La Casa Norte 10th Anniversary Report
From the Executive Director

La Casa Norte opened its doors for services on July 1, 2002. We didn't know if we would be able to meet the needs of people in the community. We had never done this before.

Soon, we worked with one family—and then another—as we focused on helping people move forward to housing stability and receive the comprehensive supportive services they needed.

In our first month of operation, I remember that a woman named Frances walked through the door. She had three children: two of them were very young, plus one was an older child in her early 20’s with whom Frances had a strained relationship. I even remember specific things about Frances, like her red hair.

I learned that Frances had had her two younger children taken away from her by the Department of Children and Family Services. She lived in a shelter. I remember her saying to us “I feel like there's no one who cares.” She told us that she just wanted to get the help she needed and live in her own place. Much of her time in recent years had been spent shuffling from person to person, agency to agency.

What I learned is that Frances did not feel rushed by us to achieve a certain outcome. From the start, we listened to what she wanted to accomplish.

Frances knew that she wanted to get out of the shelter, find housing and get her kids back.

Change did not happen overnight, but we had faith that we were on the right path—and so did Frances. Within six months, she had a new home, her children had returned home, and her relationship with her older child—who struggled with HIV—also improved. We provided Frances with case management services, counseling and referrals. We referred her to food pantries, counseling and organizations experienced in working with HIV patients. Before that, Frances didn't know what kind of disability assistance and parent support was available to her.

Meanwhile, we also helped her identify an apartment in Humboldt Park and worked with a landlord to help ensure a positive situation. The child welfare system also provided Frances with financial assistance.

We told Frances what we've told so many clients: Don't ever hesitate to engage us. We are not just there for you when you are in the middle of a crisis—but when you face a challenge and want to prevent a bigger challenge. We are humbled to be a catalyst and partner that served thousands who have come to us.

Now it's ten years later. Our model remains: we meet families and youth where they are. Our goal is the same as it has always been: to help transform lives and communities.

— Sol Flores, Executive Director, La Casa Norte
Mission

La Casa Norte’s mission is to serve youth and families confronting homelessness. We provide access to stable housing and deliver comprehensive services that act as a catalyst to transform lives and communities.

In its first 10 years, La Casa Norte has supported more than 20,000 homeless and at-risk individuals in more than 43 zip codes throughout the Chicagoland area.

Growing capacity: Starting with an initial program staff of two and an operating budget of under $200,000, LCN staff and resources have grown to over 50 professionals supported by an overall operating budget of $3.8 million.
The need was there. So was the will to do something about it. When a group of people came together in Humboldt Park a decade ago, they saw that the problem of homelessness in the community—like many communities—deserved a concerted and urgent form of action.

In 2002, La Casa Norte was born. The story, though, is actually rooted in a connection between people and communities that happened earlier—more than twenty years ago. In the early 1990’s, co-founders Keith Decker and Peter McQueen both belonged to the Wilmette Congregational Church, a church long devoted to social justice and action (both men are also Vietnam veterans).

Decker had started a business making upholstered furniture; McQueen worked for a publishing company. For both men, being involved in social issues was never too far from their minds. For years, Decker has traveled with church members to Latin America, where an education fund he started supported an orphanage. McQueen later trained at the Chicago Theological Seminary and became a minister.

Through their church, the men learned of opportunities to connect with communities in Chicago. Eventually, they both volunteered at Chicago shelters on the city’s north side. The experience made an impact on them. “We saw kids go into the shelter, leave and then come back,” says Decker. “That’s when we asked: ‘What would stop this cycle of homelessness?’ And we decided that it would take a safe place—and an education.”

