



DULCE Family Specialist Profile

Los Angeles County, CA

ABOUT LA COUNTY

Clinics: Northeast Valley Health Corporation and The Children’s Clinic

Early Childhood Agency: First 5 LA

Setting: Urban

Family Specialists: Monica Martinez and Karen Orellana (NEVHC), Ana de Jesus and Jessica Leyva (TCC)

Family Specialists are the linchpin of the DULCE initiative, acting as a conduit between the family and the medical, legal, and early childhood systems. These profiles, one for each DULCE community, were produced from interviews with each DULCE Family Specialist. They are a celebration of the Family Specialists’ dedication to and passion for supporting infants and their families and give some insight into their work. If you wish to learn more, please visit CSSP.org.



Monica

Karen

Ana

Jessica

What’s your favorite hobby or activity outside of work?

Karen: I love going to the beach—it has become a method of self-care for me. Taking a walk clears my mind and helps me relax. There’s no better sound than that of waves crashing on the shore.

Monica: I like self-help books, books on psychology, nutrition, newspapers—anything you can grow from. I have copies of a book I highly recommend that I hand out to families, called *Happiest Baby on the Block* by Harvey Karp.

Why did you want to be a Family Specialist?

Monica: I was interested in the position because of my sister. When she had her baby, she had no support around her. She searched for support groups but it was hard and didn’t find the support she needed. She was experiencing postpartum depression, her baby was colicky, she has trouble breastfeeding, she was alone at 2 and 3 am while everyone else was asleep, and she was alone during the day while everybody was at work. Nobody tells you how levels of social support, lack of sleep, etc. can affect you. I went through the same thing when I had my baby.

Jessica: When I heard about this position, I wanted to apply because I knew I could make a difference in the first few months not just for the baby, but for the parents, as well. I could help the parents with their bond, reassure them that they’re doing well, and just see the bond grow stronger between caregiver and baby.



How do you explain your work to people not involved in DULCE?

Ana: I always joke that I live in a pink and blue world—I work with babies, and they're adorable, but I work with families and adults as well and help them through their tough times. I have the best of both worlds.

Karen: Helping families recognize the strengths that have always been there. Anytime I tell somebody about DULCE, they're surprised because there's no other project like it. It's life-changing. It's the most rewarding job I can think of!

Jessica: To friends, I tell them that I work for a program with newborns and provide services to both the family and medical providers, helping them with things they may not be comfortable sharing with each other. I also explain that a legal partner and mental health lead are also a part of the team, and they connect families with services that improve their well-being.

In what ways do you see your work impact families?

Monica: It impacts families in a way where I validate their experience and normalize things as much as I can to make them think they're not alone, they're not the only ones going through that.

Ana: One of the comments I hear a lot [from families] is, "No one ever asks me that." It impacts not only the family but also the provider and staff. There's a provider we work with who learned from us and [now] asks deeper questions about support, well-being, and even benefits like CalFresh in her own caseload.

Jessica: Sometimes families are too shy or scared to ask providers anything. They may say things are okay when they are not. I help give them the confidence to ask those questions. Many of these mothers are stay-at-home moms who are so busy with their kids, but they are missing that adult interaction and support, and they're grateful to get that from DULCE.

Is there a success story you're most proud of?

Karen: One mom, a DACA holder, mentioned she was under a lot of stress being a single mom and felt afraid of the father of newborn. I informed mom of the behavioral health services in the clinic that might help her cope with being a single mother and with her traumatic experience, but mom declined services. Over time, she felt more open to talking about her domestic violence experience, and I informed her once again of behavioral health services in clinic. Mom accepted and was referred. She also mentioned she processed the required documents for obtaining a U-Visa. "All those negative experiences are finally becoming positive ones."

Ana: One mother, who had a chronic illness, was initially guarded but opened up over time. At the start of the new year, she said she was moving to a different county. I remember her last appointment at TCC. She was blowing up my phone, [and] I thought something was wrong. It turns out the kids all wanted to say bye to me before they left. I was so touched.

Then, months later, mom called me to say they were living out of a van. I referred her to the multi-service center, which is a one-stop-shop for the homeless population. They applied for Section 8 and were able to access it. Without DULCE, they probably would not have had these connections. A few months later, they moved to Arkansas, where they have a larger family support system. Mom took time out of her very busy life to call us and update us as to how well they are doing. They always express gratitude to the clinic and all the support they received. This would not have been possible without the one-to-one interventions provided through DULCE!

