

# Latinos in Dane County: Different Language, Different Reality

## United Way of Dane County's Call for Research

Dane County is a melting pot of Latino culture with residents with heritages from more than 40 different countries. As United Way of Dane County seeks to understand the needs of the growing Latino population, along with the associated language differences, cultural barriers, and economic issues, the Self Reliance and Independence Community Solution Team conducted three focus groups in 2004-2005 within this important, and diverse, community. A total of 26 individuals participated in the Latino Focus Groups conducted in Spring 2005:

- Group 1: Members of the Latino community with enduring disabilities and frail seniors (over age 65). The seniors in this group were all born outside of the United States.
- Group 2: Members of the general Latino community (ages of 18 to 59). All participants in group were parents of children in local HeadStart programs and recent immigrants to the United States.
- Group 3: Latino reputational leaders in the community, many of whom were employed in advocacy and social service agencies and spoke on behalf of the Latino clients they serve, rather than about themselves.

**According to US Census data, the Latino population in Dane County has grown by more than 250% between the years of 1990 and 2000**

2000 Census:

<b>Total Hispanic/Latino Population:</b>	<b>14,837</b>
- Mexican	9,040
- Puerto Rican	1,088
- Cuban	294
- Dominican	68
- Central American	676
- South American	1,132
- All other Hispanic/Latino origins	2,089

1990 Census:

<b>Total Hispanic Population:</b>	<b>5,744</b>
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*We are issuing 4 Impact Reports focusing on African American, Native Americans, Southeast Asians and this report on Latinos. These reports will be used internally by the UWDC Vision Council and Community Solution Teams and distributed to agencies to better help our community serve our populations of color. The results and conclusions in this report are representative of the 26 participants involved and may, or may not, be representative of the greater Latino population in Dane County.*

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**United Way  
of Dane County**

## **Greatest Needs: Transportation, Bilingual Services, and Healthcare**

Although the reported greatest needs varied by ages and situations, all three groups expressed **serious concerns about transportation issues**. Challenges included getting children to HeadStart, unreliable transportation, and difficulty in obtaining a driver's license. Senior participants also expressed concern that without transportation to the local meal site, they would not be able to get out of their homes regularly. Seniors were also frustrated with the difficult-to-read signage used for the public transportation system.

### Latino Seniors and People with Disabilities

- Many senior participants said that although they are interested in learning English, it was **very difficult to get into English as a Second Language (ESL) classes**.
- They also noted a great need for **translators and bilingual staff** to help with conducting financial transactions, applying for health and social services, and medical appointments. Many participants in this group said that when they were seeking medical care, they were neither able to communicate their health concerns fully with the doctors, nor completely understand their diagnosis. Additionally, when translators were provided but unable to stay for the entire appointment, language barriers made understanding the prescriptions given, drug interactions, and nutritional implications of their diets difficult.
- **Health care and dental care** were the next highest area of need. Some senior respondents were not United States citizens, and thus did not have a Social Security number because they were undocumented residents. Without a Social Security number, they were not eligible for Medicaid, Medicare, and/or BadgerCare. These participants said that their healthcare needs went unmet because they did not want to *“risk being sent ‘back home’ after all these years.”*
- Serious concerns were also expressed about the issue of **elder abuse** for Latino seniors. Participants mentioned knowing at least 3 senior women were victims of elder abuse by their teenage grandchildren. As undocumented residents, these women did not want to bring attention to themselves, or their grandchildren, in fear of government officials would send them ‘back home.’

### General Latino Population

- Almost all of the parent participants said that they simply **could not afford healthcare or dental care**. Although a majority of the participants were employed full time, their health insurance premiums were too expensive, resulting in many choosing not to carry health and dental insurance even when their employer offered it. One young mother said that she, *“has relatives send medicines from Mexico because they are less expensive.”*
- This group's second highest need was for **Spanish speaking childcare providers**. Many parents said that their only source of information about childcare providers was word-of-mouth. Additionally, parents expressed concern about not being able to communicate with the English-speaking childcare providers regarding important information about their children.
- Additional needs named by these participants included additional spaces for Spanish-speaking children with HeadStart and parental stress and respite programs.

### Reputational Leaders in the Latino Community

- **Youth services with bilingual staff** in Dane County was a pressing need mentioned by the group. They also expressed concern over the increasing number of Latino teens getting involved in gangs in the Dane County area. As gangs from larger cities, such as Chicago and Milwaukee, are reaching Dane County they noted that service providers in this area had, *“some catching up to do in the area of gang prevention.”* Further thoughts on youth service needs included the creation of after-school programs for children, increasing access to early childhood programs, and increasing access to pre-college programs.
- **Bilingual staff in a wide variety of services** was the second highest need discussed. Need gaps were noted for a wide variety of services, ranging from GED classes in Spanish to bilingual attorneys.

