

Testimony of the LPRAC before the Appropriations Committee
Wednesday, February 11, 2009
Room 2C of the Legislative Office Building, Hartford, Connecticut
H.B. No. 6365 “An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium ending
June 30, 2011, and Making Appropriations Therefor”

Good afternoon State Senator Harp, State Representative Geragosian and honorable members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Ed Rodriguez, a Commissioner of the Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs Commission (LPRAC), Chairman of the Priorities & Legislation committee of the LPRAC and the designated speaker on behalf of the LPRAC today.

History

The LPRAC was created by the Connecticut General Assembly in 1994 via Public Act 94-152, taking effect February 1, 1995. The LPRAC is part of the Legislative branch and is governed by section 2-120 of the Connecticut General Statutes as amended by Public Act number 03-229. The initial appointees to the thirteen board members included all the members of the Governor's Council for Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs established by Executive Order Number Ten by Governor Lowell P. Weicker, Jr.

Mission Statement and Legislative Mandate

The LPRAC's mission as stipulated in statute is to coordinate and provide access to resources by developing and recommending to the Governor and the Legislature policy for the advancement of the Latino and Puerto Rican community by:

The commission shall:

1. Review and comment on any proposed state legislation and regulations that would affect the Latino and Puerto Rican populations in the state and provide to the members of the General Assembly copies of any such comments;
2. Advise and provide information to the Governor and the General Assembly on the state's policies concerning the Latino and Puerto Rican communities;
3. Advise the Governor and the General Assembly concerning the coordination and administration of state programs serving the Latino and Puerto Rican populations;
4. Maintain a liaison between the Latino and Puerto Rican communities and governmental entities, including, but not limited to, the General Assembly;
5. Encourage Latino and Puerto Rican representation at all levels of state government, including state boards and commissions, and maintain an accessible list of prospective appointees who are members of the Latino or Puerto Rican community;
6. Secure appropriate recognition of the accomplishments and contributions of Latino and Puerto Rican populations of the state;
7. Work in consultation with the joint committee of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to legislative management for the purpose of establishing a plan of short-term and long-term initiatives based on the needs of the Latino and Puerto Rican community; and
8. Prepare and submit to the Governor an annual report concerning its activities with any appropriate recommendations concerning the Latino and Puerto Rican populations of the state and submit a copy of the report to the joint committee of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to legislative management, which committee shall distribute a copy of the report to each member of the General Assembly.

Summary of Performance

Thus far, the LPRAC has published the only report on the socioeconomic status of Latinos throughout the state. Moreover, in order to respond to one of our legislative mandates, the commission has held annual Gala-Award events in celebration of the accomplishments of the many outstanding adult and youth leaders in our community. Furthermore, the LPRAC has developed a Legislative Agenda and testified before the

Connecticut General Assembly on a broad range of issues dealing with education, healthcare, housing, judicial, and economic development. The LPRAC has been successful in providing information about legislation that has later been adopted into law such as the creation of Individual Development Account Programs, and the restoration of voting rights just to mention a few examples. The LPRAC continues generating data for lawmakers on issues such as the Housing Mortgage Crisis, HIV/AIDS, Lead Poisoning, and Asthma. Furthermore, the LPRAC has successfully worked in partnership with Connecticut lawmakers, federal, state, and municipal elected officials on issues such as the effects of workplace discrimination, redistricting, trafficking of persons, domestic violence in immigrant communities and immigration reform. Finally, the conferences and programs initiated by the LPRAC includes the Reflecting Connecticut Project, Dual Language training, homeownership conferences, money management, and about the landmark State Supreme Court case of Sheff, Bermudez vs. O'Neill.

The demands on the LPRAC have continued to increase with more and more elected officials, members of the public and institutions seeking our expertise in a broad range of areas of extreme technical difficulty. In 2007, for instance the immigrant communities began to mobilize through-out the State of Connecticut seeking help on different problem areas and the LPRAC stood up to the challenge and advocated in the legislature in support of state-sponsored healthcare programs for legal immigrants, drafted the language for the in-state tuition bill that would have provided in-state tuition to the children of immigrants, and collaborated with other state leaders in support of the creation of a Trafficking in Persons Council.

In the education front the LPRAC began a partnership between the Deputy Commissioner of the State Department of Education to look for ways to improve education outcomes for Latino students and played an important advisory role to the Commissioner of Education's proposed plan for Secondary School Reform Legislation – a plan that sees student success by the connection between 21st Century Learning, Engagement, and Rigor. The LPRAC among other recommendations submitted in writing to the Education Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly (CGA) or with direct meetings with the Co-Chairs of Education in the past few years include the following recommendations: (1) that the CGA substantially increase state investments in pre-school education, (2) reduce the segregation and the concentration of poor students in Connecticut schools, (3) improve teacher certification requirements, (4) increasing capacity in school readiness programs for low-income students, (5) mandate that the State Department of Education prepare a comprehensive plan of intervention in non-performing schools under the Federal No Child Left Behind Act, and (6) provide the Connecticut Mastery test to Limited English Proficient students in their native language.

