

**Report of the 2023 SOMOS Inc. New York
Conference Legislative Workshops:**

Harnessing the Power of Our Diversity



Assembly Member Karines Reyes , R.N., Chairperson
NYS ASSEMBLY & SENATE PUERTO RICAN / HISPANIC TASK FORCE



Report of the 2023 SOMOS Inc. New York Conference Legislative Workshops
“Harnessing the Power of Our Diversity”
Saturday, March 11, 2023

Hon. Karinés Reyes
Chair
NYS Assembly & Senate
Puerto Rican and Hispanic Task Force

MEMBERS OF THE ASSEMBLY

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Juan Ardila	Steven Raga
Kenny Burgos	Phil Ramos
Catalina Cruz	Jonathan Rivera
Maritza Davila	Nily Rozic
Manny De Los Santos	Amanda Séptimo
Erik Martín Dilán	Tony Simone
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Brian Maher	

SPEAKER OF THE ASSEMBLY

Carl E. Heastie

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**Message from the Chairperson Assembly
Member Karines Reyes, R.N.
2023 Somos Albany Conference**

I am pleased and honored, as Chair of the New York State Assembly & Senate’s Puerto Rican / Hispanic Task Force, to present a report on the Task Force’s legislative panels and workshops that took place during the 2023 Somos Albany Conference, which occurred on Saturday, March 11th.

These panel discussions provided a forum for Task Force members, policy experts, practitioners in fields of interest, and community members to gather and discuss pressing issues impacting Hispanic New Yorkers. The conference contained a ground-breaking 30 panels, which were free and open to the public, covering crucial topics, such as food policy, economic empowerment, worker and environmental justice, social safety nets for immigrant communities and so much more.

The theme of the conference, “*Harnessing the Power of Our Diversity*” was on full display, with members of the Legislature, panel participants and constituents converging in our state’s capital to acknowledge and uplift our shared experiences. The analyzed topics provided policymakers with significant insights into critical issues, which informed how legislators approach the state budget process and consideration of key legislation impacting Hispanic communities throughout our state.

The Task Force is a body composed of nearly 30 Assembly Members and State Senators of Latino-descent, along with state legislators that represent districts containing significant Latino populations. We stand united, as a committed voice, and use our collective power to initiate, amplify, and win comprehensive policy achievements that benefit Hispanic New Yorkers. We look to achieve innovative policy changes that can create a blueprint for others states and the federal government to consider and implement, for the benefit of our vital community, across the country.

I would like to express immense gratitude to the innumerable partners who provided assistance with these panel discussions and the development of this report. I thank Somos, Incorporated, who provided the space and venue for these urgent conversations to occur. Additionally, I am thankful for the Hispanic Federation’s logistical support with the panel conversations. Finally, I am appreciative of the Hunter College – CUNY’s Center for Puerto Rican Studies (CENTRO) and Fordham University’s Center for Community Engaged Learning for their notetaking and documentation of panel discussions, which was key to the development of this report.

Karines Reyes

CONCURRENT PANELS

Making Children, Families and Communities Safer from Violence through the Arts



Chairs: Assemblymember Juan Ardila and Senator Zellnor Myrie
Panelists: Violeta Galagarza, CEO, KR3Ts Dance Co.; Liz Aquino, dancer, KR3Ts Dance Co.; Noah Catalá, actor, dancer, coreographer; Dr. Kai Smith, The GRAAFICS Program

Abstract: The panel aimed to explore how the arts can be used to address gun violence, and to minimize violence by providing alternative creative spaces for young people. Senator Zellnor Myrie and Assemblymember Juan Ardila were optimistic and trust that gun violence can be eradicated in their lifetime. They and talked about the importance of comprehensive approaches to ending gun violence, the need to minimize violence and provide alternatives to young people, and how the arts can amplify positivity and diversity.

