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Photographer Turns Public Health Worker in San Fernando Valley

By Clarissa Hastings

In 2023, the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (DPH) began a pilot project known as Community Public Health Teams (CPHT). Multi-disciplinary teams, each made up of a DPH representative, a community-based organization, and a health care partner, will take on the huge undertaking of reaching a minimum of 8,000 households every year.

In the San Fernando Valley, there are two teams. StrengthUnited is a non-profit organization that works to end interpersonal violence and provide support to those who have survived abuse while Northeast Valley Health Corporation provides comprehensive primary healthcare services to underserved communities. In preparation, the team began hiring Community Health Workers (CHWs), who will be trained to conduct household screenings, provide health care referrals, and connect community members to needed social supports and resources. The first CHW to be brought on board is Jorge Santos.

Meet Jorge Santos

Jorge came to the United States from Venezuela seeking asylum a little over four years ago. In Venezuela, Jorge was a photojournalist capturing everything from wedding ceremonies to natural disasters. When he developed his first film, he realized he had found his passion and never viewed it as “work.” He felt exhilarated and had no problem working long hours and weekends to capture the perfect shot. He excelled in this career, eventually becoming editor and supervising 14 people. Unfortunately, Jorge was forced to make a difficult decision and sought asylum in the U.S. with his wife.



Upon entering the U.S., Jorge had two main priorities; he needed to find a job to make a living and he wanted to do everything in his power to give back the U.S. for providing sanctuary. Not long after, Jorge was approached by a representative from StrengthUnited to get involved in Close to Home, an adult leadership program that focuses on community mobilization. The group is aptly named, Voces del Cambio. The first thing he learned with StrengthUnited was the cycle of violence. Learning about the different forms of violence empowered him to engage in conversations with others in his community and share resources. Jorge was quick to volunteer his time to the community and he beams with pride when talking about working with Voces del Cambio. He is often seen leading community conversations at community events about violence prevention. Watching younger generations get involved and work to make their communities a better place has been very inspiring and fills him with hope.

When StrengthUnited staff created the CHW CPHT position, they knew Jorge was the right fit because he embodies the work and aligns with their values in putting community first. As Jorge steps into this new CHW role, he hopes to show individuals that they are not alone and help people find the support they need. For Jorge, helping people that live in his community is the best way to give back to this country. He believes in a quote by Sebastião Salgado, a famous photographer, “the people that have the least are usually the people that give the most.” Jorge’s tenacity and strong moral compass will allow him to take this project to new heights.