
Helping Hispanics in Transition

An Interview with H. Nolo Martinez

In June 1998 Governor James B. Hunt, Jr., signed an executive order creating the state Office of Hispanic/Latino Affairs, the Advisory Council on Hispanic/Latino Affairs, and the position of director of Hispanic/Latino Affairs. The Office of Hispanic/Latino Affairs, a division of the state Office of Minority Affairs, is part of the Office of the Governor and is housed in the Executive Building in Raleigh. Its purpose is to coordinate and develop state and local programs to meet the needs of North Carolina's Hispanic/Latino residents.

In September 1998 Governor Hunt appointed H. Nolo Martinez, a member of the faculty at North Carolina State University, as director of Hispanic/Latino Affairs. In this position Martinez oversees the work



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of the Office of Hispanic/Latino Affairs, staffs the Advisory Council on Hispanic Affairs (see sidebar, page 16), and is special adviser to Governor Hunt on issues related to the Hispanic community.

The Office of Hispanic/Latino Affairs answers requests statewide for information about social services, immigration laws, the census, economic development, and other issues. In addition, Martinez holds regularly scheduled meetings twice a month with representatives of Hispanic groups throughout the state to talk about race relations, health and agriculture issues, and other concerns. At least once a month, he travels to farm communities to meet with farm workers. He also meets with university administrators, employers, and members of Latin American

organizations, among others.

In a recent interview in his office near the governor's, Martinez talked about the needs of Hispanics in North Carolina and how public policy might address them.

This interview with *Popular Government* was conducted on June 2, 1999, by Eleanor Howe. Howe is a freelance writer living in Chapel Hill who specializes in government, public policy, planning, and medicine.

What is the main focus of your work as director of Hispanic/Latino Affairs?

Within the Hispanic community, there are a number of groups differentiated not only by country of origin but also by factors such as immigration status and language—for example, by whether or not they speak English and, if they don't, by whether or not they are literate in Spanish. While I basically follow the governor's philosophy, which is to be inclusive of all people and to address the needs of everyone who speaks Spanish, realistically most of my work is to help individuals who are still in transition, who are not assimilated into the culture, and who aren't politically represented.

What are the most pressing needs, as you see them, for people who are still in transition?

I used to think, and I still do to some extent, that language barriers and a lack of understanding of the culture and the government infrastructure were the top concerns. But the advisory council came up with a list of sixty issues important to Hispanics, and we categorized those into eight areas: education; human relations; health and human services; workers' rights; immigration, licensing, and documentation; economic development; political representation; and crime control and public safety.

In the area of education, is the English as a Second Language (ESL) program the answer to helping students whose English is limited or nonexistent, or should we be doing more?

How best to educate students who aren't proficient in English is a challenge. If kids start ESL early, the chances of them staying in school are higher. It takes about two to three years to become proficient enough in English to study other subjects. But if these students come into ESL when they are in middle school or high school, the chances of them staying in school are very low. They're probably going to have to go out and earn a living before they can learn enough English for school.

And the ESL program has been outmatched almost from the start. We don't have the programs to prepare the teachers, and we have a higher growth rate of students than of ESL teachers, although the metropolitan areas are doing better than the rural areas.

Related to this issue is the fact that appropriations for the ESL program are very low. There are about 28,000 students in the state classified as LEP [limited English proficient], and probably 70 percent of those

are Hispanic. Last year the state appropriated \$5 million for the ESL/LEP program. The advisory council is talking about spending \$1,000 per child, or \$29 million a year. I don't think that will pass. If we get \$12 million, it will be a gain, but a lot more has to be done.¹

So the council is recommending a different strategy in the metropolitan areas, where we have the highest growth. It is trying pilot programs that integrate English-speaking and non-English-speaking students. One program, in Greensboro, is a Spanish immersion program, in which classes like science and math are taught in Spanish to students whose native language is not Spanish. It shows that academic achievement is possible by teaching in the Spanish language. The other program, in Charlotte, is a bilingual program that uses English and Spanish together to teach mixed classes of English- and Spanish-speaking students. The difference between ESL and this kind of program is that here you're teaching students subjects like math or history in their native language—in this case, Spanish. With ESL you're teaching the target language—English—for an average of forty minutes per day outside the regular classroom. The ESL strategy helps students with social integration, but bilingual education helps them more with academic achievement, and that's what I think we should be shooting for. Bilingual education would also be beneficial for English-speaking students.

