

SUCCESS STORY: MARIA TORRES

By Jesus Garcia, Special Assistant, Office of Public Affairs, Administration for Children & Families, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, (Published 12.9.2014 in The Family Room Blog)

Earlier this month, ACF's Office of Family Assistance hosted its fifth annual Health Profession Opportunity Grants grantee meeting, "Building Pathways to a Brighter Future," in Washington, D.C. This gave me a chance to connect with people with great success stories. An HPOG student spotlighted at this meeting was Maria E. Torres of Bridgeport, Conn.

Torres had never been to the nation's capital. Although the weather was cold and rainy that week, she was beaming with excitement, being able to see historic landmarks and coming to speak about her experience as an HPOG participant.

Before sharing her story on stage with people from all over the country who administer the program at the local level, Torres sat with me and opened up about her journey.

The once-promising high school student excelled in math and had plans to go to college to become a CNA (Certified Nursing Assistance) just like her mother. But Torres was derailed. Life happened. Things didn't go as planned. After ups and downs, the final blow came when she lost her job.

"I was laid off in 2011," said Torres, who went on assistance and took whatever job came her way.

The young mother remembers dreading going to her dead-end jobs at call centers. She spent days in a tiny cubicle calling customers and receiving calls from impatient people attacking her with profanity, making her workday even longer. But she needed the work. Torres had two children to feed and bills to pay.

"I don't want to do this anymore," recalled Torres, about her lowest days. "I wanted to go back to school and get to where I know I wanted to be."

Like her mother, Torres battles Lupus, a systemic autoimmune disease. Being in and out of hospitals took its toll on the family, but she never gave up.



SUCCESS STORY: MARIA TORRES



In the fall of 2013, Torres came across an opportunity at Health Career Academy, a program run by The Workplace, Inc., to resurrect her dream of becoming a health professional through the HPOG program provided by OFA.

The HPOG program is made possible thanks to the Affordable Care Act enacted in 2010, which allowed OFA to administer grants to build up the nation's health care workforce. The HPOG program provides education and training to TANF recipients and other low-income individuals for occupations in the health care field that pay well and are expected to either experience labor shortages or be in high demand. In its first three years, HPOG has served 24,558 participants across 23 states, 32 grantees, and five tribal organizations.

As of today, Torres has taken full advantage of the program — earning certificates as a CNA and Patient Care Technician, which includes certifications in electrocardiogram (EKG) and phlebotomy, plus many other certifications in health care business, human anatomy and biology classes.

“The program assistance was very helpful considering I wasn't working and I couldn't get a student loan because I already had a student loan that I owe on. It was a big blessing,” Torres said. From providing a bus pass to get to school to paying for tuition and books, Torres was empowered to succeed on day one. “They even provided my uniforms, shoes and a stethoscope — all the instruments I would need,” she said.

For her part, Torres does community service in the health care field to give back to the community by volunteering at Bridgeport Rescue Mission, an agency that helps the homeless and addicted. She signs up for any workshop that will allow her to become a better health care professional.

When asked where she would like to be 10 years from now, Torres responded, “Working for a dialysis center, being in a steady position. I would like to become a dialysis RN in the long run.”

In the coming days, while many Americans will celebrate the holidays with their families, Torres will be on call in her brand new internship she just started with a home caregiver center. She wants to make sure she stands out and gives her new assignment 100 percent.

SUCCESS STORY: MARIA TORRES



“We usually have a big Christmas dinner and go to church, but we’ll find a night to celebrate it. Work has to come first. It has to right now. I’m trying to get out of this rut that we’ve been in and school has lifted me up,” said Torres, who hopes to inspire her son Tyrrell, 15, and daughter Marialy, 12, to never give up on their dreams.

She motivates her children on a daily basis to keep focus. “I tell them to study hard because that is what is going to keep you going forward in life. Stay in school,” Torres said. Tyrrell hopes to be a pilot in the U.S. Air Force, while Marialy hopes to follow in her family’s footsteps and become a nurse. “She sees me in my scrubs and says Mommy’s a nurse!” laughs Torres.

In January, Torres will start an additional course in phlebotomy (her favorite part as a health care professional). She wants to perfect her craft and work with the local hospital to get hands on experience. “I want to be confident in my own skills before I start working with others,” she said.

Torres looked forward to sharing her story with grantee representatives that afternoon at the HPOG meeting because she wanted them to see what students go through to get to these programs and how grateful they are for the opportunity. But she was happy I was sharing her story with a wider audience through ACF’s Family Room Blog. She wants to encourage folks, who may be unemployed or in a bad place, “not to give up.”

“Anyone who comes through the program would be blessed to do it because it helps a lot,” said Torres. **“The program got me through a lot. It got me to where I want to be right now.”**