

Stride, a Lakewood nonprofit, helps break cycle of poverty

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By **Electa Draper**

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Casandra Lozano was near her breaking point after the sudden violent death of her husband and family debt of \$40,000 forced her to work two full-time jobs and a part-time cleaning job to provide for her three young children. Instead, she had a breakthrough, with help from Stride, a Lakewood nonprofit.

"I knew I had to do something different," the 30-year-old Lozano said.

She had never been on state assistance, but the random shooting death of her husband while he traveled in Mexico, the suicides of friends and a physical attack on her young daughter in the span of a few years finally convinced her she needed help, she said.

Stride, in its modest building at 5400 W. Cedar Ave., has no less a mission than breaking the cycle of poverty. It provides struggling families with individual plans for attaining economic independence and stability.

"It's an amazing gift that we can give," Stride executive director Sarah Maxwell said. "Most people can do a lot with a little opportunity and support."

Stride offers financial, career and education counseling. It provides housing assistance. It furnishes families with refurbished computers and finds opportunities for children, such as tutoring and after-school activities.

"We're jacks of all trades," Maxwell said.

And Stride's six-person staff stands by families until they graduate to the middle class.

Two out of three Stride clients graduate by gaining and holding a job for more than a year at a living wage, the nonprofit states. The average annual income of a new Stride family is \$5,800. That grows to more than \$25,000 by graduation.

Lozano, who graduated from Stride in March 2010, now owns Amazing Hands Massage Therapy, which has two offices and employs eight therapists. She earns about \$85,000 a year and ends her day in time to pick up her children from school.

"My kiddos make me want to be ambitious," Lozano said. "Stride helped me with everything I needed to make it." With help from Stride finding new affordable housing and other government assistance, Lozano was able to take a breather, go back to school and complete a two-year program in massage therapy in one year. It also gave her the time to grieve the loss of her husband.

Her Stride case manager, Carl Hansen, helped her navigate each new challenge.

"Carl's been right there to back me up with everything," she said.



Sarah Maxwell, executive director of Stride, loads a computer monitor as Carl Hansen, far left, case manager with Stride, and Steve Perkins, manager of infrastructure technology at the Colorado Housing and Finance Authority, accompany her. The housing authority donated 40 monitors to Stride. (John Prieto, The Denver Post)

Maxwell said that the two toughest obstacles for families to overcome is the lack of affordable and suitable housing and the effects of negative relationships — everything from a death to divorce, abandonment and domestic violence. Most of Stride's clients are single mothers.

"When the relationships in your life that you should be able to rely on fall apart, it can destabilize any family's financial situation," Maxwell said.

Stride becomes the extended family, support network or community that everyone needs but many don't have, Hansen said.

"It's really all about building relationships," Maxwell said.

Stride is one of several organizations that has received funding through Denver Post Charities Season to Share.

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Stride

Address: 5400 W. Cedar Avenue Lakewood, CO 80226

In operation since: 1991

Number served last year: More than 150 families

Staff: 6

Yearly budget: \$600,000, which includes about \$200,000 in housing funds

Percentage of funds directly given to clients and services: 87 percent