

A City That Cares

Cross-Agency Innovation to Support Caregivers in Bogotá

GAYLEN W. MOORE, YAMILE NESRALA, HANNAH RILEY BOWLES, JORRIT DE JONG, AND SANTIAGO PULIDO-GÓMEZ

On October 27, 2020—exactly one year after being elected mayor of Bogotá, Colombia—Claudia López Hernández stood before a mask-clad crowd at the inauguration of Manitas SuperCADE, the site of the city’s first “Manzana del Cuidado,” or “Care Block.” During her campaign, López had made a promise to feminist leaders: she would use the powers of her office to recognize the importance and address the inequitable distribution of unpaid care work.¹ At the heart of this commitment was an idea that the city should establish a new “care system” to support and honor the work of caregivers. The Manitas Care Block stood as the first step in delivering on this promise.

As López explained to her audience that day, the Block brought together a variety of free services, including childcare, healthcare, education, legal and mental health counseling, and recreation. The city’s newest SuperCADE—itself an award-winning innovation in public service delivery that co-located many municipal services—would “anchor” the Block.² Caregivers could receive services within the building and access additional supports within an 800-meter radius, all while the city provided care to their dependents. If all went according to plan, Manitas would be the first of many such Care Blocks. López explained, “The more Care Blocks we have, the lower the weight of unpaid care work that will fall on women’s shoulders, and consequently, they will have more time for leisure, for their life, for their education, and for their enjoyment. That’s what we’re making possible today.”³

Claudia López: Activist, Journalist, Scholar, Senator, Mayor

Claudia López grew up in Bogotá in the 1970s and 1980s, a time when drug traffickers were consolidating power in a nation plagued by armed conflict between the government, right-wing paramilitary forces, leftist guerillas, and organized crime. As a college student, she joined the youth movement that led to the ratification of the Colombian Constitution of 1991. She eventually earned a master’s degree in public administration at Columbia University in New York City, where she took a job cleaning apartments to cover her living expenses.⁴

Upon her return to Colombia, López worked as an investigative journalist, playing a key role in igniting the so-called Parapolítica scandal, which exposed ties between elected officials and paramilitary groups, bringing dozens of political careers to abrupt ends.⁵ Death threats and lawsuits followed. “The people in paramilitary groups and drug cartels are so powerful. Instead of reporting endlessly, I went to work so we can change it,” she said.⁶ In 2011, she returned to the US on a Fulbright scholarship to begin work toward a PhD in political science at Northwestern University. She went on to serve Colombia as a senator for four years and became a vice-presidential candidate in the Green Alliance party’s unsuccessful bid for the presidency in 2018. This loss preceded a year of growing social unrest

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across Colombia, but also of personal victories for López. By the end of 2019, she had completed her PhD and become the first woman and openly LGBTQ candidate elected to the mayor's office.

López often referred to caregivers as Colombia's hidden social security system because of the crucial role they played in caring for children, older adults, and people with disabilities.⁷ Women were the fabric of this safety net. They spent more than twice as much time on domestic tasks as men.⁸ Over a million full-time caregivers—roughly one third of all women in Bogotá—dedicated an average of seven hours a day to care and household chores, leaving little time for education, paid employment, political participation, leisure, or managing their own health.⁹ But when López took office, her commitment to offering caregivers their due respect, relief, and support was only a promise; it was not yet a plan.

“A Diana” for Women's Affairs

“The first dilemma was deciding, whom should I put in charge?” López recalled. The difficulties facing caregivers were multi-dimensional and intersecting. Secretary of Health Alejandro Gómez was quick to embrace López's view of caregivers as a social safety net, recognizing that “women who are taking care of older adults or people with disabilities at home are part of the health system.”¹⁰ Given the importance of advancing caregivers' education, the Secretary of Education would also play a key role in the care system. Both Health and Education had resources at their disposal; together, they made up nearly half the municipal budget.¹¹ But neither could accomplish much for caregivers without help from the Secretary of Social Integration, which oversaw public daycare for young children and provided services for older adults, people with disabilities, and indigent residents. And, given the need to offer caregivers leisure activities and build cultural understanding about the value of care work (and persuade more men to contribute their fair share), there was also a key role for the Secretary of Culture, Recreation, and Sports.

Establishing a care system would require bringing these entities and other key service providers together to serve a neglected population. It would not be easy. The care system was a strategic priority for López, but it was one among many. She could not afford to become mired in the nitty-gritty negotiations this kind of collaborative work entailed at the expense of her other ambitions. “This is a gender-based policy and gender-based program,” reasoned López. “Who's the expert on gender perspective? It's the Secretary of Women's Affairs.”

The Secretary of Women's Affairs was among the smallest divisions in city hall. Established in 2012, it had a two-part mandate: (1) to prevent and respond to gender-based violence, and (2) to promote women's empowerment through education and community partnerships. While the other secretaries had more resources, they also had wide-ranging responsibilities and complex bureaucracy and infrastructure. In López's estimation, Women's Affairs had both the policy authority to spearhead the development of a care system and the ability to commit a greater share of its internal resources to the work than the larger administrative bodies. The only remaining question was whether she could find someone with the skill and imagination to lead it.

