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The ADVOCATE

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Sylvia Lara had been living with her husband and two young children in an apartment in Fairfield Court in Stamford for six years when a plan to tear down the beleaguered public housing complex forced them to move out in 2007. For the Guatemalan natives, who made Fairfield Court home after immigrating to the United States, the prospect of relocating was intimidating.

"I felt scared at first," says Lara through a translator. "My kids started crying. We thought, how are we going to afford this? Where are we going to live?"

With the aid of Clyde Evans, a Hope VI caseworker, the family found temporary residence on Lawn Avenue, hired a company to help them move and enrolled their kids in new schools. The move was tough on her family, Lara says, but "with Mr. Clyde here, we made it through."

The Laras are among more than 140 households served by Hope VI, a collaboration between Family Centers and Charter Oak Communities (formerly known as the Stamford Housing Authority) that provides counseling, vocational training and case management services to former residents of Fairfield Court. Initiated in 2004, the program is part of a federally funded city plan to replace some public housing units with mixed-income developments in hopes of reducing crime and improving

the quality of life in these troubled areas.

The Laras, along with dozens of other Fairfield Court households, will begin moving into the new Fairgate Drive development this fall (other residents, meanwhile, have already transferred to the newly constructed Post House on Clinton Avenue and Taylor Street Apartments).

According to Donna Spellman, director of self-sufficiency services at Family Centers, Hope VI has been crucial for residents - especially the elderly, disabled and non-English speakers - displaced as a result of the plan.

"It can be very frightening for people when they have to move," says Spellman. "A lot of families have existing problems - now, on top of that, they have to pick up and relocate. Hope VI provides crucial support during this transition."

That support has gone well beyond helping families adjust to new surroundings - Hope VI caseworkers help clients navigate an often confusing and sometimes unfamiliar world.

Prior to the Laras' move, Evans helped Sylvia Lara enroll in English classes as part of adult continuing education at Stamford Public Schools. And last year, when Lara's husband, a landscaper, was denied unemployment benefits by the state because of an error in his work status, Evans accompanied the family to court in Bridgeport

Partnership helps families through transition

to clear up the issue.

"The paperwork can be very overwhelming," says Evans, one of three Hope VI caseworkers. "I try to help them with that."

The program also has benefited 20 residents of Post House who did not come from Fairfield Court. One of those residents, Jonathan Hart, gets help from his caseworker, Feona Garrick, completing forms for his disability payments. He also receives free health screenings and takes weekly computer classes.

"It's great to have somebody in your corner," says Hart.

Vin Tufo, interim executive director of Charter Oaks Communities, says the program has had "far-reaching benefits for the community."

"Our clients are more self-sufficient, more employable and less a burden on other institutions," he says.

Lara hopes to open up her own cleaning business; Hart cares for his elderly mother and volunteers at St. Luke's Lifeworks.

Advocates for Hope VI ac-

knowledge, the program is costly. Despite interest on the part of the Obama Administration to bolster social programs, federal funds for Hope VI - obtained through a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development grant - could dry up as families begin to settle into Fairgate Drive, Tufo says.

But that's not stopping the Hope VI partners, who have worked together for the past five years. According to Spellman, Family Centers and Charter Oak Communities are looking for organizations to partner with as well as grants to sustain the program. Ideally, they hope to extend services to other public housing.

"Our intention is to keep Hope VI going," says Spellman. "Without these services, people wouldn't have been as successful. Our work has really just begun."

For information about Hope VI, contact Family Centers at 869-4848 or www.familycenters.org.