

**Centro Hispano
(Hispanic Center)
Lowell, MA 01852**

**CED Final Report
To Dr. Michael Swack
New Hampshire College
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A. ABSTRACT

The Hispanic Community Development Action Project, that I initiated in the fall of 1996 was to create a Hispanic center. The goal of this project was to establish a center that would advocate participation in identifying issues and possible responses in the areas that concern Latinos. The aim was to bring as many members of the community together as possible in an effort to make a positive impact on economic development projects and other community issues, while at the same time forming a citywide coalition of Hispanics and non-Hispanics to work on these and future issues on an ongoing basis. This coalition of Hispanics and others will collaborate with the Hispanic Center in identifying research and outreach needs, assess the implementation process, and advise the faculty on changing needs and opportunities in the community.

B. SUMMARY

PROBLEM STATEMENT

If no effort is made to bring the Hispanic community together to work toward a common interest of raising the economic and social standard of living, and explore new ideas that will strengthen our own unique character while providing opportunities for economic growth, then the Hispanic community will continue to be scattered all over the city without a voice and unable to participate in the policies of the local

government at best. At the worst end, the community will continue to suffer friction amongst its various groups. Mistrust of the political process and cynicism about the social environment will only escalate friction among the local government, providers, and other groups.

GOAL STATEMENT

The objective of this project is to facilitate a grass roots community organization where the Latinos will identify themselves, receive assistance and collaborate with one and other in order to foster a safe, clean, attractive living environment and create opportunities for cultural education, physical and mental health, economic development and growth. The Hispanics would be asked to form a Steering Committee that would represent sub-groups within the Latino population and others, in terms of their unique ethnic background, gender, and income of the Lowell residents, to participate in identifying issues that most concerns them and possible responses. The steering committee will reach out into the community, assess the implementation of past plans, and develop modified plans for the future.

Lowell has been the home to the Hispanic community for about 40 years and yet it does not have a place where the community, agencies and the Municipal government can get together and channel their energies. There is no point of reference nor an Hispanic community liaison. In 1974 a private non-profit organization, was founded by a local priest that provided social services by offering a variety of bicultural and bilingual supportive services. Back then, **UNITAS** was the only place where the

Hispanic community could receive assistance and resolve their concerns. Unfortunately, the agency ceased to exist in the late 80's.

Since that time, there have been several attempts to start up new organizations, but there has been no success in sustaining them. Repeated efforts by concerned Hispanics to bring back a Hispanic Center, where the community is able to gather to talk about issues of mutual concern or simply to get information have gone in vain. This has been mainly because of insufficient general interest. Amongst the Latinos in the Lowell area, and lack of organizational and leadership skills that would bring them together and exercise strong political clout.

The concerns of the Hispanics are often not taken into account by public officials and others who hold position of authority, because of their ignorance of the community. Hispanics do not have an institution that would advocate their concerns thus, the public officials refuse to listen and, once again, nothing gets done.

PROJECT PRODUCT

At the end of this project, a Hispanic Center office will be established that will function as an engine for all the Latin Americans who want to utilize services of any kind, including services for their own personal development and which would respond to the needs of the Hispanic residents not only in the Lowell area but also for others who would like to share issues or concerns with the community or simply participate. This Hispanic Center will also be a point of contact whenever communication

is necessary between the local government and a point of contact for opportunities that might be available from other organizations.

METHODOLOGY

Early this year, I started this movement. First, I gathered information about Hispanics from different sources. I also interviewed people from the community, and executive directors of some of the major social agency in the area, as well as community development corporations. I identified potential stakeholders in the community for this project and who would be excited in seeing it to its completion and who are know part of the coalition of Latinos that are working on the mission of the Hispanic Center. They, in turn, have mobilized their own institutions and followers.

I have also identified community minded people who potentially could participate on some sort of advisory committee, as this project develops into a citywide effort. I notified Hispanics, either by word or by mouth or through the local public access channel, provided by the Lowell Telecommunications Corp. (L.T.C.) So that more people could learn and become knowledgeable about what we are doing and if they could contribute their time and energy and became part of this effort.

It is important to have Latinos become part of this project so that the Hispanics have the agenda as to what direction the Hispanic Center should proceed in and what would benefit the largest number of people in this area. These Latinos can become members of an official board of

directors in the future. This group of people would be critical for refining the overall vision on which this Center would focus. It will also encourage potential founders to donate economic resources for the support of this effort.