The seed for La Casa Norte had been planted. The story that followed was filled with the kind of hard work, dedication, vision and networking that have characterized the organization ever since. By the late 1990’s, the next step was to raise money. One key goal was to find a building that could house services for the homeless—a search that led to purchase of the building at 3507 West North Avenue, where LCN now runs its Solid Ground Supportive Housing Program for young men. “This is our opportunity,” Decker said of that purchase at the time. It was around this time that Decker and McQueen met with a group connected to San Lucas United Church of Christ in Humboldt Park. Sol Flores, founding and current executive director of La Casa Norte, was in that meeting. Decker says that he and others were still rehabbing the organization’s new building when Flores was hired as executive director.

Soon after that, a small group met with Illinois Department of Children and Family Services Director Jess McDonald, a meeting that led to funds that served people at-risk of homelessness.

In July of 2002, La Casa Norte officially opened The Crisis Center to serve families and youth. One of the organization’s first moves was to hire a case manager.

Flores reflects that “at that time, there were zero services for homeless youth in our community—and few services for Latino families that were homeless or at risk.”

Flores vividly remembers how—even in LCN’s earliest days—La Casa Norte’s story was not just about the services it could provide but about the Humboldt Park community. “Our neighborhood is very active,” she says. “As we opened for services, neighbors noticed that we were open. People came in and knocked on the door and began to engage with us. They began to tell us about what they needed for a better life. And we began to gain confidence that we were the right people for this community.”

In the course of a decade, La Casa Norte has gone from two employees (Flores and a case manager) to fifty employees. In the meantime, the organization has helped shape an approach to serving the homeless that has grown significantly in recent years.

“We’re growing—that’s a reflection of the work the organization is doing,” says Decker. “The staff is incredible.”

In the early days, La Casa Norte was providing case management services to clients and making referrals. While those essential components of its work remain, the depth of LCN’s services has grown significantly. In fact, in its early years LCN’s budget consistently doubled every year.

Over time, LCN translated client needs to new programs. At first, case management services focused on families and youth at one site. After a few years, clients expressed the need for more job services, information on how to negotiate with a landlord, and
other services. In 2006, the organization opened Solid Ground, its innovative housing program for homeless youth. Three years later, LCN opened La Corazon, a drop-in center for homeless youth.

Meanwhile, La Casa Norte not only delivered key services; it became an advocate and strong voice on youth homelessness, and a leader in the movements for permanent supportive housing, short-term and interim housing for the homeless. La Casa Norte’s leadership impacts the broader issue of homelessness—but has always been a powerful voice for often underserved youth, families and Latino communities.


“When I think of the last ten years, I am humbled and in awe,” adds Flores. “I look at what is possible when people say: Something needs to happen. Now, we have seen what can happen when youth and families are given an opportunity to improve their lives without judgment. We also know, of course, that the need still exists today.”

“Today, people connected to La Casa Norte celebrate its history but look ahead. The need is still there. If anything, it’s still growing. Just look at the impact of the economy on homelessness since 2008.”

– Keith Decker, Co-Founder, La Casa Norte
For the last ten years, La Casa Norte (LCN) has provided services to help families and community members who are currently homeless or at risk of being homeless stabilize their housing situation. The organization provides access to stable housing and delivers comprehensive services that act as a catalyst to transform lives and communities. LCN connects clients to a wide range of services, including mental health as well as employment services that can help people move towards economic self-sufficiency. La Casa Norte’s bilingual and culturally sensitive case management services are essential to preventing homelessness. Meanwhile, the organization also provides long-term supportive housing through its scattered site permanent supportive housing program.

**Timeline: Family and Community Programs**

- **2002:** La Casa Norte (LCN) opens The Crisis Center, which serves families and youth that are homeless or at-risk of homelessness.
- **2002:** La Casa Norte (LCN) secures a contract with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services to provide housing advocacy to families involved in the child welfare system, with the goal of keeping families together.
- **2003:** Funding received from Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA) for rental and utility assistance.
- **2005:** LCN becomes a partner agency of the Emergency Fund, giving the organization access to emergency assistance for clients.