Main points from panelists: Gun violence is the number one issue affecting young lives in NY state. However, lack of funding in schools and other programs stymie efforts to address, among others, mindset of limited opportunities among youth (e.g., young people need more options and encouragement to explore different career paths), peer pressure and bullying (e.g., children who identified as being in gangs confirmed that they were interested in gangs because they were bullied at some point in their lives). Some actions that can be taken to prevent violence include teaching discipline and etiquette through arts-based training; therapy (e.g., dance and other arts could be an outlet for young people struggling with mental health issues); properly funded youth-oriented programs (e.g., important to address mental health issues related to bullying and the need for more support from elected officials and funding for clinicians); setting priorities and being understanding of youth concerns (e.g., importance of support and encouragement from adults, particularly leaders in business and politics, for young people to thrive). The use of technology can be positive in helping organize social media strategically and promote creativity among youth. Promote positivity and creativity, and amplify love, culture and tradition through the arts.

Poverty, Hunger, and Economic Opportunity: Fighting Food Insecurity with Community Connections



Chairs: Assemblymember Jessica González-Rojas and Assemblymember Catalina Cruz
Panelists: Grace Bonilla, CEO, United Way; Cheryl Huber, VP, Food & Benefits Access, United Way of NYC; Emilio Tavárez, Director of Advocacy, Policy, and Research at Hunger Free America; Dr. Leonardo Falcón, Professor of History and Latin American Studies, Nassau Community College, and Fellow, SUNY Hispanic Leadership Institute

Abstract: Food insecurity is a leading issue in New York, which the COVID-19 pandemic made evident. There are about 3 million New Yorkers who are food insecure. There is need for additional funding. The pandemic highlighted the serious issue food security represented for the well-being of the population. The pandemic also showed how food pantries were not the answer to the food security problem. Hispanics and children and disproportionately affected by food insecurity. During recessions, hunger spikes and takes a long time to recover from. Moreover, immigrants are not always eligible for help, or do not know that they are in fact eligible for food assistance. There are also serious issues of food distribution logistics and capacity (i.e., getting food where it needs to be and keeping it fresh for safe consumption). In New York, farmers produce 1.2 billion pounds of top quality produce they cannot distribute and end up throwing out. From a budgetary perspective, food insecurity and hunger can be addressed through a focus on children and income maintenance and minimum wage legislation. In order to address further food insecurity and hunger, there is a need for expanding the nutrition outreach education program (NOEP); access to food generally and healthy food in particular; drive-thru food pantries can alleviate the cost of renting space; community efforts, such as community fridges can target very localized need.

Panelists pointed to the following budget and legislative priorities to address food insecurity: increase the minimum wage and index it thereafter; eliminate the sub minimum wage for 250,000 workers who are mostly families of heads of households of color and tax-based credits; provide for universal (free) school meals; restore funding for SNAP outreach.

Surveillance Isn't Safety



Chairs: Senator Kristen González and Assemblymember Harvey Epstein

Panelists: Albert Fox Cahn, Founder and Executive Director, Surveillance Technology Oversight Project's (S.T.O.P.'s); Derrick Ingram, MBA, Executive Director, Warriors in the Garden; Nina Loshkajian, Legal Fellow, Surveillance Technology Oversight Project's (S.T.O.P.'s); Fabian Rogers, Constituent Advocate, Senator Jabari Brisport's Office; Meghan Maloney de Zaldívar, Director of Organizing and Strategy, NYIC

Abstract: Panelists discussed the drawbacks and potential harms of extensive surveillance, particularly in relation to marginalized communities, which include, among others, immigrant communities affected by data sharing with immigration enforcement and the resultant fear of participation in public activities, as well as racial minorities experiencing over-policing and under-protection. Surveillance technology, such as ShotSpotter and CCTV, were criticized for their inaccuracies and potential for misuse. Furthermore, the panelists highlighted the history of institutions that have traditionally marginalized certain groups, indicating that these institutions could potentially misuse evolving surveillance technologies. A critique was made against "Big Brother" keeping people safe, with some panelists suggesting that this surveillance might create more harm than safety. Also, it discussed that surveillance can deter people from exercising their rights due to fear of being watched and targeted.

Next steps identified by panelists included: develop better trust between law enforcement agencies and marginalized communities, in part by limiting data sharing with immigration enforcement; conduct proper validation studies of surveillance technology to ensure it is unbiased and does not disproportionately harm certain groups; increase the focus on actual social services that can reduce crime, rather than over-investing in surveillance technology; ensure transparency and accountability in the use of surveillance technology by law enforcement and other institutions; review and potentially outlaw certain surveillance technologies that have proven to be ineffective and potentially harmful; promote more agency and the right to privacy for everyday people as technology becomes more integrated into society; assess and address the chilling effects of surveillance on people's rights and freedoms; support legislation such as the New York for All Act; raise awareness of surveillance issues and upcoming related bills.

