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Health-care conversation, in Spanish

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DELTONA -- Nayda Cuevas remembers translating for the 23-year-old epileptic woman who had just come from Puerto Rico.

They were at the Deltona Health Center, the only public health clinic in the city. The clinic opened two years ago..

"I interpreted everything for her," Cuevas said.

Cuevas is hoping her partnership with a national project on health care will bring up issues some Hispanics face -- such as language barriers -- at a talk today at Our Lady of the Lakes Catholic Church in Deltona.

The group Cuevas partnered with, the Citizens' Health Care Working Group, is a nationwide project that seeks public feedback on how to improve the nation's health-care system. There have already been four other meetings in Florida, but this is the most unusual, said Cuevas, because the talk will be in Spanish.

Montye Conlan, a member of the working group, said other outreach attempts toward Hispanics have been unsuccessful. But a meeting in Spanish might draw more people.

"To me it's not acceptable to send in the data from Florida without the representation of the Hispanic community," she said. "They are the face of Florida."

Cuevas, group facilitator for MS-Keeters, a local support group for people with multiple sclerosis, said she tries to help Spanish-speaking people navigate the health-care system, which can be very bureaucratic.

"The other barrier is if they are illegal," she said. "Sometimes they don't ask for help because they are scared."

The Citizens' Health Care Working Group was created by the Modernization Improvement Act of 2003 to compile people's recommendations on how to improve the nation's health-care

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system. Those recommendations then go back to Congress for consideration.

Cuevas, who attended a similar gathering in Daytona Beach last month, said she noticed how few Hispanics attended. Of the 50 to 70 people who attended, there was only one other Hispanic, she said.

In Deltona, where 20 percent of the population is Hispanic, the city's only public health center has 75 to 100 patients a week, according to officials with the Volusia County Health Department. Of those, 20 percent speak Spanish, said Brenda Middaugh, the center's nurse practitioner.

Middaugh said the center's bilingual staff helps translate for Spanish-speaking patients. About half of the staff is bilingual, she said.

Because of this, language doesn't seem to be much of a barrier to accessing health care, she said.

"We're a small-knit bunch here and we know our patients," she said. "I haven't had anybody complain."

But Cuevas said many who speak Spanish have concerns about health care and that today's talk is a chance for them to make their voices heard.

"I think it's very important for Hispanics to get involved," she said.

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