Adelante Healthcare was created nearly four decades ago to address the health needs of rural community members and farm workers (the underserved populations of West Phoenix at the time). Through federal grants and expanded needs, Adelante Healthcare now has nine valley locations! The Adelante Healthcare in Mesa is considered a “big dream,” campus and includes a Women, Infants & Children (WIC) Program to provide free nutrition, health education, and services for infants and children up to age 5.

Dr. Elizabeth Reifsnider, an Associate Dean of Research in the College of Nursing and Health Innovation and a faculty member in the Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention, has a long history of working with WIC programs and is currently partnering with Adelante Healthcare in Mesa on a research project titled Preventing Childhood Obesity Through Early Feeding and Parenting Guidance. This study will compare the effectiveness of community health worker home visits to the standard care received through WIC office visits for preventing obesity in infants. We’d like to share more about the organization’s work and our research partnership from three WIC staff members: Denise Gillett, RD; Norma Castaneda, and Zarina Ahlstrom.

Please describe your background, current position at Adelante.

Zarina Ahlstrom: I have been a Registered Dietitian Nutritionist for 10 years and with Adelante WIC for the past 3.5 years. I am preparing to become an Internationally Board Certified Lactation Consultant (IBCLC) and believe increasing breastfeeding rates is a key to preventing childhood obesity.

Norma Castaneda: I am the Program Manager for this WIC program at Adelante in Mesa.

Denise Gillett: I am a Registered Dietician and Nutrition Manager at Adelante in Mesa where I manage the dieticians in the WIC program.

How would you describe Adelante WIC’s services to the community?

Z: We care about our families...we think about them when we go home and strive to stay as current as we can on resources to help them with whatever needs they have, nutrition or not. WIC is a prevention program and we make a difference in health outcomes for overweight/obesity. We also strive (and succeed) at increasing breastfeeding rates. I see it every day!

N: We offer classes and one-on-one consultation for breastfeeding and nutrition services with certified breastfeeding consultants. We provide services to a diverse clientele including non-English speakers from all around the world so we work hard to meet the health needs of the client using effective and understanding ways.

The CHPDP mission, as a transdisciplinary and collaborative research center, is to enhance the health and well-being of underserved populations across the lifespan with the help of community partners. How do you see Adelante WIC and CHPDP benefitting from this partnership in regards to our missions and your patients?

Z: Our WIC population is diverse, particularly among the different clinics we have throughout Maricopa County. There are different cultures, languages, beliefs, values, and life experiences that challenge us and remind us that while people may have the same financial need for services, they are not all the same. Individual attention is often required to learn more about our clients and how we can best help reach their health goals. I believe awareness plays a large role in health and wellness by providing education and resources so we can fulfill our mission of serving the community. The more we work together, the more “good” we can do.
Research in breastfeeding has really helped us show our clients the lifelong benefits to both the mom and child. I think the research helps spread awareness on the importance of breastfeeding into the community that is supported by strong scientific evidence rather than just expert opinion. All partners have the same overall goal whether it’s an ASU partnership or another partner in the community!

I feel like WIC is such an underdog in the world…we’re not doctors or registered nurses but we are part of healthcare and really focused on prevention on the front-lines. Any study or any research that proves that the work we’re doing is beneficial really is a highlight for us. It allows us to tell our clients that science shows this is best and there are hard data to back up our education programs. That’s why I believe the partnership is so important!

What are the primary health concerns in the communities you serve?

I believe the primary concerns of our WIC population are breastfeeding education and assistance, obesity, food insecurities, and physical activity. Our program here at WIC addresses many of these for those early years and Adelante Healthcare in general addresses these health concerns through the multitude of services they provide. These services include family medicine, pediatrics and women’s health, dental, pharmacy, and a lab…all in one location.

What do you aim to do more of this coming year for Adelante Healthcare, WIC and your work here?

Growth and maintaining clients while providing nutrition education as a resource for clients and their families. We’d like to expand our services to include group nutrition classes and support groups for breastfeeding to offer opportunities for our families to get to know and support each other in order to promote healthy lifestyles. Above all, we want our clients to know we care about them and that they feel uplifted after spending time with us.

There are some goals we’re working toward along with the breastfeeding. Like promoting physical activity and active lifestyles while spreading health awareness to the community and reaching out to those families or working moms who may not always hear that message. We are able to impact that family which impacts the community itself because that awareness is spread. If we can transmit the spread of health information every day, we’re making progress!

What makes you passionate about the work you do?

Empowering families to learn about and take charge of their health through the choices they make for feeding their families and keeping active. I also especially love educating about breastfeeding and helping mothers reach their goals. I enjoy the challenge of the diversity of situations facing our families…there is always something we can help with! Everyone wants the best for our next generation and we serve as that extra support to educate families on how to give that to their kids through the lifestyle habits they pass.

I came from a hospital where you see patients when they’re sick…here we get to see them on an ongoing basis so there’s not the wonder of what happens to them once they leave the facility. I know I’ll see them again soon. Being able to see how much patients enjoy coming to us is also very fulfilling!

I always go back to the moms because at the end of the day, whatever I have left on my plate for the day, I know that there’s a mom who was impacted by our services. Whether it’s actual food they needed or advice and assistance with breastfeeding. To me it’s always about the moms and the babies! Even outside of work I see a mom that’s breastfeeding and let her know she’s doing a good job.

For more information regarding the WIC Nutritional Program, please visit: http://www.adelantehealthcare.com/services/wic-nutritional-program/

The CHPDP is honored to work with Adelante Healthcare and their WIC program and we feel fortunate to share a collaborative mission for improving health in the community.