

## Post Summit Summary: Toward A Statewide Agenda on Latino Issues in Michigan

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As the nation continues to undergo major demographic shifts that will present major challenges in the coming decades, it is important to begin to address the challenges facing Latinos in Michigan. One dimension of the demographic shift is the aging of the Baby Boomers, who will leave a major void in the labor force when they begin retiring in substantial numbers this year. Another dimension is the growth of the Latino population, which is projected at the national level to go from 15% of the population to 30% by mid century. Although Latinos comprise only 4.1% of Michigan's overall population, the shift is still evident in the state.

This year race/ethnic minority births are expected to exceed those of White Americans across the nation. Because of Latinos' marginal status within the larger society, their rapid growth can either lead to increased demands on public goods and services or to increased economic productivity if programmatic steps are taken to increase their human capital levels.

The Julian Samora Research Institute is pleased to provide this summary of the *Summit on Latino Issues in Michigan: Toward a Statewide Agenda*, which was held at the Kellogg Center in East Lansing, Michigan, on July 31, 2009.

This summit represents the first phase of an effort to galvanize Latino-informed leaders and researchers and provide an opportunity for them to identify, prioritize and begin to work toward solutions to the challenges facing Latinos in Michigan.

Nearly 60 individuals representing different institutional sectors and geographic areas of

Michigan came together for one day to work collaboratively on identifying and prioritizing the challenges facing Latinos in Michigan.

Summit participants identified the following issues as key challenges for Latinos in Michigan and provided some suggestions for how they can be addressed.

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### 1) Education

Education (both formal and informal) leads to success in all aspects of life. It is the foundation for effective involvement and success in nearly every aspect of life. In order to have an impact on education, the Latino community must engage parents in the education of their children. This requires empowering them through an understanding of their rights, school policies, and ways to engage their children in educational activities.

It is important to develop leaders within the community, conduct authentic assessments to re-evaluate schools and curricula, and serve as advocates on behalf of Latino children in the school system. It is also important to consider alternative schools with support programs for addressing culture shock among newcomers.

Finally, efforts must be made to increase awareness of the issues among legislators, develop capacity to influence policy at the state level, eliminate institutional exclusionary practices that limit Latino education, and reject reverse racism as a viable ideology in a context of institutionalized racism.

## 2) Immigration Rights

Immigration rights relate to all other key issues. Legal versus illegal status affects such areas as insurance (i.e. health insurance qualification based on illegal or legal status), eligibility for higher education admission, and government assistance programs. Ultimately, it is also connected to human rights issues.

Immigration has a completely legislative solution. Immigration reform can be addressed and influenced through political organizing and advocacy. How much the community is willing to compromise is an issue. Some components that are not legislative must be addressed at an administrative level. Latinos and other immigrants must raise their voices to the level of the U.S. President's office.

## 3) Health and Healthcare

Quality of life is affected if health is affected. There is a high percentage of diabetes, heart disease and obesity in the Latino population. Obesity in children is a problem of particular concern.

Poor health is caused and exacerbated by a variety of factors. Some of these factors include but are not limited to:

- Minimal or no health insurance,
- Poor neighborhoods with few exercise and recreational facilities,
- Lack of access to fresh produce in poor communities,
- Lack of bilingual, culturally relevant health education, prevention and wellness programs,
- Few bilingual health service providers,
- Lack of access to quality healthcare.

Implications for the healthcare system:

- Quality interpreter services should be made available.
- Health providers at all levels should be encouraged to learn a second language.
- Health and medical curricula need to address cultural and linguistic issues in order to adequately serve the Latino community.

Latinos working in the health services professions provide models and mentors for youth and should encourage youth to consider careers in the health professions.

Community education is important for providing critical information on how to access services and resources (i.e. Medicaid, Health Department).

Encourage healthcare providers to volunteer their services in low cost/free clinics, or provide pro bono services in their offices.

Grants and research on Latino health can provide current data on their health status and insights into effective prevention practices and treatments.

Policy implications:

- Access to healthcare must be universal.
- Adequate financial support must be provided for free and low cost clinics.
- Medicaid reimbursement rates must be increased.
- Dental and mental health services must be part of insurance coverage.
- Foreign healthcare providers should be recertified more quickly after entering the US.

## 4) Civic Engagement

The Latino voice is needed in policy and decision-making. Michigan is void of a Latino political network and consequently of a Latino voice and advocacy. Latinos need to influence and engage in politics regardless of the political party of which they are members.

Latinos need to register to vote, organize around issues, and become educated about the U.S. political system so that communities can share in the benefits of Latino activism. Resources to address these needs include bilingual materials and training programs to teach "civic engagement" within Latino communities and neighborhoods.

Latinos with political savvy will be informed voters who are better able to hold politicians accountable in policymaking.

