

PREVENTION PROFILE

Rafael Rivera



Name: Rafael Rivera

Occupation: Vice President

Agency: Healthcare Alternative Systems, Inc. (HAS)

City: Chicago, Illinois

Length of time in prevention: 18 years

What is HAS?

Healthcare Alternative Systems Inc. (HAS), formerly known as Hispano Alcoholic Services, was founded and first incorporated in 1974. Since that time, HAS has been recognized as the leading provider of behavioral health care services (substance abuse, ancillary mental health and social services) to Hispanics in the Chicago metropolitan area. Over the past 30 years, HAS has further developed and offered its culturally sensitive and competent services to other minority groups as well as the general population.

Current duties and role:

Rivera oversees a number of prevention programs at different sites throughout Chicago and ensures their compliance with contracts and strategic plans. “In 1980, HAS started offering substance abuse prevention services at a time when prevention services were receiving little attention and had no designated funding,” said Rivera. “A major portion of our organization’s prevention efforts is presently involved with comprehensive substance abuse prevention activities.” HAS’s comprehensive prevention program promotes individual and social change, with a focus on issues related to alcohol, tobacco and other drug abuse to create healthy families and communities.

How do you engage young professionals in the prevention field?

“I try to mentor young leaders within the organization and the community so they can move up the ranks,” said Rivera. “It’s a challenge to engage prevention professionals because there are financial drawbacks in finding and retaining qualified staff. This is not a profit-oriented career path, and many young leaders don’t see this as their life’s work.” Rivera said among the biggest challenges for the Latino community is finding qualified bilingual individuals who can assist with prevention programs within their community. “HAS has been lucky, however, because we have found many key leaders within our organization who have a strong presence in the communities we serve,” he said.

What are some of the challenges you have faced as a prevention worker?

“In my experience, in order to make an impact in the lives of youth, you need to reach the parents,” explained Rivera. “And parents are a challenging group to engage.” Rivera said in the Latino community, mothers tend to be available to participate in youth programs or activities more so than the fathers. “The reason is because the fathers usually are the primary income earners and oftentimes have multiple jobs that do not leave a lot of time to participate in community-based prevention programs. Our job as prevention professionals is to make sure what programs fit the family situation and explore ways to make these programs available to them.”

What helps parents make informed decisions in keeping kids drug-free?

“Parents crave information,” said Rivera. “As a parent, I am always seeking information on how to communicate effectively with my two children about substance abuse, underage drinking and life in general.” The key, said Rivera, is to find one key message and reiterate that message through the most effective medium. In Chicago’s Back of the Yards neighborhood, prevention messages or topics discussed on a local morning radio show garnered more response than handing out printed materials such as flyers or brochures. “Word of mouth sometimes has more impact than a television ad,” Rivera added. “Find out how your community communicates and you have found yourself an audience.”

What can young preventionists learn from professionals like you?

“Time flies. It does sound like I have been in this field for a long time,” Rivera said. “My main focus has always been the community.” Rivera said keeping connected to the community helps those in the prevention field understand the needs of the community. “Maintain a balance between the initial prevention grassroots and the professional changes that have happened in the field over the years. And, be seen in the community you serve. People respond to familiar faces and listen to what you have to say.”

To learn more about HAS, call 773.252.3100 or e-mail info@hascare.org.

