

A HOSPITAL THAT GROWS CULTURES



PHOTOS BY GEORGE MONSIEHE THE STAR-LEDGER
Patient Pedro Vargas plays along with the band at the opening of the Alameda Center for Rehabilitation's Hispanic-friendly wing.

Patients love Latino wing

Alameda Center unveils encore to its third-floor India section

BY SUE EPSTEIN
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

When Marina Baez walks out of her room at the Alameda Center for Rehabilitation in Perth Amboy, she almost feels as if she were visiting her native Dominican Republic.

Murals depicting the blue waters of the Caribbean and the white sand of island beaches grace the walls of the cafeteria on the fifth floor of the center. Swaying palms and tropical fruits dot the wallpaper. Pictures of island children and posters from Latin American countries hang in the corridors.

A new program at the center is trying to provide all of the comforts of home to Hispanic patients, according to George Gonzalez-Gomez, Alameda's director of Hispanic services.

For Baez, 54, who has no family in New Jersey and says she intends to spend the rest of her life at Alameda, the program is a success.

"Before, there was something missing," Baez said through an interpreter. "It makes me feel better. It's brighter."

The administration allows the patients to decorate their rooms, and Baez has hung pictures from Spanish-language magazines on hers.

"We're trying to reproduce what they are used to," Gonzalez-Gomez said. "All of the staff on this floor speaks Spanish. The patients dine on Hispanic dishes. We're hoping that all of the elements here will help in our patients' healing process."

One day earlier this month, a mariachi band strolled through the corridors and then set up in the cafeteria, where it played Latino music. Several members of the staff and some of the patients danced.

Gonzalez-Gomez said the wing can hold 50 patients but only three beds are currently available.

"We may actually add another wing to the Hispanic pro-




Marina Baez dances with nurse's aide Lisa Riley during the Nov. 3 celebration at the facility, the former Perth Amboy Nursing Home.

gram if we have call for it," he said. Garden State Healthcare Group took over the 250-bed facility at 303 Elm St. about a year and a half ago, said Renee Pruzansky, a spokeswoman for the company. Before that, the center was known as the Perth Amboy Nursing Home.

Pruzansky said Garden State owns two buildings, including Alameda, and "we put unique programs into each of our buildings."

"These programs may be off-beat but they are extremely popular, both with the patients and [See WING, Page 33]

MIDDLESEX COUNTY

Page  Friday, November 18, 2005
Bureau Chief Bruno Tedeschi News (732) 404-8080
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MX

The Star-Ledger

WING

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 31

Fifth floor: That Latino touch

their families," she said.

Pruzansky and Michael Neiman, administrator of Alameda, pointed with pride to their first success, located on the third floor: the Indian wing.

Bright-colored banners decorate the tops of the walls. Pictures

of Hindu gods and goddesses hang in the corridors. The main recreation room-cafe contains an altar for any patient who wants to pray. The staff on the floor speaks several of India's languages and the patients are served Indian dishes.

"We opened this wing after members of the Indian community came to us and asked for a place where they could feel comfortable," Neiman said. "Many of these patients were losing weight because they couldn't eat the food they were given where they were before — it wasn't what they were used to.

Now they have their favorite dishes and they've gained weight."

The patients also get Indian programs on their cable TV, he said.

Jenni Cariock, director of case management and marketing, said the goal of the new programs is to "bring their countries here," making the patients who now make their homes there "feel they are home."

Sue Epstein covers Middlesex County. She may be reached at sepstein@starledger.com or (732) 404-8085.