At this point, all the people that have been approached individually, through the word of mouth or the local media have come together, and have pledged their support and assistance. They are getting acquainted with each other and have learned to respect each others backgrounds, as they learn more about their own cultural heritage. Most of these Latinos that are community minded have had the opportunity to share their vision and have invited others to do the same so that all the differences and similarities would clarify the overall vision and every one can commit to the overall purpose.

Some of the outcomes that have been achieved since the beginning are as follows- It has begun the citywide promotion of the Hispanic Center and the involvement of some of the Latinos and non-Hispanics, who embraced the idea of having such a Center in Lowell. The remaining task required to fully achieve the end result is to have a mission for Centro Hispano and their Articles of Incorporation and By-Laws. The group or the unofficial board wants to start up a Latino Organization that will be independent and can function on its own. The coalition of Latinos and myself are working on the missions statement so that we can apply for a tax-exempt organization classified under section 501 © 3 of the Internal Revenue Code (IRC). Once the mission statement is done and the application is

approved, then we can start working on the by-laws and the articles of incorporation. The next step is to develop a game plan or agenda and approach appropriate people for legal support for the early stage of this process.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMENDATIONS

The Hispanic Center project was a very good hands on experience for me. I learnt for example that everything on paper is almost perfect, but the reality of the matter is that it is difficult bringing Hispanics together, especially when some of these Hispanics came from countries where corruption is rampant and there is wide spread mistrust in the democratic process. I learned that there is tremendous conflict amongst different groups of Hispanics, for example Mexicans do not trust the Dominicans, the Puerto Ricans do not trust the Colombians and all of these groups do not trust the Cubans and so forth. Most of these Hispanics that came from Latin America do not understand democracy, and the benefits of organizing in order to make changes and improve conditions nor do they understand the importance of voting and electing people to public office.

I also learnt that the role of the organizer is one of perseverance and innovator, furthermore the organizer has to be firm and clear about the goals and objectives. I learnt that organizing is difficult, but one has to be creative in order to get people involved. There is no magic book out there that can teach all the tricks of the trade, one simply has to do it. I learnt that economic development in our community requires a lot of education in the Hispanic community, because we come from undemocratic

governments, for one, that in most cases, the government suppresses political activism and has other priorities or simply do not care for the welfare of poor people.

Sometimes the motivation for Latinos to come to the U.S. is because they are looking for economic opportunities. They work hard at it once they get here, but for one reason or another, they fall into the “system” and sooner or later they end up being dependent on that “system”. When someone tries to organize this community they do not want to participate because they are overwhelmed with other issues that takes precedence. The last thing they want to do is get involved in organizing that would benefit them as a whole. I learnt that one has to be flexible.

Originally, I wanted to organize people from the community and get this movement from the bottom up, but people from the community did not respond very well with the exception of two-to-three people who were assertive and exhibited willingness to do something for those Hispanics that are less fortunate. I then identified and contacted other community minded professionals who are capable of doing this kind of project, but never got the time or energy to face the challenge.

However, if it had not been for the generosity of Community Teamwork Inc., the Greater Lowell Community Action Agency, which serves as a fiscal agent for a lot of other projects Centro Hispano couldn't have made it. They offered me assistance in applying for a start-up grant to the

Theodore Edson Parker Foundation. The agency sponsored the proposal and the Foundation approved the grant.

Once I was working full time on this project, and the coalition of Hispanics learnt that there was a start-up grant available to get organized, the group started to get more serious about the process. Now the group and myself are working in increasing community participation, and hopefully starting a Latino organization that can function on its own in a few months or years.

As far as I am concerned the Hispanic project was a success. This was mainly due to the community minded people who truly believed that the Hispanic community should have a Hispanic Center that can reflect and advocate their concerns and interest. The assistance of the agency was just as important as they also believed that the Hispanics have something that they can be proud of. We have been able to create a common sense of purpose, which we hope will help us focus our energies for the next few months or years to come.

The next step in the process for this community is the actual planning for this development project. People in the group currently meet once a month, we communicate back in forth in the interim. Hence, there is a Latino network in this group where people talk about different things and look forward to the next meeting. The group again is working on the mission statement and they are planning on calling the Massachusetts

Association of Hispanic attorneys and ask for assistance with the application for the 501 © 3 non-profit with the Internal Revenue Code.

I don't remember how many times I have heard people in the community express frustration at the lack of collaboration from all the Hispanics, and the lack of support from public officials and agencies in the city. But I also remember their yearning to do something, because they understand their needs. They now understand the root of the problem to be the lack of an advocacy entity, that would address their concerns. Otherwise, a singular voice, it just may go unheard.