López thought immediately of Diana Rodríguez, a friend and former classmate: “I need a ‘Diana’ for the Secretary of Women's Affairs.” López knew the public and the press were expecting her to appoint a prominent figure in the women's rights movement.¹² Rodríguez, whose background was in human

rights advocacy, was unknown in feminist circles. Still, López noted, “Diana is the most charismatic person.” She believed Rodríguez had “the social, intellectual, and personal skills to be a good negotiator.” Moreover, “I didn’t want to have someone from the women’s movement who was very ideologically driven or very politically prominent. I didn’t want to take sides within the movement.” Whether Rodríguez would take the job was another question. “I know you’re an incredible person,” López told her friend, “but this is not an academic post. This is not an NGO post. This is not a private-sector post. This is a political public post, so you need to understand politics. All the people elected into the city council—you might not like them, but they’re our boss.” López was delighted to learn that the very “Diana” she had in mind was indeed interested.

By Rodríguez’s own admission, she faced a steep learning curve: “Some people on the transition team I didn’t understand at all; they used very complicated language.”¹³ As López recalled, “Diana is like, ‘At every meeting, they tell me that I don’t know anything.’” The mayor advised her: “Always be humble. They are the experts. We’re just taking notes and doing whatever they think we need to do.” At an early forum with eighty-five leaders in the feminist movement, some of whom were openly skeptical of the mayor’s appointee, Rodríguez emphasized shared values: “I said, ‘I appreciate your honesty and your transparency, and I expect that these are the terms on which we will speak for the next four years. We share the same agenda. I bring a set of tools, you bring others. I expect you to be willing to join me and tell me what I’m not seeing.’” By mid-January, Rodríguez had assembled a small team of advisors, including Natalia Moreno and Diana Parra, who had both worked on López’s campaign and seemed to understand the mayor’s priorities for the care system.

The “Pizza”

The team at Women’s Affairs sought inspiration and guidance from academia, the women’s movement, and former officials from Uruguay’s national government, which had instituted a care program centering daycare services for working parents.¹⁴ For Moreno, a conversation with the director of Women’s Affairs’ “equality houses,” which offered services related to the Secretary’s core mandate in each of Bogotá’s localities, clarified some of the structural barriers they faced. “There were neither public policies nor facilities” to provide relief and opportunity for caregivers, explained Moreno. “When the school was open, the women’s house was closed, and when the women’s house was open, the school was closed. There was a lack of coordination that didn’t allow women to free up care time.”

After weeks of research, conversations, and brainstorming with her team, Rodríguez landed on the idea of using existing infrastructure and adding services around it: “I stood by a whiteboard and I drew a pizza. I said, ‘Why don’t we do a “manzana” [a block]?’” (See Appendix 1 for images.) She sketched a circle with a park at the center. “I said, ‘What if we have a washer and dryer? We have a place for children to be playing. We have a park in which women can exercise.’” Her team quickly grasped the potential of this idea: leveraging infrastructure in flexible ways to provide simultaneous services in close proximity for both caregivers and their dependents. “This was like the super blocks of Barcelona and the safe paths of Mexico City, the circuits of Paris,” said Moreno. “In other words, it was understanding how cities are organized and how care could also be an axis of urban structuring.”

In early February, López was slated to meet with representatives from an international nonprofit that had offered support in setting up a care system. She invited Rodríguez to join her for breakfast before the meeting. “So, what are we going to say we’re going to do?” asked López. Rodríguez redrew the “pizza.” López jumped right in, Rodríguez recalled: “She said, ‘Yes, let’s have something related to healthy food, because that’s what consumes a lot of women’s time, cooking. I like the idea of the washers and dryers.’” Together they brainstormed through the car ride to the meeting. “And we come into this meeting and this huge table,” Rodríguez said, “and we presented this idea as if we had been working on it for years, like a PhD dissertation.” The proposal was well received.

But not everyone was so confident it would work. Claudia Rincón Caicedo, director of communications for Women’s Affairs, noted that the local culture was “permeated by machismo and marked gender roles whereby it was assumed that the natural role for the female gender is to bear this [caregiving] burden.”¹⁵ Changing these kinds of attitudes would be key to redistributing the balance of care work between women and men, but, López acknowledged, “We’re working against millennia of patriarchy. It takes time.” As Rodríguez explained, “Usually a lot of people agree on the problem, and then you negotiate the policy. We took a risk and flipped the cycle around. We had to show the solution for people to understand the problem.”

Even within Women’s Affairs, some worried that the focus on caregivers (who were overwhelmingly but not exclusively women) would detract from the Secretary’s core agenda.¹⁶ “There were other issues, such as the prevention of violence and equality houses and the political participation of women, that seemed to get lost in the agenda,” said Lisa Gómez, deputy secretary for empowerment at Women’s Affairs. The mayor had a different point of view: “The way I saw it was that the care system along with the women’s empowerment programs are the preventive side of the policy for exclusion or violence not to happen.” Confident that they had landed on the right intervention to deliver on López’s campaign promise, Rodríguez and López prepared to announce their plans on International Women’s Day: March 8, 2020.

A Crisis of Health and a Crisis of Poverty

Colombia’s first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Bogotá on March 6, 2020.¹⁷ On March 25, the president announced a nationwide quarantine. For López, the pandemic was simultaneously a crisis of health and a crisis of poverty. Roughly a third of Bogotá residents worked in the informal economy.¹⁸ For many, being unable to work meant no food on the table and no money for other essentials. López perceived not only lost wages but also lost progress in the fight for gender equality: “Women that had already freed themselves from unpaid care work at home, now they’ve lost a job and they’re back in the home doing the same thing.” Even worse, in the pressure cooker of quarantine, domestic violence spiked, with reports rising 142 percent in just the first three weeks.¹⁹ In response, Women’s Affairs increased capacity on their 24-hour hotline and in their shelters, posted signs in public spaces, and trained supermarket and pharmacy workers in protocols for responding to victims of domestic violence.²⁰ They also began working with Director of Culture, Recreation, and Sports Nicolás Montero to establish a “calm line” for men to “talk man-to-man” before a dispute escalated into violence.²¹

The mayor spent the spring of 2020 in a sprint to coordinate the city’s pandemic response and execute the complex participatory and political task of getting her four-year governing plan drafted and

approved by council. Early drafts of the plan proposed establishing six Care Blocks, but López and Rodríguez were wary of putting promises they might be unable to fulfill in the plan. “We didn’t know if all the public budget was going to end up going to the health sector,” Rodríguez recalled. They put in just enough language to allow them “to work and move along and tweak as we went.”