You have said that, in the areas of crime control and public safety, the main issue for Hispanics is communication. Can you elaborate?

Many Hispanic immigrants come from countries that use the military to handle public safety, and they're not well respected. People fear them and run away from them. Here the relationship between the police and the community is different, but many Hispanics don't understand that; plus they have language differences and they don't know the laws. And the criminal justice system and public safety folks are ill equipped to handle the needs of Hispanics, especially because of language differences.

There are basically two ways in which our criminal justice and public safety systems work: one is to react to problems when they come up, and the other is to establish links with the community. Unless there is communication, though, there is a big barrier to both.

We are hoping to have more Spanish-speaking and bilingual officers. And we want to train EMS [emergency medical services] staff in survival Spanish so that the dispatchers can get a call and at least go from say-

ing to the caller, “*Despacio por favor*” (Slower please), to “*Conteste ‘si’ o ‘no’ a las preguntas*” (Answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to the questions) and then “*¿Necesita un doctor?*” (Do you need a doctor?) and so on. The advisory council has people working on training EMS workers throughout the state on how to take calls from Spanish speakers. Communication is very important.

Is communication as important a need in workers’ rights and immigration issues, or are there other, more pressing concerns?

Language is a concern but also legal representation and understanding the law, especially workers’ compensation. And we’re not looking just at farm workers but at construction workers and textile workers too. In many instances, workers’ rights are violated because the workers are here without the right eligibility status and they feel they can’t file complaints. They may be afraid, or not know where to file, or lack legal advice. And not all migrant or seasonal workers have workers’ compensation. Also, they can be threatened with the employer providing information to the INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service].

But I also know that a large number of employers would like to do many things for those workers, who work very hard and have strong work ethics, but they can’t because of their workers’ legal status. It’s easier for employers to help highly skilled workers, like people working on high-tech activities, than to help low-skilled workers. If employers need these skills and can prove they can’t find anyone else to do the work, then they’re in a better position to petition the INS for a work visa. But the reality is we have an unskilled labor force in the state that doesn’t have legal status to be here, and they’re hired to work. Maybe we’ll have to go to an amnesty program or special work visas. It’s a big issue in North Carolina and in many other states.

It’s true that immigration and documentation policies are regulated by the federal government, but you can’t be blind to the fact that our economy and public services are affected by illegal aliens. So I think we need to look at policies that affect us, whether they’re under state jurisdiction or not. One example is that children in this country have a constitutional right to an education from grades K through 12, regardless of their immigration status. To me, an ignorant child is as contagious as a sick child. You can’t deny education if you’re going to keep the country moving forward.

There are other immigration issues that seem small, perhaps, when you look at them from the federal perspective, but when you look at them from the state per-

spective and how they affect people’s lives, they become big issues. The marriage license is a good example. In many counties, people who don’t have a Social Security number are denied marriage licenses. The same is true for a driver’s license.²

What is the advisory council hoping to achieve in the areas of health care and economic development?

North Carolina has done a very good job in trying to close the gaps in medical services to migrant farm workers. There are about twelve or thirteen migrant health clinics throughout the state, and they seem to have interpreters and bilingual staff. But again, the biggest growth in the Hispanic population is in the metropoli-



WRAL’s David Crabtree [left] interviews Andrea Bazan-Manson, Office of Minority Affairs, and Nolo Martinez.

tan areas. And in some counties, like Montgomery and Chatham, the bulk of services that the health department provides is for Hispanics.

In the area of economic development, we’re looking at what people need in order to understand financial institutions and practices, not only banks and banking but savings and investments, like buying a home. You know, the American dream isn’t necessarily a realistic dream for these new immigrants because without formal credit you can’t buy a home. So one area of major interest is creating a *cooperativa latina*, or Latino credit union. We’re working on this with the help of the State Employees Credit Union.

