



Maria Ventura, who moved from her native El Salvador to the United States in 2002, chats with David Moreno, a bilingual employee hired by The Arc of Frederick County, which provides services to people with developmental disabilities and their families.

Staff photo by Bill Green

Foreign territory

How social service agencies help non-native English speakers

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Maria Ventura knew her daughter needed help.

But she had no idea where to turn for services for 19-year-old Yesenia Amaya. Compounding her struggle were her daughter's inability to speak English and her own limited English-speaking ability.

Ventura moved from her native El Salvador to the United States in 2002. In the intervening 15 years, she picked up conversational English.

enough to navigate the day-to-day activities of life in Frederick, enough to secure a job at the McDonald's in Westview Promenade.

But it wasn't enough to know who could help her Spanish-speaking daughter, who made the journey across the border just a month ago. Amaya was born with a developmental disability, but Ventura, who has lived apart from her daughter for most of her life, never got an official diagnosis.

Desperate for answers, Ventura asked everyone: people on public



transportation, neighbors, friends, even customers at work.

"I would take their order and then say, 'Do you know where I can get help for my daughter?'" she recalled

(See **AGENCIES A6**)

Agencies

(Continued from A1)

in a recent interview.

It was through Frederick County Public Schools that Ventura eventually connected with The Arc of Frederick County, which provides services to people with developmental disabilities and their families. She and her daughter are among the newest foreign language-speaking clients the organization serves, but by no means the first.

The Arc has in the last decade seen a significant increase in the number of clients it serves whose native language is not English, according to Joanna Pierson, the organization's executive director. Across the county, social services agencies of all types have experienced a similar surge in foreign language speakers.

The diversifying array of languages spoken among clients, in turn, has prompted the affected organizations to adapt with new policies and practices.

Adapting to change

Hiring more bilingual employees has been a focus of many agencies' response to the growing number of foreign language speakers among their clients.

David Moreno was one of those bilingual employees hired by The Arc. Moreno was born in Colombia and speaks Spanish and English.

When Moreno started in 2009, he estimated the agency served half a dozen Spanish-speaking families. In the first year, that number grew to 30, he said.

He credited the spike in Spanish-speaking families to the addition of language-specific services, news of which spread through the Hispanic community, primarily by word-of-mouth, he said.

Now, the agency serves about 50 foreign language-speaking families per year, he said.

Heartly House, a service agency for people affected by domestic violence, has experienced the opposite trend, at least in recent months, according to Inga James, the agency's executive director. James blamed the decrease in foreign language-speaking clients on heightened rhetoric and threats of deporting immigrants who are in the U.S. illegally. A majority of the foreign language-speaking clients her organization serves are undocumented, she said.

Beki Doing, a bilingual victim advocate for Heartly House's legal services department, also said she sees fewer Spanish-speaking clients than when she was hired a decade ago.

"But the cases I do have are more severe," she said, naming strangulation and more extreme physical abuse as examples of the

heightened severity of cases.

She attributed this to victims' reluctance to come forward, which characterizes most domestic violence cases, not just those involving foreign language speakers, she said. But when a victim cannot speak English and relies on the abuser to act as interpreter, it perpetuates the cycle of violence, James said.

"It's another method of control," she said.

Outreach to foreign language speakers can also prove more challenging. Lack of awareness about services also exacerbates the length and severity of abuse.

"They don't know about resources, where to get help if things start to get out of control," she said.

Moreno also highlighted the difficulty of disseminating information about The Arc's services to foreign language speakers.

"If you know the language, you can go out and research," Moreno said. "If you don't know the language, how do you know it's there?"

This was the case for Ventura. She and Moreno are still working to determine a diagnosis for her daughter. Ventura suspected Down syndrome, but she wasn't sure.

Awaiting more definitive next steps, she has found comfort in meeting with Moreno, speaking about her daughter in her native tongue.

Speaking their language

In some cases, The Arc's clients, often children with developmental disabilities, might speak English, but the family members who care for them do not. Even for people who do speak English, such as Ventura, the option to discuss more complicated terminology or sensitive subjects in a native language can be comforting, she said.

Ventura spoke in Spanish a few times during her interview with a *Frederick News-Post* reporter, at which point Moreno stepped in to translate.

Doing, in an interview last month, recalled one client who spoke "near-perfect English" when the pair met one on one, but when that same client appeared in court to file a protective order, her nerves made her lapse into her native tongue.

"She told me, 'I forgot my English,'" Doing recalled.

The Frederick County court system provides its own interpreters when clients appear for hearings in court, but Doing helps them through the process from Heartly House's end, hearing their stories, guiding them through the paperwork and consulting with the organization's attorneys.

Even as a fluent Spanish speaker — Doing was born in Puerto Rico — she still struggles to understand certain dialects.

"When I first started, especially, there were a lot of new words,

Editor's note

This is the fifth in an occasional series about Frederick County residents whose primary language is not English. Their struggles to overcome the language gap touches many aspects of their daily lives, including their interactions with schools, businesses, courts, the health care system and social services.

or the same words used differently," she said.