By June 20, with quarantine restrictions easing and the four-year plan approved, López finally had time to focus on her immediate strategic priorities: establishing a universal basic income program for poverty relief, expanding internet access to support remote school, and building the care system. While the lockdown had exacerbated inequities, it had also heightened public awareness of work in the domestic sphere. “It forced non-caregivers to provide care and walk in the shoes of care workers,” Moreno observed. Caicedo recalled memes circulating online about endless dishwashing. She thought, “Let’s leverage this. People finally get it. Housework is work.”

Getting to One

This subtle shift in cultural consciousness did not guarantee that either the public or city officials would understand or embrace the care system and Care Blocks as a worthwhile project for city government. Rodríguez sought to shield the effort from criticism by defining the problem in terms of quantifiable costs and insisting on a data-informed approach, seeking advice and support from non-governmental organizations and philanthropies.²² The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) helped Women’s Affairs calculate the costs of caregiving not only in terms of caregivers’ health and ability to escape cycles of poverty, but also in relation to Colombia’s GDP. With support from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Women’s Affairs mapped access to care services across the city and developed a “prioritization index” with five variables—including poverty rates and the proportion of caregivers living in the area—to determine where the Blocks would have the greatest impact. Women’s Affairs also convened focus groups, learning about caregivers’ physical and mental health challenges, their economic stress from lack of opportunity and education, and barriers to accessing services.

With this data in hand, Rodríguez was prepared for the hard work ahead: persuading the service-providing Secretaries to lend their infrastructure and staff and bend their usual policies and processes to “mirror” caregivers’ needs and schedules.²³ The city’s budget was already strained by the pandemic, and the health and education sectors were spread particularly thin.²⁴ While philanthropies and grantmaking networks offered funding opportunities that might support a pilot or short-term program, López and Rodríguez understood that to be sustainable, the Care Blocks would have to be funded within the constraints of existing budgets. The budget for fiscal year 2021, approved in the fall of 2020, allocated additional funds for the care system through the Secretaries providing the specific services, but the Secretaries still controlled the funds. According to Leidy Vega, an international affairs advisor for Women’s Affairs, the data gathered proved essential for convincing officials and staff across government to “adapt their logic” to the needs of service recipients rather than providers.

“It is a hard negotiation,” López acknowledged, “first for the infrastructure, then for the budget and the new allocations, and then for the coordination of the specific times and days and tasks.” Negotiations were multi-dimensional and multi-level. For example, the mayor observed that Bogotá had invested heavily in school facilities, but classrooms and schoolyards were vacant after 3:00 pm.

Why couldn't a school anchor a Care Block? "In Colombia, the head of school manages the physical grounds," said Secretary of Education Edna Bonilla. "To come and use the school, you need the authorization of the head of school." The teachers' union also initially resisted working longer hours, even with additional pay.²⁵ There were many conversations, some of them heated. But López's passion for the project boiled down to one simple rule: "Never surrender," she said. "Period."

By mid-summer, López and Rodríguez had identified a site for the first Block: the Manitas SuperCADE in Ciudad Bolívar. The locality encompassed an informal settlement that sprawled up the steep hillsides on the southern tip of Bogotá, and many young mothers called this "self-built" neighborhood home.²⁶ The new SuperCADE sat at the Manitas stop of the new "TransMiCable," a two-mile-long cable car that cut travel time from the top to the bottom of the mountain from over an hour to just fifteen minutes.ⁱ This combination of infrastructure, need, and ease of access made Manitas an ideal site for the city's first Care Block.

In early September, Rodríguez received a call from the mayor's chief of staff, Felipe Jiménez, notifying her that the Block would open on October 3rd. It came as a shock. "I said, 'No, it's not ready, and we can't do it. It's irresponsible. I've been very mindful of keeping everybody on board. I've been hand-holding every single actor, like a grandmother holding ten grandsons wanting everybody to feel that they have equal attention from their grandmother. And so, no, this is going to be a mess, and we're not going to make it.' And he said, 'Yes, we are. And I need to go to the next call. Bye.' And I remember being furious with Felipe Jiménez." Once the adrenaline had subsided, however, Rodríguez recognized the deadline as an opportunity: "This is a clear vote of confidence and of willingness to innovate." She broke the news to her stunned team: "I was like, 'Yes. Believe me, I'm very angry myself. But guess what? Either you take windows of opportunity or you lose them.'"

Indeed, the order from the mayor's office turned out to be wind at Rodríguez's back. "That was a tipping point," she recalled. The opening of the first Care Block was an opportunity for city government to show it could still accomplish things for residents amid the pain and upheaval of the pandemic. "Every sector wanted to offer something," said Rodríguez. In fact, the city's public service providers were suddenly so eager to be a part of the first Block that the initial list of services on offer grew to ninety-two. López granted Rodríguez a few extra weeks to iron out the details.