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ADVISORY COUNCIL ON HISPANIC/LATINO AFFAIRS

The Advisory Council on Hispanic/Latino Affairs was created to bring attention to issues affecting the Hispanic population in North Carolina. It has four major duties: to advise the governor on matters concerning the Hispanic community; to establish a forum for the Hispanic community; to work on issues of race, ethnicity, and human relations; and to see that Hispanics are represented in all facets of government. The council meets periodically at different locations around the state to discuss Hispanic/Latino issues and to gather data and opinions that will help shape its recommendations on state policies.

Recently the council has been instrumental in adding coverage for dental services for North Carolina Health Choice¹ recipients and making it possible for state residents without a Social Security number to obtain a marriage license. The council also has been a strong advocate of continued funding for Smart Start.²

The council's twenty-five members were appointed by Governor Hunt and sworn in on September 2, 1998. Fifteen

are voting members, representing a range of occupational, social, economic, and political groups in the state, and ten are ex-officio members.³ H. Nolo Martinez, director of Hispanic/Latino Affairs, staffs the advisory council and is a voting member. The other voting members, with their country of origin in parentheses (unless it is the United States), are as follows:

- Andrea Bazan-Manson (Argentina) of Durham is a founder of El Pueblo, Inc., a nonprofit Latino advocacy organization, and a William C. Friday Fellow for Human Relations, one of twenty-five people in the state who have been awarded two-year leadership fellowships. She also is a researcher for the North Carolina Office of Minority Health, part of the Department of Health and Human Services.
- Bill Herrera Beardall (Panama) of Raleigh is a general contractor in private business and a former U.S. Marine.
- Father Paul Brant of Kinston is affiliated with Catholic Ministries and serves as the itinerant priest for the east coast of North Carolina.
- Javier Castillo (Nicaragua) of Greenville hosts radio and television programs for the Latino community in the Pitt County area. Also, he is a member of a study group sponsored by the North Carolina Division of Motor Vehicles that is investigating ways to serve the Latino population better.
- Julio Cordoba (Colombia) of Raleigh is president of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of North Carolina.
- Martha Crowley (Cuba) of Chapel Hill is president of Hispanic County Human Services and a community activist who has helped develop culturally appropriate programs on the state and local levels. She chairs the advisory council.
- Ilana Dubester of Siler City heads Vinculo Hispano, a nonprofit resource and referral organization in Chatham County that provides information to Latino families about schools, health issues, driver's licenses, and legal matters.

Your appointment and the creation of the advisory council in themselves have increased the political representation of the state's Hispanic community. What other things are needed?

We have to start with pretty basic stuff, like the census. There have been tremendous undercounts, and the census is how states get federal aid and how they get redistricting. From there we have to move into registering to vote and actively participating in electing candidates who are committed to Hispanic issues. We have only one Hispanic in the General Assembly now, Danny McComas, a Republican businessman from Wilmington and a member of the Advisory Council on Hispanic/Latino Affairs. For most Hispanics in North Carolina, political representation is what's happening in Mecklenburg County, where Andrew Reyes has become the first Hispanic president of the county Democratic Party. He's close to the Hispanic community; he owns *La Voz de Carolina*, one of the few Hispanic papers in the state; and he's been recognized as one of the most successful businessmen in the nation.

People think it's the rural areas that are growing, and they are, but in terms of the overall number of Hispanic people, the metropolitan areas—Mecklenburg, Wake, Forsyth, and Guilford counties—are growing faster. And there are a number of organizations in Mecklenburg and Wake counties that started as places for social and cultural activities but are becoming more political and more service and education oriented. When I came here fourteen years ago, there was only LAANC [Latin American Association of North Carolina], which basically was doing international dances and social activities. Now some LANCC members in the Triangle have created the Society for Hispanic Professionals, whose mission is to enhance the education potential of Hispanic children.

You have often spoken of a "hierarchy of needs" for Hispanics. What do you mean by this?

