

Rosa Gonzales Gives Emergency Assistance

By Daniel Skeen

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You have a \$932 utility bill and no way to pay it. Imagine that it's winter, and if your electricity gets shut off, you will have no heat. Imagine you have a daughter who just had surgery and can't work and has four kids you for which you are caring. That's only one situation that Rosa Gonzales has dealt with as the emergency assistance coordinator of Catholic Charities of Larimer County. The agency is a recipient of the Northern Colorado Empty Stocking Fund. "For the first time in her life, (this woman) was experiencing financial trouble and had to ask for help," said Gonzales. "She was figuring out she was about to be homeless, and she was about to get all her utilities cut off and didn't know what to do."

The woman went to Catholic Charities in Fort Collins to get help and spoke to Gonzales. "Our only option was to reschedule her for the following week, when we would be receiving more funding, and call the utility company to ask for an extension on her shut-off date," Gonzales said. The following Monday, the woman showed up with the shut-off notice in her hand and a smile on her face. "Perhaps we didn't make her life easier, but we did lift some weight off her shoulders," Gonzales said.

Gonzales, who works at the Sister Mary Alice Murphy Center for Hope in Fort Collins, works with 50 people during a typical week. Emergency assistance hours are from 1-4 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays. On a typical day, she receives her schedule, meets with clients and contacts utility vendors on behalf of her clients. The Murphy Center houses several organizations: Neighbor to Neighbor, Hand Up, the PATH program and Catholic Charities. These organizations offer services to people who are in desperate financial situations. Catholic Charities receives funding from the El Pomar Foundation's Empty Stocking Fund and was able to pay the woman's utility bill so that she could continue to have heat through the winter. "It's a one-stop shop for people to stop by and have different services available to them," Gonzales said. She awards funds to those who need help with utility payments, prescriptions and transportation. Catholic Charities offers services from Denver to Northern Colorado, including feeding the homeless, counseling and assisting with immigration paperwork. "Our mission is to give service to people who need it, doing it out of the teachings of the Lord," Gonzales said.

While there is no religious requirement, Catholic Charities is funded through the Archdiocese in Denver. They want us to follow the teachings of the Lord and give service to people and help the needy," she said. Gonzales got started at Catholic Charities with an internship while she studied social work at Colorado State University. After graduation in May 2011, Catholic Charities hired her. Gonzales said her motivation to become a social worker came from her father. "My dad had to file for disability and just going through all the mediums of human services pissed me off to be honest. Seeing the lack of interest (the social workers had) for the people they were working for was a real motivation for me." Those who come for help need respect. "A lot of people who have the hardest time have people working for them who don't really care about them," Gonzales said.

As a youth there were other things that influenced Gonzales' passion for social work. "In high school I really loved volunteering. I used to volunteer at the cafeterias at homeless shelters in Greeley."

Gonzales's language skills play a special role in her work. "It helps that I speak Spanish so that I can be in a position to help people who really need it," she said. Gonzales says she has helped many Spanish speaking clients apply for assistance.

Recently, Gonzales dealt with another tough situation when an abused young woman came to her for assistance. "(The young woman) had been married at 13. She was with a guy, and it was pretty much a domestic violence case. "She left him at the age of 18, entered another relationship and it was pretty much the same thing all over again," Gonzales said. "She was (a) girl in my eyes, because she really hadn't matured to where she should be. She had no idea how to take care of herself.

"She finally left the second guy, but in both situations both men had been taking care of the bills, and she had been a homemaker," Gonzales said. Gonzales discovered that the young woman was living in a trailer park and she was running behind on rent. "She had no job experience, she had no education," Gonzales said. "This was her first try paying her own utilities. I had to help her manage all of that ... being on her own for the first time and really figuring out what it takes to pay a bill."

Gonzales is not a social services case manager, so her options to help are limited. "I couldn't assist her with a lot. I assisted her with the bill both her ex-husbands had racked up and put to her name. The bill was over \$1,000 that she had to pay." Gonzales said, "I think the best part about being in this place is I was able to get her a case manager and give her counseling to go through this whole domestic violence and finding herself all alone for the first time."

Northern Colorado Empty Stocking Fund money makes a difference at Catholic Charities. "It's just good to see how much help we can really give," Gonzales said. "I think if I found myself in those situations, I'd be just as overwhelmed."