The LPRAC is also an active member of the Commission on Racial and Ethnic Disparity in the Criminal Justice System (REDCJS), which was created by the Connecticut state legislature to make recommendations on how to eliminate racial and ethnic disparities in the criminal justice system. In October 22, 2008 the LPRAC collaborated with the REDCJS at the helm of the Honorable Lubbie Harper Jr. in an event entitled *Disparity in Connecticut: Where are We Now and Where are we Heading*, which will help us respond to our legislative charge on developing and recommending policies to reduce the number of Latinos and African-Americans in our criminal justice system as well as the number of minorities who are victimized by crime. This far reaching charge requires the Commission to examine every aspect of the systems from arrests to dispositions as well as how the public perceives the face of the system. The REDCJS is currently focusing all its efforts on finding ways to keep the children and the youth to stay away from the criminal justice system and the LPRAC already made specific recommendations to the REDCJS of the importance of prioritizing efforts that study the adequacy of the number of court interpreters, competence of legal representation for underprivileged Latino defendants with Limited English Proficiency and most importantly to make

recommendations to the CGA and to the Governor's Office to increase the number of Latino judges, which is currently about 2.6 percent of the total positions currently available within a population size already surpassing the 12 percent mark.

At the beginning of 2008 the LPRAC – before a room full of community leaders, concerned members of the public, and the press – announced the findings of the LPRAC's fourth and most comprehensive Socio-Economic Study. The LPRAC utilized the results of this report to prepare its 2009 Legislative. This report indicated that a growing number of Latino families living in Connecticut's five largest cities continue experiencing a declining standard of living. The declining economy is only adding to the burden of these working families, forcing many of them to work multiple jobs to keep a float. At the time of the announcement the LPRAC advised both the Governor and the legislature to react through policy that bears clear and tangible change to avoid a larger economic crisis.

In July of 2008, the LPRAC conducted a summit entitled *Connecticut Families in an Ailing Market: a Summit on Housing* at the Legislative Office Building to study the impact of the housing mortgage crisis on the state's Latino and minority populations. The LPRAC invited a series of national and state experts to talk about the topic and intended to motivate public dialogue and policy discussion among the experts and policymakers alike.

The LPRAC in coalition with other state election officials and other Latino organizations worked on a campaign entitled “¡Tu Voto Si Cuenta!” or “Your Vote Does Count!” which endeavored to register 10,000 new Latino voters across the state. The LPRAC specifically helped establish volunteer committees in Bridgeport, Danbury, Hartford, Meriden, New Britain, New London, Wallingford, Waterbury, and Willimantic. This effort was the first of its kind in the state and the ultimate results of the campaign showed that a total of 21,570 Latinos registered to vote via the “¡Tu Voto Si Cuenta!” For comparison purposes, keep in mind that to the best of our knowledge there are about 90,000 Latinos registered to vote in Connecticut, which is less than half of the citizen voting age population. In other words the LPRAC's efforts resulted in a Latino voter registration increase of 24% not bad for an effort with almost any monetary investments from the state.

The LPRAC also continues responding to our legislative mandate which stipulates that it must secure the appropriate recognition of the accomplishments and contributions of the Latino and Puerto Rican population of the state. In 2007 the LPRAC bestowed its Latino Citizen of the Year Award to Bishop Peter A. Rozazza for his leadership in the area of help to Latino immigrants. Mrs. Leticia Colon was awarded the Latina Citizen of the Year Award for her commitment to helping mentally challenged adults succeed through social integration. The LPRAC thus far has recognized 10 agencies for their work on their communities and so far awarded \$45,000.00 dollars from private grants to Latino students for their academic success. In 2008 the LPRAC awarded Dr. Agnes Quiñones and Dr. Francisco Donis the Latina/o Citizen of the Year Award and announced that the LPRAC would double their scholarship monetary awards to about \$85,000.00 for the Fiscal Year of 2009. These award-ceremonies bring together about one thousand guests from throughout the state to recognize the Latino community's best and brightest, and celebrate the achievements of leaders, organizations and students. All of which is performed using no state funds. In 2008 the LPRAC raised more than \$100,000.00 in private contributions to make this possible.

The Commission is also active making recommendations to the Connecticut General Assembly regarding increasing access to healthcare to the Latino community. In 2007, for instance, the LPRAC assisted the legislature passing legislation that mandates the Commissioner of Social Services to work with the LPRAC on the development of an

outreach effort through the Latino media to increase Latino children's enrollment in the Healthcare for Uninsured Kids and Youth (HUSKY) program. The LPRAC is also an active member of the legislature's HealthFirst Connecticut Authority Committee, which is mandated to examine and evaluate different alternatives for providing all Connecticut residents quality, affordable, and sustainable healthcare; and a member by state statute to the Commission on Health Equity within the Office of the Health Care Advocate to work to (1) eliminate disparities in health status based on race, ethnicity, and linguistic ability and (2) improve the quality of health for all state residents (Public Act 08-171). Furthermore, the LPRAC played a big role in directing the first ever-national grant for a tobacco secession program designed to protect Connecticut Latinos from the dangers of tobacco use. This program was entitled "Latino no Fumes Protége tu Salud – Latino don't Smoke Protect Your Health" presented in partnership with the Hartford Hospital through a grant totaling \$497,055 given by the American Legacy Foundation for a three year program.