For several years, Lashanna lived in a small two-bedroom apartment with her five children. During this time, she ended up losing her job. Later, while going through an eviction process, she called the Lawyers’ Committee for Better Housing in Chicago for assistance and representation. That experience helped lead her to La Casa Norte, which helped her pay a security deposit and first month’s rent while informing her of her options. “La Casa Norte has always been so supportive and encouraging,” she says. “It’s so valuable to have someone’s opinion other than your own. Sometimes I talk to them for at least an hour.” LCN has referred Lashanna to food pantries and places to get clothes as well as job workshops and trainings and a range of supportive services, including where to apply for heating funds. Sometimes it’s the things others might not think about—like when LCN referred her to a donation center that supplies people with household items, like mattresses. Lashanna has referred several people to La Casa Norte. “They are always polite and welcoming,” she says. “Maybe you’re having a rough time—but everyone does. La Casa Norte helps you get services you need, helps you figure it out, and supports you through the whole process.”
Gabriella

Gabriella, a single mother with a disabled child, became homeless and lived out of hospitals while her son was being treated (he is a victim of abuse and suffered a brain injury). When she asked for housing assistance, she was referred to La Casa Norte for housing assistance and information. Now, she is hoping to move into a handicap accessible apartment on the city’s south side through a nonprofit housing provider (in addition, the Chicago Housing Authority is providing a voucher to Gabriella for this apartment). “LCN talked to me about its programs and helped me apply for housing,” she says. “Honestly, they have always kept me up to date, and they always call me even just to check in and make sure I’m OK. They become like friends and family; there is no better way to say it than to say they are a blessing. I talk to LCN at least once or twice a week.” (LCN and another organization paid for Gabriella and her son to stay in a hotel after leaving a hospital and while waiting to secure a place to live). Gabriella reflects on her life. She compares where she is—and where she hopes to be—with being homeless. “I look forward to my ‘new normal’—finally, to have a home where my kid can be comfortable again. If I have questions about my new apartment, I know who to call.”

Jasmine

Less than a year ago, Jasmine moved out of her apartment on Chicago’s northwest side with her 14-year-old daughter. She had to leave, she says, after her daughter was sexually assaulted in the building. For three months, she and her daughter lived in her car, with occasional stops at a relative’s home. Jasmine did not go back to work. “We moved out because of trauma,” she says. After a few months of being in and out of court, she was referred to La Casa Norte. After a face-to-face interview, she received a call from LCN and was told “there was a place available.” “That’s where I am now,” says Jasmine. If LCN wasn’t around, I don’t know where I would be. They call me, they come here—they even bring canned and paper goods when I need them.” LCN has also referred Jasmine and her daughter to counseling services, and provided her with bus cards and vouchers for food as well. Meanwhile, Jasmine has also spoken out about the need to fund homeless services in Illinois. “I told them my story,” she says. “I realize that things can change for the better—but where would I be without help from LCN? If I meet anyone who needs services, I will refer them to LCN.”

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– Jasmine, client of La Casa Norte

2006: LCN purchases building at 3533 W. North Avenue after receiving grant from an anonymous donor.

2009: LCN receives funding from Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Rehousing to help support rental subsidies. This funding was spun off in 2013 to support long-term rapid rehousing.

2010: LCN launches the Northwest Food Partners Network to combat hunger on Chicago’s Northwest Side

2011: Opening of scattered site housing program. Program started with 17 units. By 2013, that number grew to 50 units.

2013: LCN wins the Bank of America Neighborhood Builders Award.
La Casa Norte at 10: Youth Programs

La Casa Norte serves homeless youth through two innovative programs: Solid Ground and Casa Corazon. Solid Ground provides up to two years of housing and services to unaccompanied homeless males between the ages of 16 and 21. The program, which houses up to 16 youth, incorporates positive youth development practices in providing best practice care to high risk youth. Casa Corazon is La Casa Norte’s homeless youth outreach and engagement project. The program, which works to move homeless youth towards housing stability and safety, runs a youth drop-in center in Humboldt Park that provides emergency resources, hot meals, case management and referrals to youth.