**One participant said, “the Latino families I work with really value the education they are receiving here in the United States,” but noted the dilemma of one family she worked with, “because of the lack of bilingual staff at their son’s school, there were behavioral problems that went unaddressed by the parents because they could not read the letter sent home with the child from school officials.”**

## Barriers to Services: Language, Income, and Lack of Information

All three groups agreed that **language** was one of the top barriers to accessing services in the Dane County area. Given the continual influx of immigrants from Mexico, many new residents do not speak English. The English as a Second Language (ESL) classes offered by MATC are difficult to enroll in because of the high demand. Without translators or a solid foundation in English, Latinos who only speak Spanish are left to the margins of the community. Spanish-speaking parents can not advocate for their children or assist their children with homework. Seniors struggle to take good care of themselves because they do not understand their health status and the instructions from a doctor. Each of the focus group respondents gave painful examples of dilemmas and crises that were inadequately addressed due to language differences.

***As one senior participant said, "I went to the doctor to check my blood pressure. The doctor gave me a prescription which I had to borrow money to get filled. But I did not understand the instructions on the bottle and I tried to tell the pharmacist. But because I do not speak English and the pharmacist did not speak Spanish, I had to wait for 4 days before my daughter could come over and read the instructions to me. I could have died in 4 days."***

### Latino Seniors and People with Disabilities

- In addition to language barriers, almost all of the participants in this group said that they were struggling day to day because of their **low income**. Some said that they had medicines brought back from Mexico to address serious health problems because drugs are less expensive there. In addition, seniors and people with disabilities who are undocumented residents are not eligible for financial assistance from the government. A few of the senior participants said they felt they were a burden to their adult children and families because of their poverty status.

### General Latino Population

- Every participant said that **income was the biggest barrier to accessing health care and medical insurance**. They noted that as family members became ill from the flu in Fall and Winter, they would use herbal medicines and "curanderas" (faith healers) because they could not afford to see a doctor. Some of the participants said that they used herbal medicine not only because they were inexpensive but because they believed that the herbs were helpful in fighting illnesses. One father of a six year old son said that when his boy became ill with the flu he started using "te de manzanilla" (chamomile) to calm him before bed time. Another parent respondent said that she lit candles, prayed and baked breads with special herbs in it to combat fatigue.
- The next largest barrier was **lack of information on services in the area**. Again, language played a large role in the participants not knowing of services available to assist them. Almost all felt that they did not know the right person to ask about needed services. They said their only resource were the bilingual HeadStart teachers and teacher's aids, even though they might be discussing issues outside of the realm of childcare and education.

### Reputational Leaders in the Latino Community

- All the participants felt that their clients relied very heavily on them for assistance because the **clients had very little contact with or knowledge of agencies and programs**.

***"One of my clients told me that I was like one of the family, which to me was an honor. At the same time, I worry that my client has become too dependent upon me. I do have my limits and I do not know everything there is to know. I have to encourage this client to reach out to other resource people in the Latino community-for her sake and mine."***

- Nearly all of the reputational leaders said that their **clients did not understand the processes for applying for services**. It was noted that this barrier had a culturally-based component because beyond health care, virtually no health and human service agencies exist in Latino countries. Again, even when informed about existing services, language barriers kept clients from seeking and receiving the necessary assistance in a wide variety of problem areas.

## Conducting Outreach in the Latino Community: Many Opportunities

All three focus groups offered similar advice to Dane County social and human service agencies for conducting outreach in the Latino Community. The top suggestions:

- Using **Latino media** was their first suggestion for outreach. Many of the participants are regular readers of Spanish newspapers and listeners of Spanish radio programs.
- **Local gathering places** such as dance halls, discos, restaurants were also noted as outlets for distributing flyers and having staff available to speak to about available services.
- Many of the participants said that there are several **churches** in Dane County that offer religious services in Spanish and said that they that would be great places to distribute information about available services.

**An elderly male respondent said, “As I got older I have found that my connection to the church has taken a larger role in my life. I find the church services to be comforting and reassuring. I also get a chance to meet some of the new families coming to Madison. I think that churches are often overlooked as ways to reach us.”**

- Recruitment efforts focused on Latino volunteers could be done at the area **schools**. Many participants said that they attend events held at school and network with other Latino parents at such events. Agencies could participate in these events and make connections with potential volunteers there.
- Finally, opportunities also exist by reaching out to the men and women active in the two **soccer leagues** in Dane County. According to a respondent, between the two leagues, there are almost 60 teams in the area, *“There is a whole other Latino community that exists within the soccer circle. These teams have meetings, tournaments and newspapers. Agencies need to find out about the leagues.”*

## Culturally Competent Agency Services: Full Service, Bilingual, Humble, and Unassuming

All three focus groups agreed that a culturally competent agency would be staffed by fully bilingual individuals who are humble and unassuming. There was great interest across all three groups for a “full service” agency for the Latino community.

Participants from the Seniors and People with Disabilities group mentioned that craft programming and English classes were absolute necessities and also wished for a Senior Center providing adult day care, group activities, health care check ups. A number of the participants had recently visited the Guadalupe Center in Milwaukee and were impressed with the services for seniors and the intergenerational activities with school age children. The General Latino Population group wanted childcare services when visiting with the agency staff and daily childcare for working parents. Participants from the reputational leaders group said that services for undocumented individuals and for the unemployed would be critical, and needs would include legal services.

## Conclusion

Based on the findings of these focus groups and recognizing the unique needs of a rapidly growing community, United Way of Dane County has decided to proceed with a more in-depth look at the Latinos in Dane County through the development of the Latino Advisory Delegation. This group will issue a report detailing their work and recommendations for action in 2006.

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