Building a New York for All: How New York State Can Protect Its Immigrant Rights



Chair: Assemblymember Jonathan Rivera

Panelists: Lina Marcela Trejos, Community Advocate; Cassandra Bocanegra, Manager of Organizing and Strategy, Finger Lakes, NYIC; Rosa Cohen Cruz, Immigration Policy Director, Bronx Defenders

Abstract: The panel discussed the topic of immigration enforcement in the state of New York, specifically focusing on the New York for All Act. The bill is designed to disentangle state and local authorities from immigration authorities as various agencies in New York engage in collaboration with local law enforcement and entities like ICE and Border Patrol. This collaboration often results in the transfer of individuals from local custody to immigration custody, as well as the sharing of confidential information with immigration authorities. While some jurisdictions in New York, such as New York City and Westchester County, have implemented policies to prohibit this collaboration, there remains a pressing need for statewide action. Other states, including those on the West Coast, Illinois, and Vermont, have already enacted laws to prevent collusion between local authorities and ICE. Ultimately, the New York for All Act strives to prevent the disruption of both the criminal justice and immigration legal systems caused by external agencies like ICE, while also establishing clear mandates for local authorities to prioritize their responsibility to New Yorkers over immigration enforcement. Panelists stressed the unjust detention based on false information, safety concerns for immigrants accessing healthcare and education, connection between police-ICE collaboration and fear among immigrants that lead to unwillingness among immigrants to come forward and report crimes they have experienced.

Unemployment Bridge Project & Digital Ad Tax



Chair: Assemblymember Marcela Mitaynes

Panelists: Carina Kaufman-Gutierrez, Street Vendor Project; Francis Mendoza, National Day Laborer Organizing Network & Yonkers Sanctuary Movement; Ace Sutherland, Immigration Research Initiative & Equality New York (EQNY); José Saldaña, Releasing Aging People in Prison; Tafadar Sourov, Laborers Local 79

Abstract: The panelists discussed the fact that the Excluded Workers Fund delivered a lifeline that allowed thousands of New Yorkers and their families to get back on their feet again. But it showed that our social safety net is filled with gaps that unjustly shut out the most vulnerable workers, especially Black, brown, and immigrant workers in precarious low-wage industries. There was deep discussion regarding the perceived lack of racial justice in the existing system. Panelists noted that unemployment insurance has disproportionately left out Black and brown workers since its enactment in 1935. There was an intuitive conversation about the need for access to a strong safety net, as a long term issue that goes beyond pandemic relief.

The panelists proposed the development and investment in a permanent, parallel state program to give our state's most vulnerable workers access to unemployment compensation, no matter what they do for a living or where they're from. They suggested that a program like this would provide New York the opportunity to invest in its labor force for the long term. The panelists contend that a absence of a permanent fix to the system would some workers critical, frontline workers behind, make it harder for our state to recover from a crisis, hurt the long-term health of our economy, and make our neighborhoods less prosperous and safe.

Why We Need to Close the Medicaid Gap



Chair: Assemblymember Amanda Séptimo & Senator Zellnor Myrie

Panelists: Peter De Jesús, Political Coordinator, 1199 SEIU; Pastor Fabián Arias, Saint Peters Church; Ramón J Rodríguez, President & CEO, Wyckoff Heights; Christina Otero, Entitlement Coordinator at Promesa, Inc. Acacia Network

Abstract: The panel discussed the impact of the gap in Medicare reimbursement on healthcare institutions, healthcare workers, and communities. Panelists emphasized the need to address this issue and highlight the challenges faced in providing quality services with limited funding: few available providers for services that have funding to be offered, and large caseloads. Many people who need Medicaid do not qualify for it; many immigrants are then turned away from hospitals. Panelists mentioned the importance of fair reimbursement rates, the struggle to make ends meet, and the impact on patients, especially those relying on Medicaid. They also discuss the need for legislative action to ensure more equitable funding and support for safety net hospitals, particularly as panelists felt discriminatory legislation affecting Medicaid is intentional.

