

## *So That Others May Eat: MCHA's Food Assistance*

Ms. C came to us in 2010 after she separated from her abusive husband. She was struggling to put food on the table for her two kids and was only working a few hours a week. She had very little income and was living with a friend, who had offered to help her until she got back on her feet. We assisted her with a CalFresh application and requested expedited benefits, so she could access needed food within two days. She was doing a lot better and tried her best to keep up with her semi-annual and annual reports.

In 2012, she remarried and had a son, Robert, who was born with chromosomal and heart abnormalities affecting a number of bodily systems. Ms. C came back for assistance a few months after she had Robert because the Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) terminated her CalFresh benefits. Although she had tried, the benefits were not restored. She said she had been struggling a lot the past few months; the severity of Robert's condition meant that she had to attend several doctor appointments every week. She felt consumed with his condition. She came to us not only for assistance, but also for support and guidance. She often had paperwork from various doctor visits and was either unable to read the forms or simply didn't understand them. We assisted her with getting back her CalFresh benefits. We knew that due to all of Robert's doctors and specialty care visits, she and her new husband were struggling to keep their jobs. So we facilitated an appointment for her at the Local District office so she could receive emergency cash aid within two days.

When she came to us for assistance with her semi-annual report, she said that her five year-old daughter, Christina, had been having some health issues. Although Christina's doctor didn't think anything was wrong for months, we encouraged Ms. C to take her to Children's Hospital to be evaluated. There, Christina was diagnosed with a brain tumor. She would need to have surgery. Ms. C was also having trouble understanding paperwork from the Social Security office for her now two disabled children, not surprising since everything was in English, and Ms. C's language is an indigenous dialect of Guatemala and although she speaks Spanish, she doesn't read it. We referred her to a local disability rights organization where she would receive assistance with the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) documents. They would read and explain them to her. Due to her children's conditions, they would receive SSI. Ms. C was extremely relieved to have someone that could help her through her Social Security process.

In 2015, Ms. C started having some health issues of her own. She had been going to a doctor for gallstones. Every time she was seen, she kept being sent back home with medication to lessen the pain. She now had a new baby, David, and came to us for assistance to add him to her CalFresh case. Her son Robert developed complications requiring surgery at the same time her gallstones aggravated. She went into the Emergency Room with an infection that put her in a coma for six days, then in recovery for a full month, while Robert had surgery to remove masses he had developed.

Ms. C has been very grateful for our support and has expressed feeling empowered to fight for her children and for herself. We had encouraged her many times to apply for a visa for victims of violence, given her ex-husband's abuse. He then decided to sue for custody of her two oldest children. Meanwhile, at some point in court, things were not going well. Ms. C became terribly afraid that her abusive ex-husband would gain custody. Without the language skills to even express herself to the judge directly, she realized the judge had no extensive knowledge of the existing police reports of the abuse, complete with pictures of her bruises and wounds. She interrupted the proceedings to call for

the presentation of this evidence and the court was suspended for another day. With the photos and heart-wrenching conversations the judge then had with her oldest son, who had been only three at the time but remembered the abuse, she was able to bar even joint custody and has retained full custody of her children.

Ms. C expresses constantly that she has learned a lot from our agency and is now determined to do everything she can to help herself and her children. Our long-term relationship with Ms. C and her family has allowed us to see her growth and empowerment.