Eduardo

For much of his life, Eduardo (who is now 20) knew what it was like to move—to East Rogers Park, Woodridge and Harvey as well as Detroit. While living in Rogers Park in his teens, his mother and her boyfriend were both unemployed, and, he says, he was “slacking” in high school. After a dispute at home, Eduardo says he “packed my bags and lived with my closest friend.” Later, he was kicked out of high school during his senior year. After staying at a shelter on the city’s north side three different times, he found La Casa Norte’s Solid Ground. “Getting into this place made we want to do better,” he says. “They’re giving me a bed here, provide me with three squares a day, job training focused on job skills, and they have a great staff that listens. The staff here is really involved.” In the spring of 2013, Eduardo was doing temporary labor and also working in the fast food industry. He has applied for the Year-Up Program, which partners with Harold Washington College to provide job training and an internship. “I would tell anyone who was in my situation to keep your head high,” he says. “When you walk with your head down you can’t see what’s in front of you.”

“I would tell anyone who was in my situation to keep your head high,” he says. “When you walk with your head down you can’t see what’s in front of you.”

– Eduardo, client of La Casa Norte

Timeline: Youth Programs

2004: La Casa Norte (LCN) opens up workforce development program for adjudicated and at-risk youth.

2006: Opening of La Casa Norte’s Solid Ground, the first bilingual male-intentional housing program in city. Ribbon-cutting ceremony for program attended by Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley and community members.

2007: Solid Ground receives Maxwell Award for Excellence from Fannie Mae. Award given for Innovation and Impact in Housing.

2008: Solid Ground wins The Richard H. Driehaus Foundation Award for Architectural Excellence in Community Design, 1st Place. Award is given through the Chicago Neighborhood Development Awards.
Gonzalo

Gonzalo, an 18-year-old man who is gay, struggled to be accepted at home when he lived in Chicago’s Pilsen community. He left home when he was 17 and stayed with a friend for a couple of weeks. Gonzalo’s experience is an example of how a young man experienced chaos at various points in his life—and found a more peaceful place to live at Solid Ground after a counselor at a school he was attending referred him to the program (he is currently living at Solid Ground for the second time). “There are so many things they can help you with here that helped put me on track with the things I have to do,” he says. “They don’t let you fall down, but they also let you be.”

Gonzalo points to the positive counseling sessions and conversations he has had with staff. He currently works full-time for an eating establishment in Chicago and says he likes his job. He also likes to write and cook. His plans include going back to school to get his GED and getting an apartment. “For now,” he says, “Solid Ground is a good place for me to be as I try to get situated and figure out what’s next.”

Jermaine

Jermaine, who is 21, has lived at Solid Ground and currently goes to La Casa Norte’s Casa Corazon drop-in center. He has lived in numerous communities around the city—including Bronzeville, Edgewater, Grand Crossing and Austin. After a conflict with a family member who was using drugs (followed by a dispute over what happened), he spent a couple of weeks in Cook County Jail, and later stayed in a shelter on the north side before coming to Solid Ground. He points to how the program provides basic needs—and support when it comes to getting to school and finding work. “I would say to anyone going to Solid Ground that they should try to stay there—it works. They never rush you and they let you do stuff for yourself,” he says. His recent experiences include volunteering for a couple of community-based organizations, one of which is trying to address the causes and impact of school closings in Chicago. He also works for a fast food establishment in Melrose Park. Meanwhile, he calls Casa Corazon “kind of like a friendly family situation” where you can get information about healthy eating, a bus card and discuss options related to school and work. When he’s not there, he says he “talks to La Casa Norte almost every week.”