In her remarks at the opening, in front of the same women who had expressed skepticism about her appointment, Rodríguez explained that, in accordance with the mayor's promise to the women's movement, they were opening the city's first Care Block. Their goal, she noted, was to ensure that unpaid care tasks "are recognized and valued, so that we can redistribute them between men and women, and to be able to reduce the overload in care that we women carry today."²⁷

Learning While Doing: Scaling Up and Paring Down

The opening of Manitas generated buzz and excitement among residents and in the media. But there was much still to do and learn, and inevitable obstacles and missteps to remind López and Rodríguez to

ⁱ In this way, Rodríguez noted, the cable car itself reduced the amount of time caregivers dedicated to "mobility of care," a key concept in gender-conscious urban planning developed by Inés Sánchez de Madariaga. See <https://unhabitat.org/mobility-of-care-ines-sanchez-de-madariaga>.

“always be humble.” Ninety-two services, Rodríguez acknowledged, was “an epic mistake.” López agreed: “But we realized that very soon, either because we were simply overcome by success—people came and we were unable to deliver on so many services at the same time—or people didn’t ask for services that we put in place. Or the way we were trying to provide the service was not really useful.”

Refining as they went, López and Rodríguez limited most core services to five key agencies: Women’s Affairs; Health; Education; Social Integration; and Culture, Sports, and Recreation. The Blocks’ anchor facilities would also be mostly limited to infrastructure from these five Secretaries, whose leaders were part of a larger committee under the mayor’s office that met quarterly to oversee the care system. “That allowed us to focus on whom to speak to, whom to negotiate with, whom to inspire, move, push, support to be part of this process,” explained López. A delegate from each Secretary formed a second committee that convened monthly to navigate logistical and bureaucratic hurdles—such as questions about liability and procurement protocols—and coordinate the specifics of service delivery.

“The Women’s Secretariat played the role of coordinator,” said Director of Parks and Recreation Blanca Durán. “If we had any difficulty, obviously we first tried to solve it with the entity with which we had the difficulty. But if it didn’t work out, then we went to the Women’s Secretariat. And if all else failed, then the mayor.”²⁸ To ensure Women’s Affairs’ capacity to implement and coordinate the care system, the city doubled its budget to a little over \$30 million (COP \$113,608,212,000) for fiscal year 2021.²⁹

López was the driving force behind the care system, constantly scouting for new anchor locations and pushing for more Blocks. “It requires passion,” she reflected. “It requires understanding each department and director’s needs—maybe to help them with some budget issues, with some allocations they need, with support in other areas. But every time they came to me and said, ‘Oh, if you want me to do that, then I have to surrender this,’ I said, ‘I’m not going to surrender anything.’ Let’s try to find a way to continue the old tasks and purposes and then add this new task.” Meetings often took place at existing or prospective Care Blocks. “I was trying to observe how things were doing on the ground and to suggest things, because I know change takes time,” said López. “That’s my type of management, I always say: ‘Look, in the office, everything’s perfect. In the PowerPoint, everything is working.’” Out in the field, reality was a little more complicated.

For example, a bustling new “Happiness Center” in San Cristóbal anchored the third Care Block, which featured a year-round bicycle school and state-of-the-art recreational facilities for children, older adults, and people with disabilities. The first indication of trouble came just before the Block was set to open. López and Rodríguez had made the strategic choice that all the Care Blocks would be branded under the same umbrella: “Mayor’s Office of Bogotá, Care System.” When they arrived, however, they found that leadership at the facility had printed dozens of signs with the logo of the Secretary of Culture, Recreation, and Sports. López and Rodríguez replaced or removed most signs but were careful to leave a few in place in hopes of reducing any hard feelings. A similar conflict occurred with the Secretary of Social Integration. While simultaneous services for caregivers and their dependents were a core feature of the Blocks, the mayor’s emphasis on caregivers gave some the impression that the services for dependents, which Social Integration provided, were taking a back seat. Rodríguez recalled, “I told the mayor, ‘Mayor, we have to change our discourse because we’re coming off as if we couldn’t care less about children and older adults and people with disabilities.’” To manage the friction,

Rodríguez emphasized in public statements that services for these care recipients were “the most important service of the Care Blocks—and it’s not an exaggeration.”

Another scuffle concerned competing visions for a Care Block in Los Mártires, which would be anchored in a notorious former brothel known as “El Castillo.” The Secretary of Culture, Recreation, and Sports, which had jurisdiction over El Castillo, felt the site’s dark but important history should be preserved and contextualized as a museum. From the point of view of Women’s Affairs, transforming the building into a Care Block was highly symbolic; the Block would offer counseling and legal aid to many local caregivers who were also sex workers, trans women, and Venezuelan migrants in a place where people like them had long been exploited. “I was like, ‘No, we need to change the energy of this place,’” said Rodríguez. It was a messy negotiation, with many parties contesting the use of the space. In the end, Lisa Gómez of Women’s Affairs explained, “Many approaches began to converge.” The Care Block opened in July 2021 in the rebranded brothel, now “El Castillo de las Artes,” which offered art classes, exhibitions, and performances along with counseling, legal aid, and other services for caregivers during hours that suited the community’s needs.³⁰

“Every time one of the Care Blocks was inaugurated, we [the secretaries] were all present,” said Secretary of Health Alejandro Gómez. “This was not only to send the community an unmistakable message of commitment to the project, but also to our civil servants that the decision to participate came from the highest authority.”

But the opening of a Block did not always signal an end to negotiations. A dispute over the laundry facility at San Cristóbal dragged on for nearly a year. The facility’s Olympic-size pool created a unique opportunity to use gas-run pool heaters to power dryers, but the facility was not insured for a laundry, and its budget depended on rental income from the space that López wanted for the laundry. López personally visited the site three times trying to get the project approved. “We’re going to do the things, period. No excuses,” López explained. “But if you have worries and problems, we as a team will deal with that. So what do you need?” She offered her office’s legal counsel to help Durán deal with any blowback from the comptroller’s office, and the laundry facility finally opened in 2022.

