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Public Health Hero: Elena Bastida

Elena Bastida, PhD, University of North Texas, Health Sciences Center, School of Public Health

Elena Bastida is a national expert in Hispanic health issues, and knows that good information is only half the battle in improving peoples' health. "Research on the social and behavioral aspects of health is crucial to getting the information to the people who need it and resonating with them. We need research to improve the way we provide health and health information to the population as a whole - if you are better informed, you will be smarter and more careful when accessing health services and taking care of yourself."



Elena Bastida, PhD, understands the importance of public health research in its many facets. She studies Hispanic populations in her home state of Texas, contributing to important research findings on how to improve health for some of the poorest counties in the country. She also works in the communities, interacting with these populations and putting into practice the valuable knowledge gained from public health research. Through a National Institutes of Health behavioral and social research study with these communities, she observed that "lecturing doesn't really work unless you make it interactive. Then knowledge becomes visible and the importance of community becomes apparent."

Bastida has been a "U.S.-Mexico border person" almost her entire life, doing public health-related and nutrition research in border areas. Her research in diabetes and obesity led her to realize the impact she could have in these communities by using her numbers to translate the knowledge into action.

"I have seen the direct ravages of diabetes. The area I live in is very hot and people don't have air conditioning so they sit outside on their porches. Many are amputees, many adult men who don't look over 50, with both legs amputated from diabetes. Just driving around my community I realized what huge health issues we have. I learned how vital community-based participatory research is from my field director Armando Dominguez."

Bastida and her team have created successful obesity and diabetes reduction and management programs in these economically deprived and sometimes unincorporated areas of south Texas.

"What always touches my heart is how much people want to learn; many people are grateful to the programs for the weight loss but more grateful for the knowledge, how to treat and learn about diabetes, how to read labels, etc. Their eagerness to learn and do better is inspiring for me. When our participants come back and tell us they feel empowered from what my group has provided for them -- when they share stories with me of going home and emptying their refrigerators of the high-fat and high-sugar foods, replacing them with healthier options, of telling their grandchildren to drink more water and less soda, and actually bringing them in to learn

firsthand -- that's when I know we need the means to make sure we can get this information out to people and that all Americans have access to health care, so they are given the necessary tools to take better care of themselves."