

Monday at 4 p.m.

Category: The Phone Call

written by Bernadette Lim | November 10, 2017

On a cold December day, I heard a knock on our clinic door. "Hello? Can someone help me?"

Her name was Sara. She wore an oversized blue jacket, black rain boots and a scarf over her head. With my bright blue Health Leads patient advocate polo shirt, I greeted Sara as she sat down in the chair next to me.

"I need some childcare vouchers. They've stopped giving me money and I can't seem to make ends meet any more," she told me quietly.

I told Sara that I could potentially assist her as a patient advocate. "But first," I asked, "could I learn a little more about you and understand why it has been hard for you to get help?"

We talked for three hours that day. I learned that Sara was an Iranian immigrant who spoke little English. She was a victim of domestic abuse, and while she has thankfully been able to remove herself from that relationship, the complexity of the divorce process deemed her income-ineligible for her childcare vouchers.

"I just don't understand where to go to now," she told me.

I couldn't guarantee that Sara would end up getting assistance especially in this convoluted healthcare system, but I wanted to help her, however long it took.

"I will call you once a week on Mondays at 4 p.m.," I told her. "We can work on this together."

Each Monday, our phone call brought new opportunities and challenges.

The next week, I relayed to Sara that she would have to travel to the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) several hours away from her home to turn in documentation. After she traveled the distance to drop off these documents, the DTA agreed to review her application. She came in the office after her doctor visit to give me a hug in gratitude.

Two weeks later, I unfortunately had bad news to relay; the process would not be as easy as we thought. She had to go through several phone interviews and show proof of her divorce within a limited time frame. Sara was discouraged, but still maintained hope. "This always happens," she said to me with a sigh. "But I will keep pushing through, especially because I have you."

As time went along, each phone conversation was my window into Sara's life and hers in mine. During delayed waiting periods, our weekly phone call became a chance to say hello. We shared in each other's everyday highs and lows. I told her how much I missed home during the Christmas holidays. She shared the hopes she has for herself and her children. We held space for each other by listening to each other, once strangers now friends.

Four months later, on a sunny April day, my program manager handed me a letter from the DTA. In it was a childcare assistance letter and receipt. The stamp on the top proclaimed: Approved.

At 4 p.m. I picked up the phone. "Sara? This is Bernadette from Health Leads. I have good news for you."

Bernadette Lim
Berkeley, California