With this type of back-and-forth on issues large and small playing out in each of a growing number of Blocks, the governing committee worked to develop an “interagency framework agreement” to standardize roles and responsibilities for Care Blocks, including details such as who would pay for security or repairs and how to integrate new service offerings.³¹ It would not prevent every squabble, but it was indicative of the committee’s commitment to the care system. “We constituted a cohesive group,” said Secretary Gómez. “That is to say, we had bonds of trust, bonds of respect, respect for dialogue that allowed us to call each other every time a problem arose, and there were many of them.”

Reduce, Recognize, and Redistribute

As they multiplied, the Care Blocks maintained a similar structure but developed distinct characteristics. Each had a coordinator, a set of basic services for caregivers and their dependents, and cultural transformation classes—for men and other family members—intending to change traditional gender roles and values. (See Appendix 2 for an overview of services.) But the anchor entities, available infrastructure, and the needs of the local caregivers gave each Block its own distinct character and

service portfolio. Stories began to emerge of caregivers across the city finishing their education, turning their handicrafts into small businesses, leaving abusive relationships, and more. (See Appendix 3 for impact stories.)

Exciting as it was to see the vision come to life, Rodríguez and López found it was not always easy to articulate and measure the work being accomplished through the care system: “What is optimally the goal?” López asked. “We started thinking that our objective could be to reduce time poverty.” Reaching back to Rodríguez’s speech at the opening of the first Block, they landed on “three R’s” as the key goals of the Blocks: “Recognize, Redistribute, and Reduce” unpaid care work.ⁱⁱ

For those who could not access Care Blocks, the city brought simultaneous services to caregivers and care recipients through two other programs: Care Buses, which served areas that lacked local infrastructure for a Block; and Home Care Assistance, which served caregivers who looked after family members who had difficulty leaving home. (See Appendix 4 for an overview of these services.) The challenge of recognizing and redistributing care, however, was not as straightforward as providing a break for caregivers at home or a yoga class for a grandmother waiting for her laundry. As Secretary of Education Bonilla said, “If we do not generate a cultural change of behavior, this won’t have the expected effect. It becomes a strategy for supplemental assistance.” This kind of critique found traction among some feminists who voiced concern about “the regressive nature of some programs [...] which replace a policy of guaranteeing rights with service actions that strengthen welfare dependency.”³² In the push to open the Blocks, there were few meaningful efforts to organize caregivers as a group with shared interests that could wield power in the political arena. “I made that concern very clear,” said Moreno. “We need to strengthen these networks of caregivers.” López acknowledged, “Our explanation and engagement of the women’s movement was, ‘We’re going to do this for you, but trust us because we need to do it.’ . . . In pushing things faster, you sacrifice time for engagement and involvement and listening.”

The city did address the problem of culture change from other angles. Artists were commissioned to paint murals with slogans such as “We can all learn to provide care.” Public service spots appeared on TV, showing food arriving on tables and laundry bins floating past as if by magic while men and boys sat on the couch.³³ Men who called the “calm line” were invited to take a caregiving class at their local Block, where they could learn to cook a meal or change a diaper.³⁴ The Secretary of Culture, Recreation, and Sports created a feedback system for women to report behavior that made them uncomfortable exercising at the Blocks and—after receiving over a hundred complaints in the first month—organized trainings to teach service providers about gender-based violence, anti-fat bias, and appropriate client interactions.³⁵

Caregivers themselves did not always embrace the care system’s culture-change agenda. “When we started to talk about the care system, the women did not even understand us,” said Secretary of Social Integration Margarita Barraquer. “They said, ‘What are you talking about? It is my duty to take care of

ⁱⁱ The three Rs were first articulated by the UN Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel on Women’s Economic Empowerment and later (with input from the International Labor Organization, UNWomen, and UNDP) expanded to include five Rs (recognize, reduce, redistribute, reward, represent). See <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-01/hlp-wee-working-group-paper-driver-3-en.pdf> and <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/07/a-toolkit-on-paid-and-unpaid-care-work>.

the children, to take care of my mother who is sick.”³⁶ A cultural transformation class instructor who asserted that caregiving was not instinctual, like pulling your finger away from fire, got an earful from his students: “Are you saying *the maternal instinct doesn’t exist?*!”³⁷ The challenge of crafting messages that reached and resonated with caregivers—especially those with the highest need and the least technological savvy—meant the Women’s Affairs communication team had their work cut out for them. “We came up with a thousand very different ways to communicate,” said Caicedo.

By the end of summer 2022, the city had rolled out ten Care Blocks, provided over 160,000 services, brought in-home care to two thousand families, offered continuing education to over six thousand caregivers, and trained nearly seven thousand people in cultural change workshops.³⁸ The Care Blocks were fully funded in the city’s budget, the budget for Women’s Affairs was set to more than triple, and the care system was enshrined in Bogotá’s new Urban Master Plan, with forty-five Blocks to be established by 2035. López aimed to have twenty operating before the end of her term, serving one million caregivers.

But questions remained. Did the Blocks have the right mix of services? Would tallies of services delivered and anecdotal evidence be enough to demonstrate impact and sustain progress? Were care responsibilities shifting? What more could they do to deliver on their promise of recognizing and redistributing care work? What would it take to change attitudes and behaviors and galvanize enduring cultural change?

