

THE ROAD TO LITERACY

Spanish used as first step to learning English

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For the students who attend classes at the Walnut Place townhomes in Greenfield, literacy isn't about reading and writing English yet.

As indigenous Oaxacans who speak primarily Mixteco, Triqui and other native languages, their challenge is attaining literacy in Spanish before they can make the transition to learning English.

In February, 28 adults started Spanish literacy classes offered by the Community Housing Systems and Planning Association (CHISPA) and funded through a \$45,000 grant from the Community Foundation for Monterey County's Literacy Campaign. In May, 24 of them completed the first 14-week session of classes, which will continue with a second session beginning in October.

Mostly farmworkers in their late teens to mid-30s, many with children, the students learned from an instructor and two translators how to read and write in Spanish, as well as fill out forms that would help them apply for financial and health-care assistance. Two day care workers watched the students' children while they learned, and each student earned a \$20 stipend, which served as a modest incentive.

Ruth Rodriguez, CHISPA's community services coordinator, said the benefits of literacy gained through the classes will extend beyond the students.

"We realized this program didn't just serve 28 individuals, but 28 families," Rodriguez said.

CHISPA officials have already applied for a second round of funding through the Literacy Campaign that would pay for English as a Second Language classes for the first group of students, who could then move on to conventional schools to continue their education. The funding would also pay for a second group of students to begin Spanish literacy classes.

Designed to improve literacy and expand educational and employment opportunities, the program is one of several funded through the Literacy Campaign, which was launched by the Community Foundation in January last year.

The campaign awarded its first round of grants — \$300,000 in all — to a variety of community-based programs in December as part of a five-year, multi-million-dollar "civic engagement initiative."

This year, the campaign plans to distribute about \$600,000 in grants.

On Aug. 28, the Board of Supervisors recognized the work of the Literacy Campaign and other people's efforts to improve literacy in the community by declaring Sept. 8-14 as Monterey County Literacy Week in conjunction with the United Nations' International Literacy Day.

According to the board resolution designating Literacy Week, 55 percent of adults seeking county services say their inability to speak English is a barrier.

For many of them, a lack of literacy in Spanish is a barrier to learning English, said Rodriguez.

Tom Melville, director of development for the Community Foundation, said research indicates that 25 percent of all local adults read at fourth-grade level or lower, which affects their access to opportunities in nearly every area, including employment.

Lack of literacy "affects every level of life in Monterey County," Melville said. "Where it hits home the hardest is in the family. If that adult can't read, do you think they're going to be helping their child read? Probably not.

"It cuts across every area of the community, but we're really focusing on young adults and especially young parents. We want to make sure that if they want literacy that they have access to (instruction)."

Also using Spanish literacy as a gateway to learning English, the Soledad Adult School employed a Literacy Campaign grant to bring Plazas Comunitarias programs and financial literacy classes to Soledad.

Plazas Comunitarias uses educational materials provided by the Mexican government to help people gain Spanish fluency en route to learning English, while the financial literacy classes help people develop skills such as creating a personal budget, understanding banking and the relative advantages of owning or renting a home.

Other programs funded by the Literacy Campaign include:

- Chartwell School Outreach in Seaside, which received \$30,000 for literacy educator and tutor training for those who teach adult students, many with learning difficulties.
- Monterey County Free Libraries: \$45,000 to expand its Families for Literacy adult-children tutoring at the Seaside and Soledad libraries.
- Alisal Community Healthy Start: \$100,000 for basic literacy programs in East Salinas and Soledad communities.
- North Monterey County Unified School District: \$40,000 for an adult literacy program in Castroville.
- Central Coast Citizenship Project: \$20,000 for workplace literacy programs in King City and Greenfield.
- Volunteer Center of Monterey County: \$20,000 to recruit literacy volunteers.

On a smaller scale, the Steinbeck Rotary Club's Salinas Valley Literacy Foundation awarded its first round of grants earlier this year.

According to Literacy Foundation secretary Becky Mier, a total of \$1,200 was distributed, with \$500 going to Monterey Park School's library, \$500 to the Steinbeck Rotary's dictionary project, which is focused on 1,100 third- graders in East Salinas, and \$200 to Poder Popular's dictionary project in Greenfield.

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