For next steps, panelists proposed advocating for an increase in Medicaid reimbursement rates to ensure institutions can provide quality services; pushing for structural reforms in Medicaid reimbursement to address the disparities and create parity with commercial rates; working towards empowering safety net hospitals to access more federal funding by making necessary legislative changes; demanding adequate financial support for healthcare workers who have been essential during the COVID-19 pandemic; engaging in political action and hold elected officials accountable for supporting communities and prioritizing healthcare funding; organizing and mobilizing to fight for sustainable reimbursement rates and challenge policies that disproportionately impact marginalized communities; collaborating with organizations like 1199 to strengthen the collective voice and advocate for necessary changes in healthcare funding; highlight the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for ongoing support in healthcare institutions and communities; urge policymakers to prioritize healthcare workers and recognize the value of their contributions by providing fair compensation and resources; and continue to raise awareness about the disparities in healthcare funding and the importance of addressing them to ensure equitable access to quality care.

Fixing New York's Hospital Financial Assistance Application



Chair: Senator Gustavo Rivera

Panelists: Elisabeth Benjamin, Community Service Society; Maria Álvarez, NY Statewide Senior Action Council, Inc.; Alexandra SanJuan, Make the Road

Abstract: Panelists discussed the challenges faced by undocumented immigrants, particularly in New York, in accessing healthcare and insurance coverage. There are significant barriers such as language, fear of deportation, and financial difficulties that deter undocumented immigrants from seeking medical care. Many of these individuals rely on charity care as a last resort but face obstacles such as confusing systems, language barriers, and difficulties in obtaining necessary documents. Panelists argued that there is a need to modernize the hospital financial assistance law and implement protections like standard application and increased federal public level access. They also suggested that the state could save money by switching immigrants from emergency Medicaid, which does not provide comprehensive coverage, to essential plan coverage. The panelists shared personal stories of individuals struggling with medical debt, highlighting the urgent need for reform and the conviction that health care is a human right. The pervasive issue of healthcare debt, its growth and its disparate impact on people of color was underscored by the examples of the hospitals' habitual practice of suing patients for debt, particularly targeting minorities. Fear of legal consequences, language difficulties, and lack of insurance are salient barriers to access to health care.

For next steps, panelists recommended reallocating the budget to cover essential healthcare services, especially for lower-income individuals and immigrants; implementing discounts for lower-income people to alleviate the burden of healthcare costs; modernizing and expanding hospital financial assistance laws; passing legislation such as the ANSWER Prevention Act, New

York Health Act, Fair Medical Debt Judgment Act, and the Courage Rule; exploring the potential to switch immigrants from emergency Medicaid to essential plan coverage; improving communication and information about hospital financial assistance for undocumented immigrants; providing resources and support to help undocumented immigrants navigate the healthcare system and apply for charity care; advocating for the removal of medical debt from credit reports to protect individuals from negative credit impacts; and encouraging public participation in commenting on the state's waiver proposal to secure federal funds for healthcare coverage.

Meeting the Medical Needs of Immigrants and Migrants in this Political Climate



Chairs: Senator Shelley Mayer & Assemblymember Phara Souffrant Forrest

Panelists: Gina Cuneo-Ramos, Family Nurse Practitioner; Lucía Alfano, Professor of Nursing, WCC; Anderson Torres, CEO, RAIN Total Care; Dora Acevedo, Nurse practitioner, Jacobi Medical Center

Abstract: Panelists began by the defining immigrant and migrant, distinguishing the former as a person who comes to live permanently in a foreign country, and the latter as one who moves around mainly to find work. Panelists further highlighted the significant number of immigrants, migrants, asylum seekers and legal permanent residents in the US, with a focus on New York City. They delved into the mental health issues faced by these groups due to fear and anxiety caused by the threat of deportation and an uncertain future. Panelists emphasized that these fears limit their social activities and interaction with authorities, hinder their ability to find work and meet basic needs, and discourage them from seeking healthcare or applying for benefits. Panelists also revealed the severe trauma experienced by these groups due to violence, extortion, and abuse in their journey to the US, further exacerbating their mental health issues. The importance of integrating behavioral wellness into primary healthcare for immigrants and migrants was underscored. The panel concluded by highlighting the critical need for a more empathetic and understanding approach towards these individuals.

