

HISPANIC UNITY GEARS UP FOR SURVEY

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Recognizing that some tasks are better done cooperatively with like-minded organizations, Hispanic Unity, a Broward-based social service organization, is asking religious congregations and other groups to lend a hand.

“We are asking congregations to help us take a survey and collect data in the community,” explained Dana Thurston, the agency’s Chief Development Officer. “That will help us to put a report together which will assist us in raising funds. Those funds will mean we can continue to offer services that will meet the needs in the community.”

Hispanic Unity was organized twenty years ago to assist newly arrived immigrants. “We provide job training, placement, acculturation programs, language education, health outreach, basic legal assistance and budgeting assistance,” said Angelo Castillo who serves on the agency’s Board of Directors.

The organization is a not-for-profit agency that obtains funding through state and county governments as well as from private donations and grants.

“We serve all immigrants, not just Hispanics,” Castillo said. “Last year we served 36,000 people in our outreach program. We are the largest Hispanic social service organization in the country.”

The survey, which is being conducted with the help of Florida Atlantic University, will seek to determine area resident’s opinions about the quality of life in Broward County and needs that the agency can help to meet. Questions will cover areas such as health care, human services, programs for children, employment and senior services.

In addition to over 1,000 individual interviews, Hispanic Unity plans to organize focus groups in various communities to allow residents to express their views more completely and clarify points that may not be clear in the survey results.

The focus groups will be formed geographically to help the agency understand different needs in various areas of the county. “I think that we will find that the needs of Hispanics living in Hollywood are different than those who live in Weston, for example,” Castillo said.

In addition to religious organizations, the agency is seeking help from businesses, health care providers, chambers of commerce and other social service organizations.

“We want to find out what barriers Hispanics have in this community,” Castillo said. “For example, if they can’t work, we want to find out why.”

Castillo said that workers from the agency find that many factors, including health concerns, the lack of a job, acculturation difficulties, housing problems and other life issues often keep immigrant families from succeeding.

“We want to get more than a snapshot or an inventory, we want to get an understanding of people’s problems,” he said.

With the information gathered, Hispanic Unity officials said they could apply for funds and grants to help improve services.

Pastors who attended a recent meeting with Hispanic Unity representatives responded positively to the call for help.

“The Hispanic community is in a time of crisis and is looking for a better way of living,” reported Pastor Pedro Sola of Fort Lauderdale’s Maranatha Christian Church. “Many of them work two jobs and aren’t at home. They don’t really have a home, they just have a place to sleep. It’s difficult for our churches to reach them.”

“Many people come here (to the United States) to live a dream but they find a nightmare,” Sola said.

“The church wants to help the people,” reflected Rafael Ortega who pastors a Spanish congregation at North Lauderdale’s Village United Methodist Church. “We are limited by our size and we know that Hispanic Unity is there to help. It’s better to join forces.”

Reflecting that there is a large, but at times hidden, Jewish-Hispanic community in south Florida, Joshua Estrin, Executive Director of Friends of Israel, pledged that he would challenge local synagogues and the Jewish Community Federation to have representatives at the next meeting of religious leaders and Hispanic Unity. “A part of our Jewish values is to help repair a damaged world,” Estrin said.

Hispanic Unity plans another meeting with pastors and other religious leaders in late July to move the project forward and receive commitments from congregations that are willing to help.

Organizations that wish to participate may obtain further information by calling Dana Thurston at 954-322-7230.

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