Appendices

Appendix 1 From “Pizza” to “Manzana”

Figure 1. Early Prototype of Care Blocks (“Pizza” Sketch)

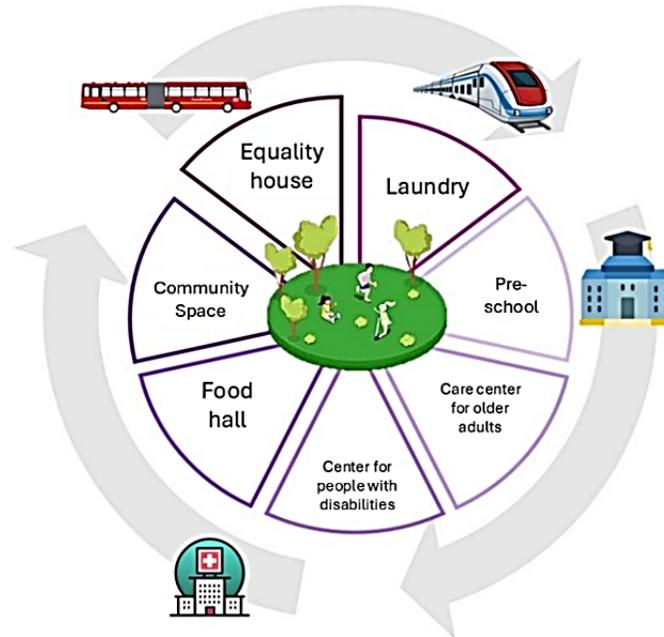


Figure 2. Care Block Prototype

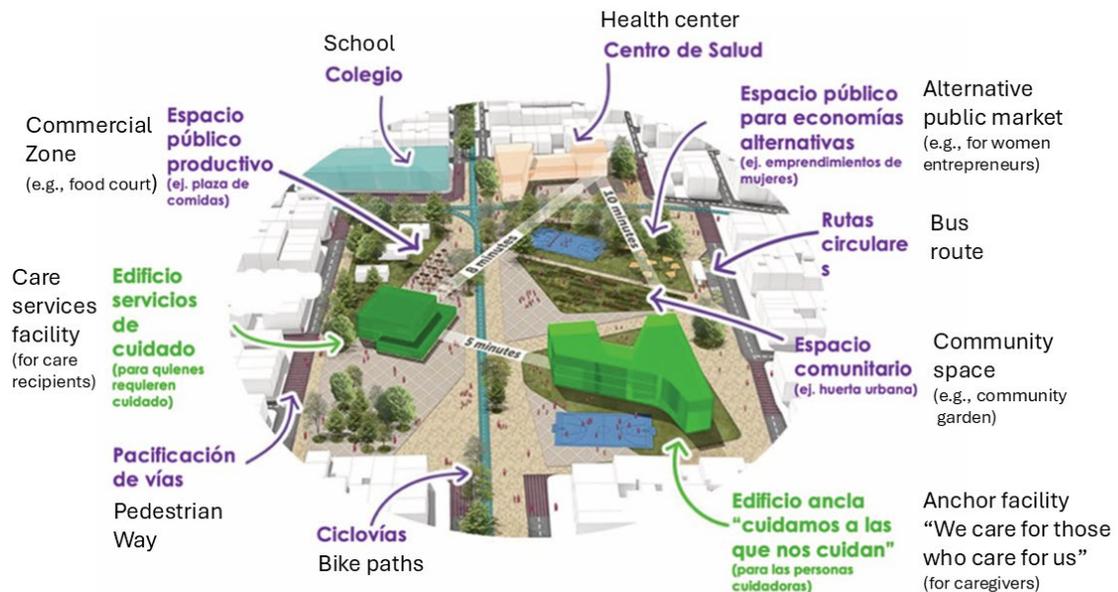


Figura 5. Manzana del Cuidado prototipo
Care Block prototype

Source: City of Bogotá, *Bases Técnicas del Sistema Distrital de Cuidado de Bogotá*, p. 34.

Appendix 2 Care Blocks Core Services

Target Population	Components	General Description of Each Service Component
<p>Caregivers, in their differences and diversities</p>	<p>Education and training</p>	<p>Training services to provide tools and strengthen capacities such as basic, secondary, technical, and vocational education; complementary training; certification of knowledge; financial education; among others.</p>
	<p>Respite</p>	<p>Services to provide conditions of well-being and contribute to the care of physical, mental, and emotional health, such as art, culture, recreation, and sports; psychosocial and legal guidance/ counseling; time for caregivers to enjoy self-care; care for pets; among others.</p>
	<p>Income generation</p>	<p>Services that contribute to economic autonomy, such as entrepreneurship and employment training; programs that strengthen the capabilities of caregivers, and strategies that cultivate employability and entrepreneurship, among others</p>
<p>Care recipients, in their differences and diversities, requiring different levels of support</p>	<p>Care or support</p>	<p>Care and capacity-building services through recreational, educational, artistic, cultural, and sports activities, among others that promote the full exercise of their rights, autonomy, and independent living</p>
<p>Men, in their difference and diversities, and diverse families of caregivers</p>	<p>Cultural transformation</p>	<p>Cultural transformation services that seek to promote changes in practices, values, beliefs, narratives, and social and cultural norms in order to eliminate traditional gender roles and sexist and violent stereotypes; educational initiatives such as raising awareness, training, and outreach to promote recognizing, redistributing, and reducing care work.</p>

Source: City of Bogotá, *Bases Técnicas del Sistema Distrital de Cuidado de Bogotá*, p 32. Translated from Spanish by case writers.

