

Hispanic American Council Sets the Agenda for Erie

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the Hispanic Council of Erie (HACE), which has maintained a steady presence providing services to the Latino community. During its monthly staff meeting, HACE staff members talked about the challenges and changes the Latino community is undergoing. And they discussed a need to get more involved in every level of the commu-

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David Gonzalez, director of Latino Services, HACE

nity. While Erie’s general population continues to drop, new Latino immigrants are coming in to revitalize the economy. According to the U.S. Census, the population in Erie city dropped from 108,718 in 1990 to 101,373, in 2002. With 25-percent of the jobs based in manufacturing, one plastics company moved all of its employees from California to ensure it would have a trained and dependable workforce. Most of those employees were of Mexican descent, and they began to share the title of “Latino” with Erie’s long-established Puerto Rican community. It did create some friction. “It’s a lack of communication,” says Maria Cortes, a drug and alcohol intervention specialist at HACE, “Because the cultures are slightly different.”

“The community is not united,” says

David Gonzalez, Director of Latino Services. He said that the immigrant community is growing a fast rate, filling in manufacturing jobs, starting small businesses and boosting the economy. Nevertheless, there is no political Latino representation in city council, school boards or the county level. “With unity comes influence and we don’t have that,” Gonzalez said. He adds that there are no numbers on Latino drop out rates, and there are issues with discrimination in accessing capital to benefit businesses, and accessing health care. “We are behind in influencing legislation—in political power,” agrees staff member Norma Vila

Mario Medina, an advocate in the community and the jobs specialist at HACE said that Latinos in positions of leadership have a responsibility to do more.



From Left to right: David Gonzalez, director of Latino Services; Maria Cortes, Drug and Alcohol intervention specialist; Inez Villegas, case manager, parenting skills; Ricky Cruz, HIV/AIDS outreach worker; Gina LaTorre, supervisor of case management; Mario Media, jobs specialist; Marisol Moffet, receptionist, and Norma Vila, tobacco program.

He says that despite the positive impact on the economy, Latinos are facing new problems in Erie, such threats of deportations, inability to get driver’s licenses, and paying exorbitant rates as high as \$20 to cash paychecks.

Despite the fact that Erie provides many social services through HACE, Medina said the new demographics require Latinos to get more politically involved. “It’s up to Latino leaders to guide the community,” he said.

Photo by Veronica Dahlberg

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Hispanic American Council of Erie

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