Star Billing

How Bienestar, a preeminent Latino AIDS service organization, has prevailed against decades of stigma and stereotyping.

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The largest Latino AIDS service organization in the country, Bienestar ("well-being") thrives under its founder, president and CEO, Oscar De La O—who considers HIV far more than just a health crisis.

"HIV is part of a larger social justice issue," says De La O, 50, who is HIV negative. "Addressing it from that perspective allows us to talk about discrimination, the lack of employment and education, immigration issues and health disparities from a wider perspective."

Beginning as a small, weekend volunteer support group in 1989, Bienestar now has 11 centers spread throughout Southern California. They offer a variety of prevention programs and free comprehensive services, including one-on-one and group counseling, case management and advocacy, for at-risk and positive Latinos, whether they're gay or straight.

"Bienestar came about from the assessment that we were just completely being ignored and that there weren't services for my friends, for people I was interacting with that were affected by HIV," says De La O. Indeed, as of 2005, Latinos accounted for 19% of new HIV diagnoses, though they represent only 14% of the total U.S. population. The organization continues to battle racial stereotyping and language barriers—both persistent roadblocks to treatment in the community.

A ferocious policy watchdog, De La O has also taken on issues such as immigration reform. This year, at the second annual Congressional Briefing on Latinos and HIV/AIDS in Washington, DC, Bienestar savaged the current HIV exclusion policy, which calls for the deportation of undocumented immigrants who test positive for HIV, preventing them from normalizing their immigration status. De La O fears that the legislation, signed by President Bill Clinton in 1993, dooms HIV-positive immigrants to "continue to live a life in the shadows, in the underground, not having access to care."

As De La O aspires to take Bienestar national, his goals remain simple: to provide HIV information that is accessible, culturally relevant and, most important, helps its clients celebrate their identity.

"I think that still, in 2007, stigma continues to play a major role in HIV/AIDS," says De La O. "We're

proud to address the loneliness and isolation of many of our clients. They’re able to come into any of our centers and immediately feel like they’ve found a family.”

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