2009: Opening of Casa Corazon, a drop-in center for homeless youth in Chicago.  
2009: LCN hires 187 youth through Youth Ready Chicago, a summer jobs program run by the city.  
2011: Opening of scattered site housing units for male and female youth. The program is only the second in the city to work with chronically homeless youth and provide permanent supportive housing.  
2012: La Casa Norte is selected by the White House as a “Champion of Change” in the fight against youth and child homelessness.
La Casa Norte's first ten years have laid a foundation for what's next. In the coming years, La Casa Norte plans to develop a 55,000 square foot comprehensive facility that will include housing, a drop-in center and a nutrition center. The facility will also include a federally qualified health center, technology center and other key programs and services. This project will complement La Casa Norte's current efforts while enabling the organization to serve thousands of people every year.

Support for this project is being raised through a comprehensive capital campaign. Like all of our efforts, this project reflects and supports our belief that safe, adequate and affordable housing with wrap-around services is the solution to homelessness.

In essence, this new facility, which La Casa Norte will own, will be an anchor institution for the community. Not only will we provide an array of urgently needed comprehensive services, but the facility will also contribute to the economic redevelopment of the Humboldt Park community.

As La Casa Norte looks to the future, we envision a growing population of families and youth who need our services. We serve neighborhoods where homelessness is an everyday reality—or will be for families who are at risk unless they have access to stable housing and comprehensive services.

We know how real homelessness is, having served 20,000 homeless and at-risk individuals since we first opened our doors in 2002. We also know that it’s possible for the families and youth we serve to transform their lives. Yes, it is true that we emphasize best practices for serving this population, whether that means creating housing opportunities, providing counseling and other services, or referring our clients to resources in the community. Our ability to have a positive impact on the people we serve, though, is also based on our fundamental values. Working collaboratively, demonstrating empathy and mutual respect and creating a just experience for all people who walk through our doors are at the core of our work.

Bank of America Neighborhood Builder

La Casa Norte is honored to announce that we are a 2013 Bank of America Neighborhood Builder. The Neighborhood Builders® award recognizes high-performing nonprofits that have made a significant impact in the community working in the bank’s priority funding areas of housing, jobs and hunger relief. The program pairs leadership training for executive directors and emerging leaders with a $200,000 unrestricted grant. Bank of America’s investment in our organization will enable us to continue performing our vital work.
“As a mom of three kids, any opportunity I have to get my kids away from their life and see how they can help other people is just really a goldmine for a parent. There are so many opportunities for youth to be helping youth; Solid Ground and La Casa Norte provide these kinds of opportunities. La Casa Norte is just such a well-run organization...and the feeling of taking one’s own energies, whether that’s financial or hands-on, and to walk alongside someone who doesn’t have the same capabilities or financial standing or surroundings and to help them—it’s pretty outstanding.”

– Kathy Deveny, Glencoe Union Church

“Our support for La Casa Norte is an excellent example of how Macquarie supports the grassroots engagement of our employees. Our employees have given their time, talent and treasure to the organization for many years. They have supported LCN through in-kind donations, volunteerism, pro-bono work, Board leadership, and fundraising because they believe in the promise of La Casa Norte’s mission and the organization’s innovative and holistic approach to building sustainable neighborhoods. We view our recent multi-year grant commitment as both an acknowledgement of staff’s longstanding efforts and as a strategic investment in revitalizing the community.”

– Kathryn O’Neal-Dunham, Director, Americas, Macquarie Group Foundation

Kathy Deveny, a member of Glencoe Union Church, volunteers at La Casa Norte with her son Colin.

To get involved and volunteer with La Casa Norte, please email us at volunteer@lacasanorte.org.
“Particularly these days with the housing crisis in the city of Chicago and throughout the country, there's never been a greater need for support than there is now.

La Casa Norte has proven itself to be an extremely effective organization. Though it’s a small budget organization, it’s very effective with its resources and is one of the few organizations that we are aware of that is actually growing. We’ve seen what La Casa Norte has already done and their plans to develop permanent supportive housing for families in the community will be a continuation of their good work.”

– Denis Pierce, Pierce Family Foundation

For a complete listing of donors and financials, please visit our website at www.lacasanorte.org.