Appendix 3 Care Blocks Impact Stories

- **Helen** obtained her high school degree at the age of forty-five alongside 330 other women at the Kennedy Care Block. Helen had started high school at thirteen but was derailed when her parents divorced and she found herself taking care of the household. Subsequently, the loss of her mother and birth of her daughter pushed her dream of completing high school even further away as she focused on working to care for her family. Then, in July 2021, she stumbled on a flyer about the Kennedy Care Block, a place where she could study, rest, and access free services. She enrolled in the “Flexible Education” program and took classes while her daughter received care.
- **Nancy** fulfilled her dream of becoming a pastry chef and running her own restaurant thanks to the Engativá Care Block, which allowed her to continue her education and take courses in entrepreneurship. Previously, Nancy had spent over twenty years juggling housework and a full-time job at a restaurant after she and her family fled violence in their hometown of Urabá.
- At the age of forty-seven, **Marcela**, a trans woman who grew up homeless and had been doing paid sexual activities in the Santa Fe neighborhood for over twenty years, was studying towards her high school diploma at the Care Block in Los Mártires. She also became involved in art and culture activities with youth from the locality.
- After detecting an inappropriate situation involving her disabled daughter’s teacher as well as abuse within her own family, **Carmen** found help for herself, her daughter, and her grandson at the Manitas Care Block. At Manitas, Carmen enrolled in a computer management course, completed high school, and both she and her daughter received psychosocial support.
- **Yolanda** cared for her elderly parents and her children, who have disabilities. Her father lost his legs to diabetes and could not easily leave home. As part of the Home Care Assistance program, a nurse visited each of Yolanda’s parents for several hours each week, allowing her to run errands, enjoy a much-needed break, or take her children out for ice cream. Yolanda credited the program with lowering her anxiety, boosting her mental health, and giving her the time to think about her future.
- **Holman** participated in the “Men Who Care School—Learning to Care” at his local Care Block. The school aimed to transform gender stereotypes around care and teach men caregiving skills such as cleaning, cooking, parenting, and practicing emotional self-care. Holman, who became a father at nineteen and shared caregiving responsibilities with his mother and former partner, credited the school with changing the way he thought about women and helping him get through a breakup without resorting to anger.

Source: Adapted from *How to Transform a City for Women*, City of Bogotá, 2023.

Appendix 4 Overview of Care Buses and Home Care Assistance*Care Buses*

Care Buses, initially funded through a grant from Open Society Foundations, were mobile versions of Care Blocks that serviced remote and rural areas of Bogotá that did not offer easy access to traditional Blocks or have the infrastructure to build them. Caregivers accessed services inside the bus while the people they cared for received care in two accompanying inflatable tents. The buses complied with the same criteria of simultaneity, proximity, and flexibility of service provision as traditional Blocks.

Care Buses offered services for:

- Caregivers: high school and vocational training; leisure and well-being (health, culture, recreation, and sports); and income-generating services to strengthen economic autonomy.
- People requiring care or high levels of support: care services through recreational, educational, cultural, and sports activities that promoted autonomy; and legal and psychosocial services for older adults.
- General public: cultural transformation classes.

As of December 2023, sixteen services were provided on the Care Buses by thirteen District Administration entities.

Home Care Assistance

This operating model, initially funded by the city through funds allocated to the Secretary of Social Integration and the Secretary of Health, brought a limited number of care system services to the homes of caregivers. It was primarily aimed at caregivers who could not access Care Blocks or other care facilities due to the conditions of the people they cared for. Their main purpose was to reduce the time caregivers spent on unpaid domestic and care work and to improve the quality of care received by people who required high levels of support. Following the same principle as the Care Blocks and Buses, Home Care Assistance took over care responsibilities to provide caregivers respite and access to simultaneous training activities or other services to support their wellbeing.

Home Care Assistance comprised the following programs:

- Home Day Care Center / Home Care (launched in 2021): Coordinated by the Secretary of Social Integration, this program provided comprehensive care for people with disabilities and older adults, as well as support services for caregivers.
- Home Respite Care for Caregivers (launched in 2022): Coordinated by the Secretary of Health, this program provided temporary relief services at home to caregivers and engaged them in activities that promoted their health and wellbeing and strengthened social networks. It aimed to benefit both caregivers and those they cared for.

Source: Adapted from *Bases Técnicas del Sistema Distrital de Cuidado de Bogotá*. Translated from Spanish by case writers.

