



AT ISSUE...

THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE FOR COMMUNITY AND JUSTICE OF GREATER CINCINNATI

March 2006

Myron L. Dale, Editor

Immigration – Welcome Mat or Do Not Trespass sign?

Immigration is at the forefront of the Congressional agenda this session, as a part of no fewer than seven bills. It will be among the most contentious issues debated and whatever legislation emerges, it will undoubtedly have enormous social and economic consequences. Immigration has also increasingly been in the news in the Tristate. As the debate heats up on the influx of Hispanics, let us reflect on what this generation of immigrants can mean to our region and country.

The face of America is changing yet again. It may look different from that of the Pilgrims almost 400 years ago, but the immigrant spirit remains the same. In many ways, the immigrants of the 21st Century are like others before them. They come looking for a better life for themselves and their families and are willing to work hard to achieve the American Dream. They also bring a uniqueness of culture, language and experiences that serves to strengthen the fabric of our communities.

- A recent study by the Pew Hispanic Center in Washington DC, estimates there are 11 million undocumented immigrants now in the U.S. Most arrived after 1990. The majority or about 57% are from Mexico, followed by 24% from Latin American countries and the rest from other countries. Undocumented immigrants work mostly in construction, hospitality and other service industries.
- Latinos have become the largest minority in the U.S. They are a diverse ethnic, racial and linguistic group comprising many nationalities from Argentineans with a strong European heritage, to Dominicans, with a large black population, to those with deep native or Indian roots. A steady stream of roughly 400,000 Latino immigrants arrives each year — the highest flow in U.S. history.
- Official “estimates” count 30,000 Latinos amongst us in the Tristate. Many believe there are twice as many. The population has grown 30% from 2000 to 2004, with this trend likely to continue.

What do Latinos bring to this country and Tristate area?

- **Economic Horsepower –**
Hispanics have a very strong work ethic like many immigrants that preceded them. They are willing to start almost anywhere to climb the ladder. For example, they are willing to work 2nd or 3rd shift or weekends. This workforce could help overcome a local disadvantage in attracting new industrial ventures to this area. At the same time, they are joining the entrepreneurial ranks in great numbers. One out of ten small businesses will be Hispanic-owned by 2007. No doubt they are a cornerstone of economic growth in North America today.

There is a booming Hispanic labor force. Their employment has surged by 27% since 1999 to 17.4 million in 2003, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Hispanics are more likely to work in industries that have defied economic malaise, including agriculture, construction and other services. And interestingly, despite this huge influx, it has not affected overall employment rates. Total unemployment rates are at very low rates historically.

- **Latino Values = Cincy Values**
In many respects Latinos value the same things as Tristaters – the importance of hard work, family, faith, and education. They have started many of their own organizations in support of those values like Centro de Amistad and Su Casa for social services, and Hispanic Scholarship Fund Cincinnati and NKU Latino/Multicultural Center for education. There is even Cincy-Cinco to compete with Oktoberfest! In the business arena, the first Ohio chapter for the National Society of Hispanic MBAs was established in our area and Cincinnati USA Hispanic Chamber of Commerce has received state-wide recognition.

Latinos are also increasingly in high profile positions like CEOs (Fernando Aguirre of Chiquita), professional football (Cincinnati’s Bengals Hall of Famer – Anthony Muñoz) and baseball (almost one of four Reds players).

The National Conference for Community and Justice, founded in 1927 as The National Conference of Christians and Jews, is a human relations organization dedicated to fighting bias, bigotry and racism in America. The NCCJ promotes understanding and respect among all races, religions and cultures through advocacy, conflict resolution and education. The Greater Cincinnati NCCJ was established in 1944 and is an independently operating affiliate of the national organization.
www.nccjcincinnati.org

AT ISSUE...

- **Do you like “salsa” or “salsa”?**

Consider the explosive growth in Latino food, exemplified by the fact that salsa outsells ketchup today in America. There are now more than 100 Mexican restaurants in the Tristate alone, many of them the real thing. And beyond that one can find food from a variety of Latin American countries like Peru, Panama and Argentina.

There is also tremendous interest and enthusiasm for salsa dancing, with salsa nights and classes all over. Still to come are the other staples of Latino dancing and music like merengue, cumbia and reggaeton.

Simply put, Latino is hot.

- **So what’s not to like about Latino immigration?**

Having a large group of undocumented workers is not desirable for the community or for the workers themselves. For the community, it raises concerns about having an underground economy, often portrayed as the increased costs of managing a group outside the “system”. This is more perception than reality since repeated economic studies across the country show immigrants are net contributors to the economy.

For the workers, it can lead to exploitation and manipulation by employers, landlords and others in a position to take advantage of their situation.

- **What is needed now across the US and in our region?**

We need *comprehensive immigration reform at the federal level* that addresses those 11 million undocumented workers, reuniting them with their families, and providing a realistic process for living and working here. Whatever laws are enacted,

there will unquestionably be a continued strong desire for others to come and get their chance at the American Dream.

So What? - ¿Y Qué ?

Gandhi said “*Be the change you wish to see in this world.*”

For the Tristate, this means willingness to strengthen our community by putting out the Welcome Mat, and making Cincinnati *the* place to immigrate to. Given where we are today, that would be altogether surprising. So, step up and help “Be the Change.”



Maria Molina, Consumer Relations Latin America Development Manager for P&G, is an NCCJ Board Member. Born in Cuba, she has been a Cincinnati resident since 1969.



Neil Comber, President of Comber Consultants, is an NCCJ Board Member. Born in Mexico, he has been a Cincinnati resident since 1986.

To learn more, please visit the NCCJ web site at www.nccjincincinnati.org.