Sara Brunal shared similar experiences with Spanish-speaking clients at the Frederick Community Action Agency, where she serves as a volunteer through the AmeriCorps program.

Brunal, a native of Colombia who moved to the U.S. as an adult, works at the front desk, answering phone calls. She often gets recruited to serve as an interpreter for Spanish-speaking clients in the agency's community health clinic or through its housing weatherization program, she said.

Interpreting for clients who speak languages indigenous to regions of Guatemala and Ecuador is particularly difficult, Brunal said.

But both she and Doing have found ways to cope: speaking more slowly, using simpler words, or in Doing's case, asking to meet in person instead of talking on the phone.

Finding workarounds

Creativity and improvisation are necessities to bridge the language gap.

The seven bilingual employees at the Community Action Agency — hired in recent years as part of a concerted effort to serve foreign language speakers — still sometimes isn't enough to meet the demand of foreign language speakers, according to Mike Spurrier, the agency's executive director.

Particularly within the agency's health clinic, where half of the patients are non-native English speakers, there might be more patients needing interpreters at any given time than there are available employees, he said.

The same holds true at Heartly House, which has three bilingual employees including Doing, and at The Arc, which has only a couple of full-time employees who speak Spanish.

Pictures, gestures and even cellphone apps have served as makeshift communication methods in the absence of an available interpreter.

"You'd be surprised how effective they are," Pierson said of cellphone translator apps.

These strategies also come into play when a client's native tongue is neither English nor Spanish. At

The Arc, it's rare, but it does happen. Pierson named French, Chinese, Russian and Hindi as examples of other languages clients have spoken.

In these cases, Heartly House relies on a phone translation service offered through the Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence. The \$2,200 yearly expense gives organization 24/7 access to a phone interpreter service in any language, according to James.

It's typically used a few times per week, either for foreign language speakers whose native tongue is not Spanish, or in some cases, when the bilingual Spanish-speaking employees are busy with other clients, James said. She admitted that discussing sensitive details about abuse and violence through a phone interpreter might make clients nervous, but it usually doesn't stop them from using the service.

"By the time people come to us, they are usually so desperate for help they will do whatever it takes to get their message across," Doing agreed.

Due to the sensitivity of the topics discussed, Heartly House shies away from having victims' children serve as interpreters. But at the Frederick Community Action Agency, family members often fill the interpreter role for languages other than English or Spanish.

In some cases, foreign language-speaking clients prefer to have a friend or family member interpret for them even when a bilingual employee or outside interpreter is available, according to Janet Jones, the agency's coordinator of medical services.

Pierson also highlighted the value of family members acting as interpreters.

"It helps smooth the whole process — not just the language, but the cultural divide," she said.

The cultural divide

Language itself isn't the only barrier between foreign language-speaking clients and the agencies that serve them. Cultural differences in the implication of seeking free services or stigma around certain conditions also play a role.

Dr. Jacqueline Badro teared up during an interview with a *News-Post* reporter as she recalled her trepidation on her initial visit to the Community Action Agency's clinic.

Badro moved from Syria to Frederick in 2014. She turned to the clinic for treatment for a serious medical condition. She declined to share specifics of the condition for this story.

Though Badro's native tongue is Syrian Arabic, her hesitation was not related to language. She never needed an interpreter to communicate with her care provider because she already spoke at least

conversational English.

Badro instead framed her emotions as a result of an unexpected role reversal. After a career caring for others as a physician in Syria, she was now the one in need of help.

"I was embarrassed and shy because I'm used to helping," she said. "When you are used to give, and now to take ... it's hard."

Embarrassment and stigma also surround how some in the Hispanic community perceive people with disabilities, according to Moreno. He spoke of one client whose parents had kept her secluded at home for years while in their native country because of her developmental disability.

"It's a whole different worldview," he said of many Latin American countries' perceptions of disabilities.

It's also the opposite of The Arc's mission, which is to help clients with disabilities participate as fully as possible in public society, as stated on the organization's website.

Part of Moreno's job is giving clients' families the tools to advocate for this, he said. That he is also Hispanic helps, he said.

"A lot of Hispanic heritage is about trust," he said. "You really appreciate who they are, where they come from, their traditions."

Brunal also highlighted her firsthand experience as a benefit in fostering relationships with clients. When she moved to the United States in 2002, she spoke very little English, she said.

She found ample resources for Spanish speakers in her first home in Baltimore, but was in for a bit of a shock when she relocated to Frederick a few years later.

"It was a lot harder," she said.

Asked if she's seen improvement in the county's resources and services for foreign language speakers in the intervening decade, she answered "absolutely."

But there was still room for improvement. Brunal named more interpreters for French speakers as one way the Frederick Community Action Agency could bolster its services.

James' focus was on expanded outreach, which would necessitate funding to grow the organization's outreach department beyond its current staff of one person.

"We know they're there," she said of more foreign language speakers who could benefit from Heartly House's services.

Ventura was willing to act as an unofficial spokeswoman for The Arc to help others avoid the lengthy and roadblock-ridden journey she experienced trying to find help for her daughter.

"If I see a mother has a baby with the same problem, sure, I would tell them," she said.

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