



Technical Assist – Barry’s Academy for Better Communities gives grassroots groups the support they need to get things done

A new playground, a litter-free park, a reading group; like many of the other mothers she knows, Sweetwater resident Tamara García wants to help. In the past, it may have been difficult for her to figure out exactly how to get started. After all, the leap from good intentions to community involvement can be a tough one to breach.

But Garcia doesn’t hesitate to sign up to volunteer for community service projects or events at her children’s school thanks to Grupo Bajo el Arbol (Group Under the Tree), a grassroots group of volunteers, primarily immigrants from Central and South America and the Caribbean, who were brought together by the common goal of improving their community and their children’s educational experience. In fact, many of the group’s activities revolve around Sweetwater Elementary School and take place at Carlow Park, across from the school.

“I went with other people from Grupo Bajo el Árbol. We helped by registering the people who wanted to lend a hand; we painted benches, put in new plants, mulched the area, served lunch,” García says, describing a recent event held to clean up and refurbish a local park.

At any given time there are about 17 to 20 volunteers, mostly mothers, many of them newcomers to the school and community, participating in activities depending on their interest and availability. But there is a core of about eight women, including group facilitator and cofounder, Virginia Rego, who have been active since its beginning five years ago. Together, the women have organized reading groups, arts and crafts fairs and virtually “jumpstarted” the school’s PTA.

“In our mission, the families’ involvement in the community is very important,” Rego says. “It is more than receiving services, but assuming a proactive stance in the process.”

In her efforts to help the group become as proactive as possible, Rego, who is now part of the nonprofit Switchboard of Miami, is supported by Barry University’s Academy for Better Communities (ABC) which, as part of the School of Social Work, provides technical assistance and brings the university’s resources – expertise, faculty and students – to community groups such as Grupo Bajo el Arbol. Established in 1994, ABC is mostly sustained through a combination of local, state and federal grants, as well as by donations.

Through the Neighborhood Technical Assistance Program, one of the Academy’s main components, Director Maritza Cabrera serves as a liaison between community groups and outside agencies or organizations helping the groups obtain the information needed to develop a project, access services and benefit from prevention programs. In fact, through its role as intermediary, the Neighborhood Technical Assistance Program plays a crucial role in keeping community and grassroots groups alive. Since they lack the resources to pay for outside consultants, without the program, most of these groups would have difficulty connecting to agencies and organizations that can help them carry out their projects.

“Technical assistance can mean guiding the partnership process, or sharing specific know-how with the partners so that they can do the work they need to do, or providing the training they require,” says Cabrera,



who developed a video chronicling the experiences of Grupo Bajo el Árbol members to inspire residents in other communities. “It can also mean bringing faculty and students into the community to participate in needs assessments or program evaluations, or deliver workshops on topics such as collaboration and conflict, crisis intervention and youth issues.

“Maritza is the person who is always aware of the type of training that our staff and residents need. She visits our community, meets with the members of our group. She provides us with guidance as to what is the best and most appropriate path to follow,” Rego says.

Following the right path can prove crucial when a community needs to respond to a disaster. That’s why Cabrera also collaborates closely with Lorenzo Sánchez, Emergency Management Coordinator of the Miami-Dade County Department of Emergency Management and Homeland Security.

“We help them strategize what they can do when emergency services are not available, with a hands-on approach so that they can be self-sufficient until professional responders can come to the area,” Sanchez says.

Although the communities have yet to be tested by a disaster, Sánchez is a firm believer that education and training are essential in dealing effectively with such an event.

Cabrera and the staff at the Academy also believe they can play a vital role in preparing a community to meet the challenges posed by the deep budget cuts and economic instability that threaten many of South Florida’s underserved communities.

“As we have seen, the biggest challenge is that while local, state and federal moneys are diminished, the need of South Florida’s communities continues to rise,” says Dr. Debra McPhee, dean of Barry’s School of Social Work. “And this requires even more of a commitment to helping these communities. It’s a real struggle, but one that we are committed to undertake as a school.”