The LPRAC was also part of a successful coalition that advocated in support of Hispanic veterans for a new mandate requiring the State Department of Veteran Affairs hire bilingual staff. The bill was introduced by State Representative Kelvin Roldan (D-4th House District) in collaboration with the Hispanic American Veterans of Connecticut, Inc. The bill was given unanimous vote in both chambers of the CGA and it was signed into law by the Governor on June 11, 2007.

Current LPRAC Recommendations

At the beginning of last year, the LPRAC released the fourth edition of the Latino Socio-Economic Status study, which alerted policy makers of a declining standard of living for Latinos in Connecticut. This survey indicated that the most pressing issues for Latinos were tax relief, high healthcare costs, and education reform. Moreover, the LPRAC stood side by side with the Hispanic Health Council when they informed the Connecticut legislature, about a year ago, of an existing health crisis affecting disproportionately the Latino population. All of these alerts happened prior to the home mortgage meltdown of 2008 which generated another set of economic problems across the country. All in all, the LPRAC believes this recession, if nothing appropriately is done, will disproportionately affect the Latino community and that is a cost the state cannot afford to undertake.

It is within this context that the LPRAC recommends that the Connecticut General Assembly (CGA) provides tax relief, strengthen state services that aim to help families during this recession, reshuffle state priorities to be able to afford education reform legislation and provide affordable health care coverage for all state residents. In specific, the state should suspend foreclosure sales for six months, and continue funding Latino agencies that provide job training for the unemployed, food and shelter to the homeless, healthcare coverage to the uninsured and after school programs for the youth.

The LPRAC also recommends that Connecticut policymakers prioritize legislation that endeavors to help Latino businesses thrive during a national economic downturn and a worsening credit crisis. Latino entrepreneurs making investments in Connecticut are feeling the weight of this economic crisis and are going to need access to capital to stay competitive. Recently, Governor Rell announced a \$100 Million loan program for Connecticut businesses as part of the Governor's "Four-Point" Credit Plan to ensure the continued free flow of credit in the state's economy. The LPRAC is supportive of this plan; however, the LPRAC does not believe that these funds are trickling down to Latino businesses, therefore we urge the Governor the legislature to ensure that this growing segment of the industry have equal access to those resources already available.

Furthermore, the LPRAC will reach-out to the Black and Puerto Rican Caucus of the CGA to work on ways to increase judicial nominations of minority judges serving on Connecticut state courts; LPRAC wants to work with the leadership of the CGA on legislation that helps Latino immigrant families on issues of higher-education, hate crimes, and domestic violence.

Finally, the LPRAC will make recommendations to state appointing authorities about the need to diversify the State of Connecticut's boards, and commissions. It is one of the LPRAC's most important mandates to "encourage Latino and Puerto Rican representation at all levels of state government, including state boards and commissions" and a major requirement of the law is that appointing authorities consider gender and race when making their appointments. However, from the latest racial composition report released by the Secretary of the State, there was insignificant change in representation of minority groups between 2005 and 2007. In both years, members of minority groups were significantly underrepresented. Specifically for our community, although the population increased from around 9.4 percent to 11.2 percent during this period, our representation for boards and commission went from 3.1 percent to 3.2 percent – a disappointing score card.

Unified Front in Support of all legislative Commissions

The LPRAC have collaborated throughout the years with the other key commissions of the legislature: Commission on Children, Permanent Commission on the Status of Women and the African-American Affairs Commission on various projects. We represented the Latino community on the Commission on Children's Early Childhood Partnership as they drafted language to obtain funding for early childhood education. We worked in partnership with the Permanent Commission on the Status Women and the African-American Affairs Commission on the RefleCTing Connecticut/Reflejando a ConneCTicut initiative whose focus was to ensure diverse appointments on the state's boards and commissions by legislative leaders and the Governor. We al participated on the Women's Health Campaign Committee, in the annual Making Women Visible program and a collaborative on the uniform presentation of the talent bank information to the legislative leaders. The LPRAC, for the record, testified in support of the creation of the Asian American Affairs Commission and remains supportive of their efforts to be part of the legislative branch of Government.

Closing statement

The LPRAC looks forward to working in partnership with the Governor and the CGA to address and solve the problems affecting the Latino community. As the legislative mandate that created the LPRAC states, we have been and continue to be ready to work with the Governor and the legislature; all that we ask is to be invited to the table as a partner and active contributor.