

Good Morning Committee members I would like to start by introducing myself, my name is Mayra Zepeda. I am a Spanish speaking, bilingual CARE Specialist, who has served my community through Umatilla County CARE Program, for almost 11 years now. Previous to that I worked for the Umatilla County Alcohol and Drug Program, initially as an Office Assistant III, and eventually as a Certified Prevention Specialist, since July 2005. I have been serving my community for close to 20 years now in total.

Through both programs I have been able to value the opportunity of serving youth and their whole family. The focus of CARE is to offer support and advocacy to the students and their families by connecting them to resources specific to their needs. I am determined to keep a close focus on school attendance rates by helping to enroll students and working closely with those families to maintain attendance at consistent levels with the end goal of seeing graduation rates increase in our school district. I currently serve students at the elementary and high school level, with a close emphasis on monolingual Spanish-speaking students and families. At the high school I serve students in the whole building, working to keep youth in education whether is be virtual, in person, or GED-equivalent.

In my community lately, we have seen a large influx of families coming to live here from other countries such as Mexico, Guatemala, Columbia and Venezuela. But lately from the last 3 countries more often. Most of them migrate here searching for agricultural work, which is available here for at least 9 months out of the year. The students we serve are either referred to us by school staff, word of mouth by other students/ families who have been previously served, or referrals from other members of community serving partners such as Department of Human Services; Self Sufficiency Program or Child Protective Services. Being bilingual has given me the opportunity to serve most of these students/ families in their native language. Some of the families however do not speak Spanish or English, and their main language is a dialect, and many of them have felt the need to learn to at least speak some Spanish, in order to help to try to adapt to their surroundings.

Once I meet them, I am able to realize the “magic” of my program, in that I am able to help guide them through processes, and help them understand policies and procedures, and how to adhere to them, but at their level, and in most cases in their native language. The CARE focus is prevention and early intervention. We serve at-risk children with sometimes multiple issues. We meet with parents, youth, and school staff to identify services and offer support and direction in accessing needs by utilizing services available in our community.

Through my position I have helped enroll students. At the high school level I am often in the position of working with a youth over the age of fourteen because we have unaccompanied youth, who are living on their own without parents at time. This could include helping them understand what they need to provide in order to register for school. Providing them rides to school as needed, once they are enrolled, if for example they miss their school bus, or their parent's vehicle is not working, and they are not able to walk to school, due to weather, risk, or other scenarios, or provide parents rides in order to attend school meetings for their children.

Translation is key in my position as lots of times parents or students are not able to understand English or even Spanish, if they speak a dialect sometimes they know how to speak some Spanish, but they are unable to read it. I find myself filling out a lot of forms for my clients. Other examples include students or parents who do not know how to read or write because they have never attended school, so they are unable to fill out any forms in any language. In the school district I serve, Hermiston School District, the students are very fortunate to be offered to be placed in a new program called "The Newcomers Program", this program focuses on assisting students in order to transition into general ed level of school, but allows them to start in this program for at least 2 years to allow them to safely transition into a regular school setting. Many of the students who are in this program are monolingual and do not speak any English. Here they have aids and teachers who can assist them each day to help navigate their classes, and even begin to learn English. Being spoken to in Spanish as needed, depending on their need, or native language.

We live in Eastern Oregon, and reside in a rural town, many of the clients I serve do not speak English, do not have access to transportation, and many can not read, or write. These barriers themselves make it difficult for many to access services and get their needs met. My program does allow us to use a vehicle, in which we can transport our clients to and from appointments, or meetings, and even allow a ride in which to get to attend school at times. Being bilingual allows me to speak to them in their native language. Having the knowledge of what resources are available in my community, and knowing the processes, and procedures in which to access them, allows me the know how to teach and train those I serve successfully.

In all my years serving my community I can attest that positive results occur when youth and their families are assisted with accessing agencies and navigating complex systems. I can't imagine how it must feel to come to a new country with different rules and processes; learning to understand these processes can help them navigate through them with more ease, with my direction. My clients are very grateful to my program, and the district I serve for providing them the opportunity to allow them to work with me at no cost. In order to help navigate with them these barriers correctly and more successfully.