

SIMI VALLEY COMMUNITY CARE CENTER

TESTIMONY OF

Maria Hamilton  
Simi Valley Community Center  
Simi Valley, California

before

The House Government Reform Committee  
Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy  
and Human Resources

The Honorable Mark Souder, Chairman

Monday January 12, 2004  
11:30 a.m.

Los Angeles Christian School  
2003 East Imperial Highway  
Los Angeles, CA

Thank you, Mr. Chairman for the opportunity to share for the record the many blessings bestowed on us through our work at the Simi Valley Community Center.

My name is Maria Hamilton and The Lord Jesus gave me the privilege to serve him as a Pastor at Mision Hispana Biblica in the City of Simi Valley California. About seven years ago, God put a vision in my heart to expand and extend the walls of the church and help the people that need help in the community. I have encouraged the congregation to embrace the vision. We rented a space in a shopping center and opened the doors to serve the people with English classes, computer classes, job placements and what ever their needs are. Six months later, the place was too small because the programs were successful and we were growing, so we rented a bigger space. We have been open for a year and half and we still are growing with three more rooms that we have rented. Every day that goes by more people come for help. Currently, we serve about fifteen hundred people.

Two years ago I was invited to attend the 2001 National Hispanic Prayer Breakfast with President Bush in Washington DC. There, I heard for the first time about the faith-based and community initiative. I had the opportunity to speak with Senator Diane Feinstein. I told her that we

as Pastors are not just helping the people in a spiritual way but in a holistic way. At least that is what I do. I teach the people to love God and trust in Him but I also teach them to love this country that has opened the doors for us and has given more opportunities, and us better and to respect and obey all the laws.

On July 7<sup>th</sup>, two months after this trip to Washington, we opened the doors of Simi Valley Community Care Center; in a miraculous way the Lord connected me with two wonderful Christian organizations, Children Hunger Fund and World Vision. I partnered with these organizations and they supply me with everything that I needed to start functioning. A few months after Rev. Thomas Ivens, California Field Director for Nueva Esperanza's Hispanic Capacity Project, invited me to become part of this wonderful organization. The Project is presently helping us to organize our operations so that we can be in compliance with the rules and regulations that go along with government funding. Through a series of training seminars, the Hispanic Capacity Project is also working to build and expand our capacity so that we may continue to serve our community as well as find new ways to serve our people.

Through Nueva Esperanza's Hispanic Capacity Project we have learned about grants that the city offers to organizations that help the community. We applied for the City Block Grant and the City of Simi Valley awarded us the first grant of twenty thousand dollars. We are working to obtain more grants because we are very desperate for financial help to pay people that work in the Community Center.

Our biggest difficulty is that all the people who work to serve others at the Community Center are volunteers. Not having personnel that are dedicated to work at the Center leads to uncertainty in our ability to meet the needs of our people day in and day out. Our next obstacle is finding financial support so that we can open more programs that the community needs.

We also share the concern of many of our brothers and sisters regarding the constraints placed on us upon receiving federal funds that preclude any discussion of God as part of our service delivery. We struggle between the advantages provided by government funds and the sense that we lose our identity when they give us money, when asked us not to mention God.

My biggest satisfaction is to see lives that are changing. I encourage everybody that comes to the Community Care Center to prepare themselves for a better future. We as Hispanics are the biggest minority group in the United States and we should study and learn the language and skills to obtain better jobs and live better lives. We need to also commit ourselves to help other people that need help and feel lost in this country with a different culture and language.

Homeless people, alcoholics, drug addicts, gang members, prostitutes, and hungry people all come for help. Through these experiences I have learned that you can not just help them by giving them bread or by providing them a place to sleep, but what they are longing for the most is love and a sense of being part of a community. When they can feel that love is sincere, they are able to change. We have seven people with this past that have become new people with a new life who now are helping me to reach more of the people that are hurting and suffering in the streets and are rejected from their families and society. We are not here just because we want to do social work, but we want them to experience and feel the love and strength that the community can give them. Because of this, they are able to encourage others.

Doors have been opened doors that I never thought imaginable, so I am very confident that more doors will open, that more people will be helped and healed. We will work hard helping the poor, delivering the prisoners of addictions, mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual abuse, and encouraging the oppressed and allowing the hopeless see that in God's hands we have hope, peace, joy and love.