## 5) Media Portrayal of Latinos

Media portrayals of Latinos are, for the most part, negative. This affects the perceptions of the general public, perpetuates stereotypes, and has a deleterious impact on the self-image of Latino youth. National news impacts local perceptions of events. (e.g., border stories, immigration issues, etc.).

Community pressure on media outlets is needed to provide more positive stories of Latino culture and people. Advertisers need to be made aware of the population shift and the increase in Latino consumers nationwide. More Latinos need to be employed in all aspects of the media world.

The community can respond to negative and unfair portrayals through boycotts and advocacy and education efforts. The Hispanic media (Univision, LaVoz . . . ) can and should highlight critical policy and community issues. Targets for such efforts include the Big Three television networks (NBC/ABC/CBS), and multi-media outlets such as cable and satellite.

## 6) Economic Development

Economic development is extremely important to Latino entrepreneurs striving to succeed in the US. Support systems are needed that will reach Latinos and provide services. These include Small Business Development Centers (SBDC), the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC), outreach centers at colleges and universities, and the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. Resources, referrals and education must be available and accessible to Latinos so that they can learn about U.S. business practices and formalities, business planning, business laws and regulations, zoning and licensing requirements and so on. Latinos also need to understand today's technology and current successful marketing strategies.

Resources created or translated into Spanish, and bilingual support should be made available as a matter of standard practice. State/federal regulatory offices that do not have bilingual materials or funds to publish them can post them on a website and print them as needed. This should be done in other languages also. Cultural competence of government and regulatory personnel is important. Providing early exposure

to entrepreneurship for Latino youth can be accomplished through the creation of a Latino Junior Achievement initiative.

Finally, forming coalitions with other cultural groups (i.e. Arabic) with similar needs will provide the political and economic pressure necessary to obtain the state and federal multicultural focus needed.

## 7) Jobs and Employment

People need to obtain/provide the basic needs of life for themselves and their families, as well as their communities. Policymakers must ensure that aid is provided for persons to reinvent and retrain themselves as workers who can meet future industries' and employers' needs. At the same time, Latinos must change and develop a mentality or philosophy of "creating their own opportunities." *Tienen que ayudarse para que otros les ayuden.* Latino representation at the policymaking and implementation tables is important to influencing federal, state and local governments as well as corporate management and union practices. Resources required to accomplish change includes leadership training, networking, advocacy and communities. Financial clout and a political voice are needed to influence policy makers

## 8) Latino-focused Statewide Network

A statewide network to support and initiate advocacy in the policy arena is needed to provide a venue for working collaboratively to improve the status of Latinos in Michigan. This is an initiative that will require commitment and due diligence, but can result in long-term benefits for Latinos in Michigan. Such an effort calls for true collaboration, one without hidden agendas. Resources such as today's technology make it possible for electronic statewide meetings (webinars and conference calls), at little or no cost. The Network can aid in developing leadership and providing training for Latinos interested in participating in advocacy/education efforts.

Research projects conducted by institutes such as JSRI provide useful information that can support networking and advocacy that is data-based. Pooling resources to support research efforts with grants, endowments, gifts and sponsorships can result in additional studies on Latino life in Michigan and the United States; dissemination of results can influence public policy and opinion and impact how non-Latinos view and interact with the Latino community.

### 9) Gender Relations

Latino family traditions and culture have historically proven to strengthen the community and family by following a unique set of norms and codes. However, it is important to acknowledge the drawback of a culture when it creates adverse effects that hinder equity for both men and women. The issue of gender bias and inequality affects the degree of opportunities in all societal institutions.

Gender-based relations differ from gender-based equity in the respect that gender equity can be legislated and enforced; gender relations cannot. This leads to the premise that one can be addressed systemically while the other one falls within the realm of social discourse.

Leadership development may provide the path to development, advocacy and implementation of legislation that addresses gender inequity. Affirmative action must once again be discussed in Michigan. Gender relations must fall on the shoulders of the community by utilizing the strengths of our cultural heritage, such as religion,

respect for family networks, etc., to address Latino vs. Latina roles. These traits and values can be conducive to positively influence all U.S. institutions. Resources important to addressing gender issues include research, funding, media, role models and curricula for training.

### 10) Civil Rights and Discrimination

Racism is alive and well in the United States. It impacts every aspect of life, resulting in a segregated society that denies opportunities to what will soon be the largest population segments in the nation. Moreover, backlash by members of the dominant group diminishes equal rights in everyday life.

In order to control and minimize racism, effective laws must be enacted and enforced. Bureaucracies and regulatory agencies must be made more efficient and effective in becoming multicultural organizations the no longer privilege White Americans. Media must be pressured to provide accurate depictions of Latinos.

Effective Latino civil rights advocacy organizing is important to the creation of better laws and identifying resources for enforcement (effective regulatory agencies).

### Next Steps

- Creating an organizational vehicle,
- Keeping communications alive,
- Inventory organizational activities,
- Communicating with media and legislators.

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