

## **New community health workers help overcome barriers to health care**

*Supporting the well-being and independence of foreign-born residents*

Five graduates from Rochester Community and Technical College (RCTC) are building bridges to health care for hundreds of Rochester's foreign-born residents.

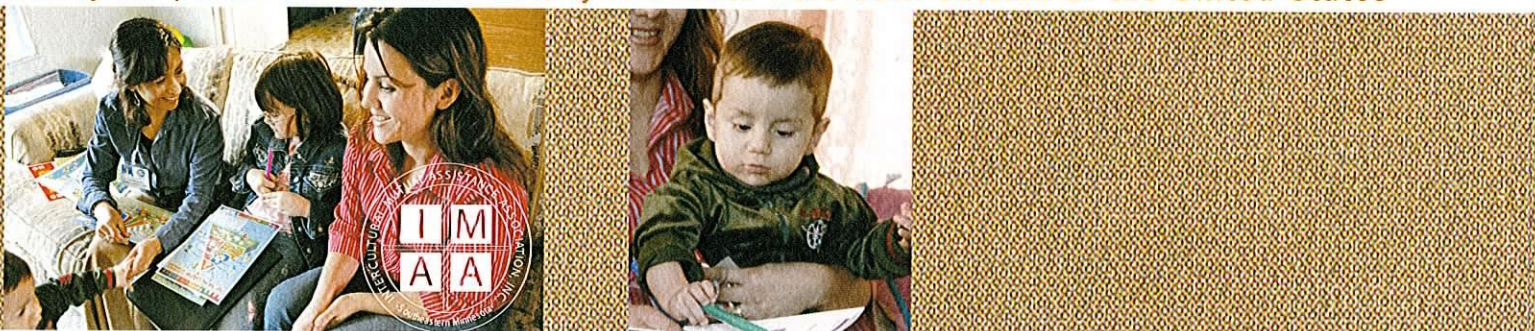
The five bilingual graduates, Dahabo Ahmed, Mary Alfred Lako, Sheena Hawm Loth, Ambrose Kurakumba Magaya and Ana Velazquez, are certified community health workers. In 2006, they were the first graduates from this new program.

For people who speak Spanish, Somali, Khmer (Cambodian), Arabic and two Sudanese dialects, Zande and Barre, the community health workers are a lifeline to health care services, helping to overcome language and culture barriers.

They work for the Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association (IMAA), a local nonprofit with the mission of supporting the well-being and independence of foreign-born residents.

Loth recalls one 6 a.m. call. Speaking in her native language, a Cambodian woman told Loth about some alarming symptoms. Loth quickly set up a three-way call with the emergency department triage nurse at Saint Marys Hospital. The nurse advised immediate medical care; the client's symptoms indicated a stroke. Loth explained the urgency to the client. The client's spouse called 911. Later, the emergency department told Loth that her assertive and timely call may have saved the woman's life.

## **Nearly 10 percent of Olmsted County residents were born outside of the United States**



Last year, nearly 1,000 Rochester residents received needed health care, thanks to one-on-one guidance provided by community health workers.

"The community health workers are advocates, facilitators and motivators," says Avni Patel, program manager. "They teach patients how to make the phone calls, understand their bills and know where to go for appointments."

The 16-credit program at RCTC includes five credits of nursing assistant training and 11 core credits for community health worker training. In addition, students complete 96-hour internships in Mayo Clinic's Office of Women's Health, the Cancer Center, and the General Clinical Research Center. The certification program is a joint endeavor of RCTC, Mayo Clinic and the IMAA.

The program, which began in September 2004, has received grants from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Foundation, and support from the United Way of Olmsted County. Mayo Clinic provided scholarships to cover RCTC tuition and fees. ■