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Cecilia Prostano / The Hartford Courant

■ Maria Serrano, right, plays with 3-month-old twins, Emmanuel and Daniel Juarbe, held by Iraida Juarbe of Hartford. The health

educator visits Hispanic women, helping them through their pregnancies, offering encouragement and advice.

## Childbirth educators target Hispanic women

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Wanda Rios was five months pregnant and hoping to have a healthy girl when her obstetrician shook his head and warned her that something might be terribly wrong.

In English, the doctor said the baby growing inside her might be born with Down's syndrome. Although the medical term was foreign and the language difficult to understand, the warning made her quake with terror.

In her native Puerto Rico, Rios might have turned to a *comadrona*, a midwife who guides women through childbirth from the pregnancy test to the baby's first check-up.

In Hartford, she sought the help of Maria Serrano, a health educator who fills the shoes of a midwife through a program designed to help Hispanic women deliver healthy babies.

Called Comadrona, the program was created by the Hispanic Health Council in 1983 to bridge cultural and economic barriers that contribute to alarmingly high mortality rates among Hispanic babies, said Grace Damio, the program coordinator.

Two health educators visit the homes of pregnant women and new mothers, reminding them to keep medical appointments and take their vitamins, explaining the processes of labor and birth, and wiping away post-partum tears.

Carmen Medina, the *comadrona* who works with about 100 teenage mothers each year, has helped countless pregnant young women break the news to their parents. She enrolled a 13-year-old in a

school for pregnant teenagers and recently secured apartments for three young women and their babies.

Serrano, who counsels adult mothers, has helped battered women flee their abusive partners, comforted women who have chosen to have abortions, reported gas leaks in apartments she has visited, and scoured tag sales for baby clothes and furniture for her needy clients.

About the only thing these Puerto Rican-American *comadronas* don't do is deliver babies.

Wanda Rios cried on the phone when she called Serrano the first time. She had been sent for amniocentesis, a test in which doctors can examine the genetic structure of a fetus by withdrawing fluid from the mother's womb.

"She was hysterical," Serrano recalled. "She said, 'I'm scared.' She didn't know where to have the tests done."

Serrano ordered all the information she could gather about fetal testing and spent hours explaining the procedures and the risks to Rios in Spanish. But mostly, she held her hand and told her not to worry.

Her latest visit to Rios' apartment on Benton Street was a happier event. The tests showed the baby would not be born with Down's syndrome, a genetic defect that causes retardation and other health problems. Serrano gently rubbed her client's bulbous belly as the pair chatted about an impending delivery by Caesarean section.

Asked what she would have done without Serrano's advice, Rios spared no emotion. "I would have died," the 34-year-old, who already has an 11-year-old son, said in Spanish. "I didn't know enough

English to ask the doctor why the test is done and the extent of the tests."

Although Rios was preparing to have her baby delivered surgically, Serrano was planning to introduce her to Lydia Zayas, a 30-year-old mother from Ward Street who was nervous about labor before she gave birth to a son three weeks earlier.

One of Comadrona's missions is to give Hispanic women in Hartford the type of social supports — including friendships — they may have left behind in Puerto Rico.

But many of the program's services are more practical. After showing her movies about infant development and childbirth and talking to her about family planning, infant nutrition and parenting, Serrano took Zayas to a tag sale, where the mother-to-be bought a crib.

"If you go into a person's house and there's a gas leak or rats, the person's mind is not going to be on what you're there to tell them," said Damio, explaining that many women's everyday lives must be put in order before they can worry about the technicalities of prenatal care.

Though the Comadrona program was designed for Hispanic women in the primarily Puerto Rican Frog Hollow and South Green neighborhoods, any pregnant woman from those neighborhoods is eligible for home visits, Damio said.

Similar maternal and infant health programs operate in Hartford's other low-income neighborhoods, but Comadrona is designed to meet the special needs of Hispanic women, Damio said.

Whether they are recent immigrants or have lived in the area for

years, many Hispanic women in Hartford have never learned to speak English and are isolated because they lack the skills to find jobs.

Many are so poor that they can't afford bus or cab fare to prenatal clinics or baby sitters to care for older children while the unborn baby is examined.

Economic problems are compounded by cultural barriers that often prevent recent immigrants from arriving promptly for clinic appointments or questioning doctors when they don't understand.

"In Puerto Rico, many clinics don't require appointments, you can just drop in," Damio said, explaining how some Hispanic women miss out on regular pre-natal care. "Here, appointments are at specific times which is sometimes a difficult adjustment for people to make."

Although no statistics are available to prove that the *comadronas* have contributed to the births of healthier babies, nurses at Hartford Hospital's obstetrics clinic praised the service.

"If a patient has started [at the] clinic and maybe she missed an appointment or two and we can't contact her, they are so helpful," said Claire Eddy, nurse manager of the hospital's clinic.

Eddy said *comadronas* Serrano and Medina reinforce the instructions given to pregnant women by clinic doctors and nurses.

Damio said the idea is simple. "People are isolated here, they don't have access to information, services or social support networks," she said. "Just the sense of having someone you can depend on, having someone walk them through the system is not there."