I like to relate the needs of Hispanics to human development theory, which enumerates eight steps people need to go through, from survival to self-

- Daniel Gutierrez (Mexico) of Morganton teaches English as a second language for grades K–12 and hosts a public-access television program on Latino issues.
- Aura Camacho Mass (Colombia) of Raleigh is founder and executive director of Raleigh's American Latino Resource Center, which works to strengthen cross-cultural communication. Mass also is a member of both the Human Relations and Human Resources Advisory Committee for the city of Raleigh and a group by the same name working with the North Carolina Human Relations Committee.
- State Representative Danny McComas (Puerto Rico) of Wilmington is president of MCO Transport, Inc. He represents the thirteenth district in the General Assembly.
- Angeles Ortega (Mexico) of Charlotte is pluralism coordinator for the Hornets Nest Council of the Girl Scouts, where she conducts cultural awareness workshops and classes for scouts, staff, and volunteers, as well

as outreach programs in Latino and Asian communities.

- Isaura Rodriguez (Mexico) of Newton Grove is a health outreach worker at Tri-County Community Health Center, which serves Duplin, Johnston, and Sampson counties.
- Ramiro Sarabia (Mexico) of Faison is a farm worker organizer for the national Farm Labor Organization Committee.
- Maria Velazquez-Constas (Puerto Rico) of Fayetteville is a licensed marriage and family therapist in private practice.

The ex-officio members of the advisory council are David Bruton, secretary, N.C. Department of Health and Human Services; J. Parker Chesson, chair, N.C. Employment Security Commission; Carolyn Q. Coleman, special assistant to the governor; Wayne Cooper, honorary consul of Mexico; Katie Dorsett, secretary, N.C. Department of Administration; Janice Faulkner, commissioner, Division of Motor Vehicles, N.C. Department of Transportation; Jim Graham,

commissioner, N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services; Richard Moore, secretary, N.C. Department of Crime Control and Public Safety; Harry Payne, commissioner, N.C. Department of Labor; and Michael E. Ward, state superintendent, N.C. Department of Public Instruction.

NOTES

1. North Carolina Health Choice is a health insurance program for children from birth through age eighteen whose family income is at or below 200 percent of the poverty level and who are not eligible for Medicaid or covered by private insurance. Cover sheet, application form DMA/5063, N.C. Dept. of Health and Human Services Health Check (Medicaid/N.C. Health Choice Program), Oct. 1, 1998.

2. H. Nolo Martinez, director of Hispanic/Latino Affairs, e-mail interview with the author, June 25, 1999.

3. Web site of the Advisory Council on Hispanic/Latino Affairs, Office of Minority Affairs, North Carolina Office of the Governor, at <http://minorityaffairs.state.nc.us/hispaniclatino/advisorycouncil.htm>.

actualization. So if you're Hispanic and you're not a citizen—maybe you're not even here legally—you move up until you become a citizen, and that would be the highest level.

In terms of economic development, you want a job; that's why you're here. But when you get a job, you don't have workers' compensation or job security. Then maybe you get some training for another job with higher pay, then a job with medical insurance or one that pays enough so you can get a car if you don't have one. Eventually you get to the point of having a bank account, and you look at buying a house.

We need to help with the transition issues we've been talking about, but we can't stop there. Immigration is not "Okay, I've come here, I've established residency, and now I'm fine." You have to keep moving up. A lot of times the first generation rises to a certain level, and then the second or third generation goes higher. They're citizens; they establish neighborhoods and stores and banks; they know the language; they've become part of the fabric of the country.

So even though the Hispanic community is very diverse—we're made up of different groups, different cultures, different races—we need to raise expectations and standards so we can all continue to grow. We need to help with transition issues, but once someone is out of the ESL class, we shouldn't stop there, or be satisfied with just a middle school or high school education. We should aim for the best, rather than for just what is good, and that takes a lot of time.

NOTES

1. The 1999–2000 budget approved by the legislature on June 30, 1999, contained \$10 million for ESL programs, \$5 million more than was allotted in the previous budget. H. Nolo Martinez, director of Hispanic/Latino Affairs, telephone interview with the author, July 27, 1999.

2. This problem is discussed in William A. Campbell, "No Social Security Number? No License," *Popular Government* 64 (Spring 1999): 44–46. The marriage license law, N.C. Gen. Stat. § 51-8, was amended effective August 4, 1999, to allow people who do not have a Social Security number and are ineligible for one to obtain a marriage license on submitting a sworn statement to that effect.