

Building a Trusted CBO Workforce: How Grants Are Strengthening Community Care

April 22, 2026



By Jasmin Flores, The Social Changery
Produced for the California Health & Human Services Agency

For many immigrant families across California, behavioral health care is shaped not by need, but by uncertainty. Families navigating health disparities, language barriers, and fear tied to their immigration status often hesitate to seek care. That hesitation can delay support, allowing anxiety, trauma, and stress to deepen over time.

“When behavioral health staff share similar experiences with immigrant families, it builds trust,” said Teddie Valenzuela, a licensed clinical social worker and vice president at Amanecer Community Counseling Service. “Clients know they are truly understood, and that makes them more willing to open up and continue services.”

At Amanecer Community Counseling Service (Amanecer) in downtown Los Angeles, bridging that gap begins with trust. For more than two decades, the organization has provided behavioral health services to families, most with roots in Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, and other parts of Latin America. For the families they serve, accessing care often depends on whether they feel understood, both clinically and culturally.

Which is why it's essential the staff at Amanecer reflect the community they serve. According to Valenzuela, "about 85% of staff are bilingual, and about 90% identify as Latino."

"When families see providers who understand their language, their culture, and their lived experiences, it changes everything," Valenzuela said. Sustaining that level of care requires more than commitment, it requires a stable and supported workforce. Across California, community-based organizations like Amanecer have faced growing workforce challenges, including high turnover, rising demand for services, and competition from larger systems with greater financial resources or private-pay options. These pressures are compounded for organizations serving immigrant communities, where trust is built over time and continuity of care is essential.



Teddie Valenzuela, LCSW, Vice President at Amanecer Community Counseling Service.

"It's hard to get funding for staff. It's easy to get funding for our clients, but we have needs for our staff just as much," said Valenzuela. "We have to take care of them, because when they feel supported, they can be fully present for the clients they serve."

The California Department of Health Care Access and Information (HCAI) Community-Based Organization (CBO) Workforce Grant Program is part

of the broader Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative (CYBHI), a \$4+ billion investment in strengthening behavioral health care for children, youth, and families. The program plays a critical role in developing California's behavioral health workforce and in sustaining it. For smaller CBOs like the Amanecer Community Counseling Service, the funding has provided a stable, continuous funding stream to recruit and retain staff who serve families and communities. This included retention bonuses for long-term staff, \$2,000 hiring incentives to fill critical therapist roles, and student loan repayment support. As a result, staff felt more valued, key positions were filled, turnover decreased by 10%.

The funding is crucial, explains Valenzuela, "It helped us slow down the workforce crisis. When staff started staying, we saw the biggest shift. Client care improved because staff weren't leaving. Clients were able to remain with the same providers, and that continuity made a real difference." Workforce stability allows providers to build lasting relationships with the individuals they serve, helping community members feel safe seeking support. In this way, the program strengthens not only organizational capacity, but the trust and connection that are foundational to effective behavioral health services, particularly for immigrant populations.

"Addressing California's youth mental health crisis requires more than expanding services—it requires investing in the workforce behind those services. The CBO Workforce Grant Program helps ensure organizations can retain providers and continue delivering care that is responsive to the diverse backgrounds and languages of the families they serve," says HCAI Health Workforce Branch Chief, Sharmil Shah.

But the impact extends beyond individual providers and families. By strengthening workforce retention, the HCAI CBO Workforce Grant Program has helped more than 250 organizations across the state sustain services in areas where behavioral health care is urgently needed, ensuring historically underserved communities continue to have access to trusted support.

In many immigrant communities, behavioral health services exist, but they are not always accessible in practice. Nationally, research shows that only about one in five immigrants experiencing symptoms of depression or anxiety access mental health services, compared to more than one in three U.S.-born individuals, highlighting a significant gap in care ([Fan & Piret, 2025](#)). However, the HCAI CBO Workforce Grant Program is working to change this by retaining staff that are connected to the communities they serve. “When families receive care from providers who genuinely understand their experiences, it fosters trust, supports healing, and can be the difference between truly thriving and merely getting by,” says Shah.

Workforce retention is a significant challenge across the behavioral health field, with more than half of providers reporting symptoms of burnout, contributing to staffing shortages and disruptions in care ([Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2022](#)). The HCAI CBO Workforce Grant Program helps ensure providers feel valued and supported, allowing them to continue showing up for the families and communities who need it the most.

For Valenzuela, the program’s impact can be summed up simply: “Game changer.” It meant providers could stay in the roles they cared deeply about, continuing to support families as trusted members of the community. She says, “staff felt appreciated. They felt that we were investing in them. They saw that we valued their work and wanted them to stay, and that made a difference in morale and stability across the organization.”

The HCAI CBO Workforce Grant Program is one of many programs supported by CYBHI specifically designed to serve the communities that need it the most. For the immigrant families Amanecer serves, the impact is simple—they don’t have to start over. They can return to the same provider to receive the same quality care they know and trust.



The Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative (CYBHI) is a flagship component of Master Plan for Kids' Mental Health and historic investment by the State of California to expand access and behavioral health support for children, youth, and families.