



April 18, 2016

To Whom It May Concern:

As founding president and CEO of La Maestra Foundation and La Maestra Family Clinic, Inc. doing business as (d.b.a.) La Maestra Community Health Centers (LMCHC), I am writing in full support of the project, *Visual Narratives to Facilitate Immigrant/Refugee Family Mental Health Literacy, Support, and Resilience*. LMCHC is a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) providing comprehensive health, wellness and social services to the underserved communities of central, south, and east San Diego County regardless of an individual's ability to pay. The organization targets underserved, ethnically diverse communities, including immigrants and refugees, and delivers culturally and linguistically competent health care services.

LMCHC is a leading provider for San Diego's East African immigrant and refugee community, the targeted population for this project. Given the elevated mental health needs of members of this community and their reluctance to seek traditional clinical services, there is a strong need to develop and evaluate alternative solutions. The proposed project is particularly promising insofar as it addresses the literacy and language challenges of the community; employs culturally appropriate forms of health communication and education; engages the affected community and stakeholders as full partners in development; supports preventive behavior; and offers services within community settings.

I was involved in the initial discussions of the project with its leaders, Sahra Abdi (Executive Director of United Women of East Africa), Dr. Brian Goldfarb (Dept. of Communication, UCSD), and Amina Sheik Mohamad (Director, Youth and Community Mobilization Programs, UCSD Department of Pediatrics). During the past year one of our mental health staff, Dr. John Kuek, has consulted with the leadership team and provided input on the unique needs and resources of the targeted population.

Dr. John Kuek was born and raised in South Sudan and moved to America in 1995. As an East African refugee himself, Dr. Kuek has been providing therapy to families, individuals, children, and couples with psychological issues from all races and ethnicities with a focus on East African refugees and immigrants struggling with the acculturation process and working to overcoming the trauma of leaving their countries.

His background and extensive experience provides Dr. Kuek vast and relevant knowledge to contribute to this project. It is documented that East African immigrants and refugees have elevated risk for mental health concerns such as, depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These conditions result from experiences of trauma, violence, and adversity in their home countries, during migration, and after resettlement. The majority of the population also faces linguistic and health literacy barriers. East African populations also have distinct cultural understandings of mental health which are often incompatible with Western forms of treatment. These issues dramatically impact access to healthcare and social services for themselves and their families.



One of the core principles of the *Visual Narratives* project is its holistic approach to family mental health, which addresses the multiple challenges of acculturation while it draws on the resilience and resources of the community itself. I believe that the combination of visual storytelling with the affordances of mobile app technology provides the proposed intervention with unique and promising characteristics. The interface will provide multilingual options, which can directly link users to local resources. It will also include a forum for participants to discuss their concerns and receive feedback from the community.

Abdi, Goldfarb, and Sheik Mohamad, together, offer a strong cross-disciplinary set of expertise in the areas of public health, community advocacy, health communication, media development, education, and advocacy. They have forged a close collaborative working relationship and developed an effective network of partnering individuals and organizations. I look forward to the opportunity for LMCHC to partner with this highly regarded team to develop, pilot, and evaluate these promising culturally and linguistically appropriate mental health interventions.

As a dedicated advocate for the needs of underserved populations, with a substantial track record of policy development and advocacy, I believe that this is an important and innovative effort with far reaching potential. If successful, this intervention holds a promise for replication in a range of community settings for addressing health disparities.

Sincerely,

Zara Marseljan

President and Chief Executive Officer

La Maestra Community Health Centers and La Maestra Foundation

John Kuek, PhD., MFTI

La Maestra Community Health Centers