

COALITION FORMS TO AID COLOMBIANS 2 GROUPS JOIN TO HELP NEW ARRIVALS ADJUST TO U.S. LIFE

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Newly arrived Colombians in south Florida are finding expanded resources to help them in their adjustment to life in the United States through the merger of two umbrella service organizations.

“We are trying to pull together all of the organizations that work with Colombians in south Florida,” explained Maria Nury Gomez of Boca Raton who works in Fort Lauderdale. “We want to help our fellow Colombians adjust to American culture.”

Gomez is one of the founding board members of the newly merged Colombian American Coalition—NACAO (National Association of Colombian-American Organizations), which is working to provide social and legal services to new arrivals.

“Most of the people who come to Broward County from Colombia are professionals,” Gomez said. “They had successful businesses in Colombia, but due to the guerrilla activity they were forced to leave.”

Here, Colombian immigrants face problems with obtaining professional certification and licenses. “Many of them are terrified of the tests,” Gomez said. “But, the people study hard to pass the exams. For many, it’s a matter of getting familiar with life in the United States.”

Gomez, who represents Broward County on the new organization’s Board of Directors, said that most immigrants take at least five years to establish themselves and get back into their professions.

“They were used to a high standard of living in Colombia where they had expensive cars, messengers and housekeepers,” she said. “But when they get here, they find that their money disappears fast and they have to take jobs to subsidize what they brought with them.”

“It’s difficult to get even a minimum salary without a visa,” Gomez said. “It brings tears to my eyes to see these professional people cleaning tables in a restaurant.”

The new coalition will be working to help train newcomers to learn English and pass their professional exams said Bolivar Franco, the treasurer of the new organization. “We want to help them settle down into the community, to get acquainted with life here in the community and restart their business or profession.”

The new organization also plans to develop a data base of over 50 Colombian-American organizations around the state that provide services according to Carlos Cabrera, the group’s president. “We want to be able to refer people to other agencies if we can’t help

them with a problem,” he explained. “There is a goldmine of information in these groups that we would like to access.”

To take services to where Colombians live, Cabrera said that the organization plans to open offices in Miami, Broward County, Orlando and in the Tampa area in the next few months.

While Franco, who lives in Boca Raton and works in Margate, says that the new organization will not be political, it will help to maintain relations between Colombians living in south Florida and political activity back in Colombia. “Our people have always been active politically, and those who live overseas have a representative in the Colombian congress,” he said.

Gomez feels that the new coalition will help cut down competition between Colombian organizations in Florida. “We want to remind Colombians already here that they need to help their fellow citizens who are relocating in Florida,” she said.

“We are like an umbrella organization, integrating the work of serving Colombians here and in Colombia,” said Cabrera, who lives in the Pinelands area of southern Miami-Dade County. “We want to coordinate the work of various organizations and eliminate duplication of events and coalitions.”

The Colombian coalitions have not confined themselves to helping just Colombians. “We have also assisted Hondurans, El Salvadorians, Mexicans and Argentineans,” said James Soto of Plantation. Soto, a board member, said that he envisions the new coalition helping to form similar partnerships between Colombian activist groups throughout the country. Currently, the newly formed organization has representatives on its governing board from Broward, Palm Beach and Miami-Dade counties as well as from Orange County and the Tampa Bay area.

Cabrera said that the Colombian American Coalition was formed in south Florida in 1995 with eleven members ranging from service clubs such as Kiwanis and Lions clubs to the U.S.-Colombian Medical Association and Niños Colombianos, a children’s agency. “The work of the Coalition has slowed down in the past few years, so we are renewing it by merging with NACAO,” he said.

NACAO is a national organization divided into 11 regions that parallel the coverage of Colombian consulate offices. The merger only affects members in Florida, however Cabrera said that the group hopes to help form similar coalitions nation wide.

The new organization counts at least twenty organizations among its membership plus a number of individuals who, Cabrera said, want to help with their own professional or personal skills.

Information on the Colombian American Coalition-NACAO can be obtained by calling 305-665-7278 or by sending email to CoalitionNACAO@aol.com.

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