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**Barriers and Opportunities for Improving Latino *Bienestar***

**St. Mary’s University**

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**Before proceeding could we take a minute of silence in remembrance of friends and family members loss due to Covid-19, and to honor Latina/o workers who have and continue to help those most affected. GRACIAS**

**I was unduly worried on whether to present these orientation remarks from a Mexican American, Chicano, Hispanic, Latino, or Latinx perspective? Traditional and social media, and the marketing industry seem to embrace the new Latinx identity term.**

**It’s important that we remind ourselves that their priority is often profits and not who we really are, let alone our perspectives on issues or their solutions.**

**Among ourselves bilingual fluency, cultural identity, and beliefs on issues are varied. The Texas Latino Policy Symposium excepts our** evolutionary **history while staying generationally focused on the ‘*bienestar* of our *familias’* as the central connecting strand.**

***Bienestar* is a quality-of-life status among individuals, families, and communities. Since the early 1900’s, beginning with Latino labor activist. It was clear to them that systemic and environmental factors, and social injustice affected their well-being.**

**From this early period to today, Latino organizations and countless individuals have made countless sacrifices for civil rights. We must uphold this history, what we learned, and that our lives and communities have improved as a result. Included are unrecognized researchers and service providers who created new concepts and frameworks that challenged education and health and human service institution service methods.**

**While many barriers came down and no longer exist; social injustices are far from gone. Xenophobia is in FULL BLOOM today, and Texas is at the head of the United States pack – lead by much of the state legislative and congressional leadership and its supporters.**

**It permeates the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, voter suppression, and so-called critical race theory. It is negatively affecting education, housing, health, employment, immigration, criminal justice, and the environment.**

**The Symposium is not an organization, it is a voluntary initiative. It evolved from a research report and informal conversations about Latino socioeconomic progress in Texas over the past several decades. Latino *Bienestar* was compared across multiple measures to Latinos in the other 50 states, and to non-Latino in Texas.**

**The poor results in how we fared led to the 1st Latino Path to Power and Prosperity working symposium in 2017. The “Texas Latino Family Economic Blueprint” was the genesis plan produced. Many of the issues and policy recommendations correlate to those identified by Texas Latino organizations and allies. Regrettably, many have not been achieved.**

**With COVID-19, Latino families have experienced even greater health and economic pain – worsen under a racialized policy environment. The pandemic has subsided, but it is still with us.**

**How well have Latino families and businesses recovered from its health and economic affects? Do we have a good grasp of what needs to be done to recover from the setbacks in education, employment, wages and benefits, housing, and health? As important, do we have sufficient political and policy influence to make the necessary changes happen?**

**The Symposium’s foundation is the Latino family – strong families reduce child development risk and expand opportunities into adulthood. Specifically, when measured by their resource assets that include education levels, employment and income, home ownership, good health, and civic engagement. These assets are key to economic mobility and building wealth.**

**We believe Texas policymaking at the state and local level is a major contributor to the marginalization and generations of low-income Latino families.**

**The documented history of Texas’s ‘minimal’ human capital investment approach to policymaking has led to unequal opportunities. Nearly one-half of Latino families continue to be low-income. I intentional use low-income instead of poverty.**

**While moving out of poverty is important, the main goal is to achieve middle class economic status which begins at 200% above the poverty level. Where you’re more likely to have health insurance, paid leave, a retire plan, and can afford to have you children in cultural or athletic activities outside of school.**

**The pandemic amplified the state’s inadequate and inequitable investments in education, child services, job training, wage equity, affordable housing, economic development, and health care.**

**Texas policymaking is entrenched in harmful ideological values, political power, and state-rights. There masked by messaging related to individual responsibility, lower taxes, and limited government, and your ownership of success or failure.**

**Messaging, that hide ‘structural’ problems, like a regressive and inequitable tax system that results in a limited budget to meet state needs. We prefer that education, health and human services, and the environment reach:**

**‘Minimum support levels where lives are loss and legal suits are assured before plugging a hole in the pervertible weak dike.’**

**Yet, the legislature consistently finds billions of dollars in tax and other legislative changes for the corporate sector’s WELFARE needs.**

**Racialized policy making is also inherent. As quoted by retiring State Representative Coleman a few years ago:**

**“Everything is about race, it’s veiled as public policy, but it encourages people to believe that their tax dollars are going to support lazy black and brown people.”**

**Combined with voter suppression, gerrymandering, and anti-immigrant policies; you further keep families economically marginalize by limiting civic engagement and fair representation. reinforcing policy barriers to economic mobility opportunities.**

**Nonetheless, some progressive socioeconomic mobility policies are happening at the local government level because of grass-root organizing and voter power building efforts. Efforts, which state policymakers targeted to restrict local government rulemaking in the 87th legislative session.**

**Local and state advocate organizations are focused on building electoral power working from collaborative efforts to expand economic mobility in employment, housing, health care, and unjust incarceration, etc.**

**Meanwhile state leaders are focused on more tax and budget cuts, less collaboration and transparency, voter suppression, and white supremacy loaded cultural issues.**

**Texas has received 10’s of billions of dollars in COVID relieve funds and more billions are on their way under the recently passed Infrastructure Bill. Also, the pending Build Back Better Act has major economic mobility opportunities for Texans.**

**Are investments from these billions going to benefit Latino families, workers, businesses, and neighborhood needs? How will we know if they do?**

**Latino advocates, their public representatives, and allies are engaged in efforts to direct resources into our communities. Their challenges are intensified given the current level of polarizing and racialized political leadership.**

**Our attempt has been to conduct statewide Symposia with a cross-section of Latinos from a wide range of community-based service and advocacy organizations, and institutional settings. They’re organized with invited keynotes and breakout issue panels that begin with presentations to facilitate discussion on policy issues and recommendations.**

**We have no illusions that a Symposia produces change. Our perspective is that Latino influence on structural changes can improve if we:**

**Increase and strengthen**

1. **Organizing, and electoral political power building across the state.**

**Increase and strengthen**

1. **Policy research that helps advocates and informs policymakers.**

**Increase and strengthen**

1. **Communication tools to frame and control our issues and policy messaging**

**Increase and strengthen**

1. **Collaboration across these areas**

**In summary, given the galling absence of independent Latino think-tanks in Texas, the Symposiums are a contributing response to promote and facilitate on going attention to these areas.**

**We ASK everyone who participates to apply their experience toward a common goal - to share their views on local and state policy needs and actions aimed at economic mobility opportunities and *bienestar* improvements for Latino families.**