

Tennessee Creates Latino Network

By Houkje Ross

Closing the Gap, Supporting State Offices of Minority Health • September/October 2000

An increase in phone calls about Hispanic health to her office and in the number of Hispanic faces she saw on the street were enough to convince Patricia Totty that something was changing in Tennessee.

Tennessee's Latino population has grown tremendously over the last 18 years. Traditionally a state comprising African Americans and whites, Tennessee now has more than 63,000 Latinos, up from 14,000 in 1980. "Even without the data to back it up, you could see the changes," said Totty, assistant director of the Tennessee Office of Minority Health (OMH).

With the changing demographics came more and more Hispanic-serving community-based organizations around the state. They were all working to address the concerns of the growing Latino population. "We also began to receive calls and questions from health care workers," Totty said. "They were asking for data on Hispanics and looking for physicians who could serve this population."

At the same time state OMH was receiving calls, it noticed that many community organizations were unaware of each other. "As a result, services were sometimes overlapping," said Totty.

Network promotes information sharing

To bring organizations and individuals together, Tennessee's OMH, with funding from the federal OMH, initiated a collaborative partnership in 1998 called the Hispanic Coalition Network. The Network aims to gather information on the sociocultural characteristics of Latinos in Tennessee and to disseminate statistical data among agencies and organizations that work with Latinos.

The Network will also work to increase partnerships and collaborative efforts between Latinos and non-Latinos of Tennessee and serve as a clearinghouse for appropriate information and resources.

Once a month, members of the Hispanic Coalition Network meet with staff of Tennessee's OMH. "It's really about information sharing," said Totty. Members of the network include churches, police departments, educators, individuals who work with migrants, and other community organizations. An average of 15 members come to the meetings, said Totty.

"With this population, we found that the best way to provide services is by word of mouth," said Totty. Recently, BellSouth gave the

Network space on the Web for a listserv where members can post information. The state also developed a bilingual resource directory of Hispanic and Latino services throughout the state.

"For about eight months now, we have also had a presenter come to speak with Network members on current topics of interest," said Totty. An agent for the Immigration and Naturalization Service has come to discuss immigration laws and documentation guidelines, and several state health representatives came to talk about the state managed care, maternal and child health, and breast and cervical cancer programs, according to the summary report of the Network. (See box on this page.) "The response has been very positive," said Totty.

Totty notes that the Network is not expensive to run—only about \$200 per month. "The most expensive and time consuming part of developing the Network was the initial set-up. I spent a lot of time searching for a consultant who could help me establish a strategic plan for the Network," she said. Totty added that she chose a Hispanic consultant to gain credibility with the Hispanic population.

For more information on the Hispanic Coalition Network, contact Patricia Totty, (615) 741-9443. ❖

"With this population, we found that the best way to provide services is by word of mouth."

Keeping up with Emerging State Issues

The Tennessee Office of Minority Health arranged several presentations for members of the Hispanic Coalition Network. Examples of presenters and topics included:

- The Immigration and Naturalization Service gave a presentation on immigration laws, documentation guidelines, establishment of full service offices, and deportation policies.
- A legislative lobbyist discussed how to access legislators to support general diversity and specific interest issues in the state's General Assembly.
- A community organizer discussed how to develop community needs assessments for public service awareness programs for new populations.
- Legal aide representatives and public defense attorneys discussed legal issues impacting Hispanics in Tennessee and how to access criminal justice resources.
- Representatives from the Tennessee Department of Health talked about the state managed care program (TennCare), maternal and child health programs, and breast and cervical cancer programs.

