



In the span of one year, Mateo Rodríguez was brought into urgent care twice with difficulty breathing. The four-year-old had been diagnosed with asthma in Puerto Rico, where he was hospitalized twice for asthma, but in the wake of Hurricane Maria in 2017, his family relocated to Fitchburg, Massachusetts. Alone in a new city and inhibited by language barriers, the Rodríguez family had no support system to help them navigate Mateo’s health needs. He did not have access to a primary care provider (PCP) and the family could not obtain proper medication to control his asthma symptoms.

With their child’s health in jeopardy, Camila and Luis Rodríguez needed help. They found hope when Mateo was identified as eligible for the Montachusett Opportunity Council’s (MOC) Green and Healthy Homes program. The program, which provides individualized home-based asthma education, paired the family with Community Health Workers (CHW) Regina and Ana. Together, the CHWs helped Mateo and his parents understand how to properly use asthma medication, identify home-based asthma triggers, and mitigate those triggers. Even better, they delivered these services in Spanish, eliminating a large barrier to care experienced by the family.

MOC’s Green and Healthy Homes program was built in 2019 through partnership with Green & Healthy Homes Initiative (GHHI), University of Massachusetts Medical Center (UMMMC), and the City of Worcester. Created to address the high volume of children from MOC’s region frequenting UMMC’s Emergency Department for avoidable asthma exacerbations, the program is based on UMMC and the City of Worcester’s successful asthma intervention. Through support from GHHI, the partners successfully replicated the program to ensure services are available to the Rodríguez family and others like them in Fitchburg, Clinton, and Leominster.

Following their first visit to the Rodríguez home, Regina and Ana took action. Mateo was using expired asthma medication, his nebulizer was not properly sterilized, and he was often taking saltwater instead of Albuterol. The CHWs connected Mateo’s mother to a PCP who provided an accurate diagnosis, updated medications, and an Asthma Action Plan. They educated Mateo and his parents on the proper use of each medication, the importance of regular PCP visits to prevent visits to the ER and urgent care, and how to use the supplies received through the program to mitigate asthma triggers (e.g. green cleaning supplies). Learning of food insecurities and a lack of insurance, the CHWs also enrolled the family in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) for food assistance and MassHealth for Medicaid coverage.



Dany Pelletier, Photographer

Given that unhealthy housing conditions were likely contributing to Mateo’s asthma exacerbations, MOC’s weatherization team completed a full home assessment that identified multiple asthma triggers including moisture and pests. MOC reached out to their partners at the Fitchburg Housing Authority (FHA) to discuss the case and FHA responded, providing \$3,300 in remediation services. The FHA worked to eliminate the pests, remove the moisture, and install a sump pump and down spout for the home. They even built the family a garden. Weeks later when a huge rainstorm hit, the family reported **no water in the basement at all**. Notably, MOC’s Green & Healthy Homes program spent less than \$200 on this work.

Mateo has yet to return to urgent care for his asthma. His Asthma Control Test score went from a 17 (uncontrolled) to a 24 (well-controlled) from the first to last home visits. Because of the personalized care and services provided by MOC and the FHA, he is happier and more active. Mateo’s parents feel less stressed, and now he and his two-year-old sister get to live in a healthier home.