

# Community health care benefits everyone

The Durham County Health Department wants to make one thing clear. Public health is a community issue that affects us all.

Omitting certain groups from this process can have grave consequences for the county. This message comes from Health Department Director Brian Letourneau in response to immigration raids and arrests in other counties that have immigrants nervous about receiving basic services in North Carolina. LeTourneau hopes to restore trust in public health services among the Latino community.

"We would never, ever release medical information to anybody," says Letourneau. He states that it is in the county's best interest to keep the entire population healthy, regardless of immigration status. "There is no purpose to frightening this population. Public health is a community issue, not an individual issue. Our job is to provide basic medical care to everyone."

For issues such as infectious disease, prenatal care and family planning, access to medical care can greatly influence the health of the wider community.

"If a group is afraid to receive flu shots, or treat



tuberculosis it could lead to an epidemic. These issues can impact the community financially and place a greater burden on social services," said Assistant Director of the Durham County Health Department Gayle Harris. The Health Department now offers prenatal care, maternity coordination, infectious disease prevention and management, dental care for pregnant woman and children, and family planning on a sliding scale fee basis.

For the Health Department, gaining back trust is of vital importance since it helped launch a collaborative program to provide free nurse visits to all parents of newborns in Durham County. The program, called Durham Connects, is a rare resource for parents during the early weeks of their baby's life. But occasionally Latino parents can be wary of letting a nurse into their home.

"Once the families understand we will be coming to weigh the baby and support the family, they relax and are pleased to

## SERVICES

Durham County Health Department services available to the Latino Community:

- Durham Connects newborn visiting program
  - Prenatal care
  - Maternity Care Coordination
  - Infectious Disease Control
  - Dental Care
  - Family Planning
- Patients can receive more information about these programs at [www.durhamcounty.gov](http://www.durhamcounty.gov) and [www.durhamconnects.org](http://www.durhamconnects.org).

have the service," said bilingual Durham Connects nurse Martha Beach. "This community has a natural inclination to rally around and celebrate their babies. If we approach them with this same attitude, we're reinforcing something that is very natural and healthy."

El Centro Hispano, a Durham-based non-profit organization focused on assisting the Latino community, is seeing reluctance to participate in public programs because of the changing immigration policies. "People are nervous, they don't want to give their numbers or names. This is beyond our control. They feel more comfortable with El Cen-

tro, but they don't know the other [programs]. It will be a long process in which the community will rebuild confidence. When nothing goes wrong, they will begin to trust these services again," said El Centro Executive Director Rosa Gattas Mayorga.

El Centro is working to help rebuild that trust. "We promote programs to the community — to try and show them this is separate from immigration."

Today, 60 percent of obstetric and gynecologic patients at the Durham County Health Department are Latino. The department does not record race or nationality, nor does it ask about legal status. The same goes for Lincoln Community Health Center, which last year treated more than 34,000 patients, 35 percent of them Latino. Lincoln was one of the first health centers to hire a Spanish-speaking interpreter in 1994. At Lincoln, as with the Health Department, confidentiality is paramount.

"We protect everyone's information," said Dr. Evelyn Schmidt, Director of Lincoln Community Health Center. "We are a federally qualified community health center and we do not have to ask for your legal status." Schmidt continues

passionately about the importance of Latino immigrants to the Durham Community. From work to taxes, to purchase power, the Latino community contributes more than most realize. "We encourage anyone in Durham to visit our clinic. We respect each person regardless of who they are or where they come from," said Schmidt.

Ultimately Letourneau says, he understands the political climate has changed for immigrants. He says that while globalization continues to dictate migration trends, it is hard to say whether the influx of immigrants from Mexico and South America will continue in the Triangle. But Letourneau is certain about one thing — the Durham County Health Department will provide health care and protect their privacy no matter what — not just because it is the law, but because it is the right thing to do, for all of us.

Durham Connects is a collaboration of the Durham Family Initiative, itself a partnership of the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University and the Center for Child and Family Health, and the Durham County Health Department. It is funded by The Duke Endowment. For more information, please visit [www.durhamconnects.org](http://www.durhamconnects.org) or call (919) 668-3279.