

HHS' Hispanic Agenda for Action

By Jennifer Brooks

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Thanks to people like Samuel Sanchez, Hispanic students are getting a second shot at a bright future—possibly one leading them to careers in health care. His program ended last January due to lack of funds, but Sanchez, director of Raising Hispanic Academic Achievement, never gave up. He recently secured \$25,000 in funding from the Office of Minority Health (OMH) as part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services's (HHS) Hispanic Agenda for Action (HAA).

Now, this fall, his program will again open its doors to 40 Hispanic students in Silver Spring, Maryland, to provide needed help in homework and to teach them about careers in health care. With limited resources, the program will provide tutoring and offer field trips to local health facilities to students with grade point averages of 2.0 who are from low-income families.

The Hispanic Agenda for Action was implemented with students like Sanchez's in mind. Its underlying objectives: to promote Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans; to increase employment of Hispanic Americans throughout HHS; and to involve Hispanic customers in program planning, implementation and evaluation.

The primary focus of HAA is to ensure that the workforce and programs of the Department are reflective of and sensitive to the Hispanic customers it will be serving in the future. This is particularly important because, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of Hispanics will surpass 40 million by the year 2009—making them the largest minority group in the nation.

In the Spring of 1995, the Secretary of HHS formed the Departmental Working Group on Hispanic Issues—made up of senior HHS representatives from each Operating Division with experience serving Hispanic populations—to examine the Department's programs and services for Hispanic Americans. This group was established in response to President Clinton's push to ensure that executive branch management practices and operations "provide the highest quality service possible to the American people."

In a 1996 report to the Secretary, the working group found that HHS was not as well prepared as it should be to respond to the future health and human services needs of the Hispanic population. Moreover, it found that despite the appointment of Hispanic Americans to key positions within HHS, Hispanics overall were still seriously underrepresented in the HHS workforce.

Actions to Address the Issues

The working group recommended that each HHS agency develop a short-term and long-term plan of action. Its nine-point agenda includes:

- *Enhancing HHS' capacity to serve Hispanics:* by increasing the number of Hispanics in the HHS workforce. Specifically, HHS agencies should focus on developing targeted recruitment initiatives and activities for Hispanics; promoting the hiring of Hispanics at all pay and grade levels; assuring Hispanic representation in the applicant pool for temporary

workforce, term appointments, and fellowships, and for appointments to executive resource boards, advisory committees, and grant review panels; and developing and implementing cultural competency training for HHS employees to enhance their ability to serve Hispanic American customers.

- *Implementing Executive Order 12900: Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans:* by identifying and correcting the U.S. educational system's shortcomings in serving Hispanic youth by developing action plans for increasing the participation of Hispanics in federal education programs.
- *Addressing Hispanic Data Issues:* by improving data collection, analysis, and dissemination by reviewing the adequacy of current Departmental data and developing an action plan to address the gaps identified; and developing a mechanism to collect service/financing data and language-use data to identify specific problems of Hispanic customers.
- *Following a Hispanic Health Agenda:* by ensuring that specific recommendations of the TODOS Report—the 1993 Surgeon General's report which resulted from the National Hispanic/Latino Health Initiative—are reviewed and appropriate follow-up is implemented; and developing a standardized tracking system to monitor progress on implementing the TODOS Report.
- *Improving research:* by assuring the appropriate representation of Hispanics in clinical trials and research as well as demonstration grants and evaluation studies funded by HHS; and identifying gaps in knowledge of health problems disproportionately affecting Hispanics and taking action to address them.
- *Promoting cross-cutting collaboration within HHS:* by establishing initiatives to develop more effective outreach methods to Hispanic elderly, children and youth, and battered women.
- *Procurement:* ensuring that information about business opportunities within the Department is disseminated in the Hispanic community, including Hispanic companies and private consultants.
- *Addressing language barriers to access to Department services:* by developing policy guidance for federally funded providers to address the needs of people with limited English proficiency.
- *Developing a Departmental Hispanic Steering Committee* to assist in implementing an action plan to ensure that HHS can effectively serve the increasing Hispanic population.

This issue of *Closing the Gap* reports on some of the progress HHS agencies have made to meet the HAA objectives. And it highlights some State and local programs that are doing their share in reaching Hispanic communities. ❖

