

Programs for Mothers and Families of Santa Fe

First Born has a new director and Many Mothers is expanding with the Village Closet



Supplies are on hand for The Village Closet at Many Mothers. | Katherine Lewin

By Katherine Lewin | July 22

Antoinette Villamil, her dark hair floating alongside both sides of her face, pushes back a thin white sheet acting as a curtain to cover dozens of books, toys and other baby supplies. The room, about the size of a large closet, has floor-to-ceiling shelves stuffed with maternity clothes, bouncers, portable cribs, bilingual books, breastfeeding pads, toothbrushes and blankets.

It's the grand opening of the Many Mothers' Village Closet, where new and gently used items for newborns to 3-year-olds can be bought on a donation basis. Many Mothers is a Santa Fe nonprofit that has been supporting families in the county since 1999, but has only now started a more focused expansion into the Hispanic and low-income communities, particularly on the Southside.

"The core of our program is a maternal support program. It's designed to be that village that families need and don't have. ... It actually trains volunteers to go into the home and offer a new mom or a new dad about 36 hours of support. That's practical, physical and hands-on support," Villamil, the executive director of Many Mothers, explains to SFR. "It could be something as simple as holding a baby if mom hasn't slept. Or driving mom to a doctor's appointment. We try to give that 36 hours support anywhere in the first six months of the baby's life. People sign up for it. It's free."

Villamil hopes the Village Closet will be a way for parents with more resources to give back to lower-income families.



Many Mothers Executive Director Antoinette Villamil pushes back a thin white sheet acting as a curtain to cover dozens of books, toys and other baby supplies. | Katherine Lewin

Many Mothers is just one of several initiatives in the city working to increase the health and well-being of families in Santa Fe to combat the large income gap in the county and New Mexico as a whole struggles with child hunger, health and overall life outcomes.

The statewide First Born Home Visiting program, based out of the Santa Fe Community College in the Early Childhood Center of Excellence, recently took on a new director in Tekla Johnson.

The program, which sends trained volunteers into homes that are having children or have adopted children for the first time to help increase maternal and child health, is different from Many Mothers in that the home visitors make sure the babies and toddlers are meeting developmental milestones.

“We’re not there to tell them what to do or to really advise. We do a little bit of teaching, but we mostly give little bits of information and then think through with them what might work best for them or for their child—like whether it’s about sleep or when to add solids or how to manage toddler tantrums,” Johnson tells SFR.

Villamil says that Many Mothers is “non-judgmental hands-on support.”

“We’re there to support mom with what she needs. We train the volunteers go into the home and ask mom, ‘What do you need today?’” Villamil tells SFR. “First Born can’t go in and hold the baby for mom if she wants take a nap. They need to be working with the mom and the baby. [Many Mothers] is more of what your grandmother or your aunt would be doing for you.”

Many Mothers has just recently begun to really step in to help the lower-income and Hispanic communities of Santa Fe.

“I think before we were working with more middle class families, you know, and now we’re working with everybody across the spectrum which is great,” Villamil says.



Villamil standing outside of The Village Closet. | Katherine Lewin

According to data provided by Many Mothers, the programs served 109 families in 2018, up from 66 in 2016. In 2016, only 34% of participating families were not white, 39 percent were low-income and the org saw only one mother who didn’t speak English. In 2018, the percentage jumped to 50% of families served that were not white, 52% that were low-income and 21 mothers did who not speak English.

Both programs have waitlists and are not able to serve every family that wants to participate. First Born, which provides weekly 45-minute visits in the first year and then more sporadic visits until the child is 3, has a 30- to 40-person waitlist. First Born is currently serving about 170 families in Santa Fe County and has been providing home visits in English, Spanish and sign language for years.

Johnson says that about 30 to 40% of the First Born families are Spanish-speakers.

Recent studies have found that home-visiting programs can help to increase the health and well-being of families. A study published in the journal *Pediatrics* in 2017 using the First Born program found that children in families that had home-care visits from trained case workers had less health care use in their first year, and that home visits are more effective for high-risk families.



Maternity and children's clothes at The Village Closet. |

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However, even with the emotional and informational help that home-visiting programs such as Many Mothers and First Born can provide, there are still many obstacles to maternal and childhood health in Santa Fe, particularly in the lower-income communities on the Southside.

“Stable housing that’s affordable is huge, and home-visiting doesn’t fix that. I mean, sometimes there’s financial literacy or other things we can help people with, but just more affordable housing, living wages, having child care that allows people if they do need to go to work, [and] to be able to afford to go to work and have their child care” would be the real fixes, Johnson tells SFR. “Plus there just aren’t enough spaces for infants. For the families that we serve that are struggling with those things that aren’t met, I would say it’s those basics.”

Many Mothers’ Village Closet

1919 Fifth St.; manymothers.org/village-closet. Open 9 am – 12 pm Saturdays Aug. 3, Aug. 17, Sept. 7 and Sept. 21. Additional Saturdays to be announced.