Endnotes

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- ¹ Claudia López, Zoom interviews by case writers, June 17, 2024, and November 26, 2024. All further quotes by this individual are from these interviews unless otherwise noted.
- ² See Johan Sebastián Gómez Rojas, “¿Por qué tanta fila para el SuperCADE? Conozca todos los trámites que se pueden realizar,” *Alerta Bogotá*, April 18, 2022, <https://bogota.alerta.com.co/quejodromo/que-es-un-supercade-tramites-que-puede-realizar-102800>.
- ³ Claudia López, “La alcaldesa Claudia López hace entrega del SuperCADE Manitas,” Bogotá Mayor’s Office, streamed live on October 27, 2020, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AQcKh4q-Xso>.
- ⁴ Edited by Roberto Ortiz de Zárate Arce, “Claudia López Hernández,” Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, <https://www.cidob.org/lider-politico/claudia-loppez-hernandez>.
- ⁵ Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, “Claudia López Hernández.”
- ⁶ Lisa Stein, “‘We have nothing to lose and everything to win.’,” *Northwestern Magazine*, Fall 2019, <https://magazine.northwestern.edu/exclusives/claudia-lopez-mayor-bogota-colombia-we-have-nothing-to-lose-and-everything-to-win>
- ⁷ Claudia López, “For the first time, women are protagonists...,” The Bogotá Mayor’s Office, Facebook video, <https://www.facebook.com/AlcaldiaBogota/videos/hist%C3%B3rico-por-primera-vez-las-mujeres-son-protagonistas-en-el-cuadro-que-preside/202656124133737/>, accessed April 4, 2025.
- ⁸ Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística, “Encuesta Nacional de Uso del Tiempo – ENUT 2020-2021, Resultados, Septiembre-diciembre 2020,” National Government of Colombia, March 23, 2021, https://www.dane.gov.co/files/investigaciones/boletines/ENUT/Presentacion_ENUT_septiembre_diciembre_2020.pdf.
- ⁹ *How to Transform a City for Women*, City of Bogotá, 2023.
- ¹⁰ Alejandro Gómez, Zoom interview by case writers, July 24, 2024. All further quotes by this individual are from this interview unless otherwise noted.
- ¹¹ Secretary of Planning of Bogotá, “Plan de Desarrollo Distrital 2020-2024: Armonización Presupuestal 2020,” City of Bogotá, 2020.
- ¹² López, interview.
- ¹³ Diana Rodríguez Franco, Zoom interview by case writers, June 17, 2024, and May 5, 2025. All further quotes by this individual are from these interviews unless otherwise noted.
- ¹⁴ Natalia Moreno, Zoom interview by case writers, August 5, 2024. All further quotes by this individual are from this interview unless otherwise noted.
- ¹⁵ Clauda Rincón Caicedo, Zoom interview by case writers, November 20, 2024. All further quotes by this individual are from this interview unless otherwise noted.
- ¹⁶ Lisa Gómez, Zoom interview by case writers, July 25, 2024. All quotes by this individual are from this interview unless otherwise noted.
- ¹⁷ Juan David Ramírez JD, Carolina Florez, et al., “The Arrival and Spread of SARS-CoV-2 in Colombia,” *Journal of Medical Virology* 93 (2021), 1158-1163, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jmv.26393>.
- ¹⁸ Melissa Murialdo, “More than 10 Million Colombians Continue to Work in the Informal Economy,” *Finance Colombia*, August 25, 2023, <https://www.financecolombia.com/more-than-10-million-colombians-continue-to-work-in-the-informal-economy/#:~:text=On%20the%20other%20hand%2C%20the,informally%20employed%20population%20was%2057.8%25.>
- ¹⁹ Juana Salamanca, “Violencia intrafamiliar: medidas urgentes y creativas para enfrentar ‘la otra pandemia’,” *El Espectador*, August 11, 2020, <https://www.elespectador.com/actualidad/violencia-intrafamiliar-medidas-urgentes-y-creativas-para-enfrentar-la-otra-pandemia-article/>.
- ²⁰ Lisa Gómez, interview.
- ²¹ Bianca Fiore, “A hotline for men to end machismo: Línea Calma,” *Atlas of the Future*, September 22, 2021, <https://atlasofthefuture.org/project/linea-calma/>.
- ²² Leidy Vega, Zoom interview by case writers, August 23, 2024. All quotes by this individual are from this interview unless otherwise noted.

²³ Moreno, interview.

²⁴ Edna Bonilla, Zoom interview by case writers, August 21, 2024. All further quotes by this individual are from this interview unless otherwise noted.

²⁵ Bonilla, interview.

²⁶ “Museo de la Ciudad Autoconstruida: Encuentro, Participación y Reconocimiento,” City of Bogotá, July 10, 2022, <https://bogota.gov.co/mi-ciudad/cultura-recreacion-y-deporte/museo-de-la-ciudad-autoconstruida-ciudad-bolivar-entradas-y-horarios>.

²⁷ López, “La alcaldesa Claudia López hace entrega del SuperCADE Manitas.”

²⁸ Blanca Durán, Zoom interviews by case writers, September 13, 2024, and September 20, 2024. All further quotes by this individual are from these interviews unless otherwise noted.

²⁹ Bogotá Office of the Comptroller, *Final Report: Regulatory Audit Code No. 33, District Secretariat for Women* (Bogotá, DC: Office of the Comptroller, June 2022), 40, 72, <https://www.contraloriabogota.gov.co/sites/default/files/2023-03/Informe%20Final%20Auditoria%20de%20Regularidad%2033%20SDMujer%20PAD%202022.pdf>.

³⁰ “‘El Castillo’, el antiguo prostíbulo de Bogotá que ahora es un centro cultural y artístico,” *Infobae*, July 9, 2021, <https://www.infobae.com/america/colombia/2021/07/09/el-castillo-el-antiguo-prostibulo-de-bogota-que-ahora-es-un-centro-cultural-y-artistico/>.

³¹ Convenio Interadministrativo 913 de 2021, Secretary of Women’s Affairs, <https://sdmujer.gov.co/node/3804>.

³² Juanita Barreto Gama and Marta Buriticá, open letter to Mayor López re: “Orden Civil al Mérito ciudad de Bogotá,” December 21, 2023.

³³ “Trabajos Invisibles,” City of Bogotá, video, 0:57.

³⁴ Fiore, “A hotline for men.”

³⁵ Durán, interview.

³⁶ Margarita Barraquer, Zoom interview by case writers, July 24, 2024. All further quotes by this individual are from this interview unless otherwise noted.

³⁷ Leidy Vega, Zoom interview by case writers, August 23, 2024.

³⁸ Diana Rodríguez Franco, “The Bogotá CARE System: How a city is reorganizing itself for women,” *City Playbook for Advancing the SDGs*, September 2022, Center for Sustainable Development at Brookings, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/City-playbook_Bogota.pdf.