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O.C. Latino, Asian, Iranian groups join forces

By ERIC CARPENTER

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Five community agencies that provide services to non-English speaking Latinos, Vietnamese, Koreans, Pacific Islanders and Iranians are joining forces. They have formed a nonprofit group called MECCA (Multi-Ethnic Collaborative of Community Agencies) to share services and better position themselves for state and federal grants. Individually, the community groups each have budgets of around \$2 million or less. Together, they will have a combined budget approaching \$10 million, to start.

MECCA's goal is to grow during its first year to incorporate up to 20 agencies that could have a combined budget of more than \$30 million, organizers said.

"We want to form a truly multi-ethnic agency that rises above any one agency's agenda," said Ellen Ahn, executive director of Korean Community Services.

The initial organization also includes: Vietnamese Community of Orange County, Inc.; Abrazar, Inc., which serves Latinos, Vietnamese and Iranians; Orange County Children's Therapeutic Arts, which serves a largely Latino population in Santa Ana; and California Latino Psychological Association. The participants provide physical- and mental-health care, youth counseling and senior care, among other services.

"Wherever you look, collaboration among all these ethnic groups is unprecedented," said Gloria Reyes, executive director of Abrazar. "MECCA is a sign of the times." The groups plan to share expertise, such as Abrazar's knowledge of providing transportation. Based in Westminster, Abrazar provides at least 400 daily bus trips to clients seeking medical care and other services.

Organizers said that when they work individually, they sometimes have difficulty persuading lawmakers that they deserve grant money because they serve only one segment of the population. But, they say, their organizations play a vital role in helping recent immigrants and those who struggle with the English language obtain desperately needed services that mainstream organizations can't provide.

Participants know they'll face critics who'll say it's up to the people seeking service to learn English and obtain care from the county Health Care Agency or other mainstream services. "But we're not talking about providing groceries here," Ahn said. "We're talking about counseling and other services that are critically linked to language and culture – services that will do no good if the person across from them is speaking English. "We want to help them to get into the mainstream, so they don't need us anymore," she added.