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House candidate
KO'd himself.
George Díaz, B1



OLDER HISPANICS STRESS SYSTEM



HILDA M. PEREZ/ORLANDO SENTINEL

Maria Judith Sanchez of Oviedo is still mourning her mother, Maria Celsa Marcano, who died in April in a nursing home at age 83.

By ARELIS HERNÁNDEZ || SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

Florida is facing an explosion in its number of elderly Hispanic residents, raising concerns about the strain on a health-care system little prepared to handle their unique needs.

In 1995, U.S. census officials said Florida would face a 102 percent increase in Hispanics age 65 and older by 2010, from about 237,000 to 480,000. By 2007, the Hispanic elderly population had already increased by 124 percent to 530,000 people, or 12.5 percent of the senior population, according to Department of Elder Affairs data.

In Central Florida alone, the Hispanic senior population has grown from 19,000 to nearly 60,000 — or about a 200 percent increase — since 2000, according to census data. And Hispanics age 80 and older numbered 60,000 across the state in 2000 but are expected to nearly double by

2010, increasing at thrice the rate of non-Hispanic whites in the same age bracket, census data indicated.

Among the chief concerns:

■ Many are Spanish speakers who fear and distrust the medical system. As a result,

PLEASE SEE **ELDERLY, A8**

Aging counties

Elderly Hispanics
projected in 2030:

81,747

Orange

Now: 26,041

10,912

Lake

Now: 2,612

42,030

Osceola

Now: 9,855

15,422

Brevard

Now: 4,868

20,867

Seminole

Now: 7,356

19,581

Volusia

Now: 6,116

ELDERLY

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they are reluctant to seek care, getting sicker by the time they see a doctor.

■ Hispanics are prone to diabetes, heart disease and many of the chronic conditions that can plague the elderly, including Alzheimer's.

■ Economic factors — low education and poverty — create additional obstacles for Hispanic elders who often lack insurance and experience in dealing with health-care services. Consequently, many will be left without the care they need.

"We just don't have the support and infrastructure within our society to support the growing needs of the Hispanic aging population," said Dr. Yanira Cruz, president and chief executive officer of the National Hispanic Council on Aging in Washington.

The need for services is particularly significant in Central Florida, which is home to a growing Hispanic community of more than 528,000 people, or 17 percent of the population, according to the latest 2006 estimates. Statewide, Hispanics make up 19 percent of the population.

Nurses and doctors who speak Spanish are sorely needed, experts agreed. But the language barrier isn't the only concern — sometimes there are cultural differences that can affect a patient's care.

"Speaking Spanish is not enough," said Dr. Jane Delgado of the Washington-based National Alliance for Hispanic Health. "You have to understand the context in which a person lives, their relationship to family, the housing they need, transportation" and other services.

If the health professional is not attuned to cultural nuances, an opportunity is missed to get information across for the best care, Cruz said.

Josephine Mercado is founder and executive director of Hispanic Health Initiatives in Casselberry, which works to educate the Hispanic community about health resources. Mercado said that often, Hispanics simply have no idea where to get help and information, or they

prefer to keep to themselves.

"People want to solve their own problems even though there is treatment and health care available," Mercado said.

Hispanics are 38 percent less likely than non-Hispanics to visit a doctor, and more than 25 percent have never had their cholesterol levels checked or ever had a colonoscopy, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Traditionally, Hispanics take care of their elderly at home, and it's a household chore to make sure grandmother and grandfather have everything they need. Educating families on proper care also means teaching caregivers that they shouldn't feel guilty when they need to place their loved one in a facility.

"We are trained to be responsible for our parents *hasta al final*, to the very end," said Maria Judith Sanchez of Oviedo.

Sanchez said she faced a "cultural trauma" as she searched for health care that fit the needs of her elderly Spanish-speaking mother from Puerto Rico, who suffered a stroke.

Sanchez said she encountered problems with everything from Medicaid paperwork to the lack of social connectedness her mother felt at certain nursing homes. She said her mother found it difficult to communicate pain to nurses and wouldn't eat the food that was served. It wasn't until Sanchez enrolled her mother in a facility with Hispanic staff and residents in east Orlando that she felt at home.

"If I ever win the lottery, I would construct a nursing home to fill the needs of elderly Hispanics," Sanchez said, whose mother recently died.

If health providers don't tailor their services to the needs of this community, Delgado said, the nation and state could be facing a dire situation for the elderly in the coming years, both Hispanic and non-Hispanic.

"Health and human services are not a discussion that follows economic models," Delgado said, "Health is about life and death."

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“Older Hispanics stress system” by Arelis Hernandez

The impetus behind my journalistic career has been to elevate my community with information. I found with this story a perfect opportunity to raise concern about the lack of resources available to Hispanic seniors in Central Florida. I found it amazing that in a region with more than half a million Hispanics, there were no adequate health initiatives for seniors. The meat of this story came from projections from Orange County's Council on Aging that estimated an incredible increase in this demographic. So, I took the numbers deeper and for two weeks I calculated percent change and cross-referenced state numbers for federal ones. After making sure everything was accurate, my editor informed me the story had A-1 potential. That is exactly where it ended up. I am proud of the work because it was by far the largest project I took on during my time in Orlando. The best part of the experience was having people from the Latino community call and thank me for providing the information. I was able to connect ailing seniors to people who could help them. I will never forget the blessing one Oviedo woman showered on me upon reading the article. The subsequent response from the community reminded me why I chose journalism over other professions.

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