.

Texas Baptists gave La Puerta Waco a three-year grant, and First Baptist made space available. Currently, La Puerta Waco is open Wednesdays and Fridays from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. in offices on the third floor at First Baptist Church.

The Loachamíns don't know yet all the ways La Puerta Waco will work with Hispanics in Waco, but they trust God to guide members of First Baptist Church Waco en Español in leading the ministry.

"This is a ministry of the congregation. They have to be the first ones to be involved," he said.

"We know that even in small things, we can find solutions," she added.