For next steps, panelists recommended conducting further research to understand the depth of these issues and identify specific barriers that immigrants face when accessing public services; developing and proposing policies that aim to reduce the fears immigrants have towards public services, such as police, hospitals, and social services; creating initiatives to provide support for families of detained immigrants; advocating for language inclusivity in healthcare settings, potentially through the implementation of comprehensive language services; working on a public awareness campaign to educate the public about the life and struggles of immigrants; collaborating with language service providers to improve the availability and reliability of interpreters; and launching workshops or training programs to educate healthcare and social workers about different religions and cultures to reduce misunderstandings and improve service provision.

Missing Girls of Color: Understanding the Road Ahead



Chair: Senator Mónica Martínez

Panelists: Dawn Rowe, Founder/CEO, Girl Vow, Academic; Chaplain Dr. Victoria A. Phillips, Founder, Visionary V. Ministries & Member, Human Trafficking Survivor Board; Damarly Veatrice Barbosa, Member Young Lords Human and Civil Rights

Abstract: The panel focused on the issue of missing indigenous and women and girls of colors and raised community awareness of the problem. Panelists zeroed in on the fact that missing girls and women are often classified as runaways as opposed to missing, which makes it more difficult to investigate and track. Missing girls face sex trafficking, abandonment and homelessness, and because they may not have a home address to file a police report, such reports are not filed. Moreover, women and girls of color do not receive the same level of support and attention when missing as white women receive.

For next steps, panelists recommended the creation of a task force, and continue education and awareness raising on the subject.

Government Contracts for Latino Businesses



Chair: Senator Nathalia Fernández

Panelists: Steven Rivera, CEO Sentry Management Solutions; Rud Morales, Fortis Contractors, LLC; Quenia Abreu, President, NY Women's Chamber of Commerce; Jeffrey García, President, NYS Latino Restaurant Bar & Lounge Assoc.; Mike Garner, Chief Business Diversity Officer, Mayor's Office of MWBE

Abstract: Panelists discussed challenges faced by minority and women-owned businesses (MWBEs) in obtaining contracts and participating in government procurement processes. They focused on the low number of MWBE procurements and the need for reforms to increase opportunities for certified minority-owned businesses. They further highlighted the lack of education and knowledge about the procurement process, the difficulties in applying for contracts, the need for dedicated support and guidance for MWBEs in this regard, and the challenges of navigating the certification and bidding processes. Panelists also discussed the importance of recruiting and expanding the MWBE program, as well as creating a centralized MWBE center to provide comprehensive services and assistance to MWBEs. They emphasized the need for transparency, better communication, and simplified processes to ensure a fair and inclusive procurement system.

For next steps, panelists recommended implementing training programs to educate and empower minorities, especially Latinos, in securing business contracts; initiating reforms to simplify the contract application process and make it more accessible to all; establishing a standardized set of information necessary for applying for a contract across all agencies; increasing awareness and understanding about the necessary certifications for contracts through educational programs and

resources; encouraging and facilitating collective action among unions, enhancing their bargaining power and effectiveness; allocating more resources and funding to unions to better serve their members; utilizing social media and other digital platforms to reach out to younger workers, provide information and gather support; advocating for improved worker rights, including access to transportation, healthcare, and quality care; and developing strategies to recognize and accommodate the diverse needs and abilities of workers in the workforce.

Union Organizing: Building Power through Unity with a Diverse Workforce



Chair: Assemblymember Erik Martín Dilán

Panelists: Gladys Bruno, 1199; Jahmila Edwards, DC37; Sharase DeBouse, Secretary Political Action Department, Transport Workers Union; Anthony Harmon, United Federation of Teachers

Abstract: Panelists discussed the importance of organized labor in keeping the city functioning during the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing the role of organized labor in ensuring people could get to work, packages were delivered, and food was provided for families. They discussed the challenges of achieving unity in a diverse workforce and the need for education and mentorship to empower younger members, highlighting the importance of engaging with legislation and advocating for positive outcomes through campaigns and collective actions. This would involve the need for educating legislators about union issues and the importance of collective bargaining rights: the need to fix Tier 6 legislation and ensure pension equity for all union members; the impact of mental health issues on workers, especially in high-stress jobs like transit workers; and the importance of providing mental health services and support. This includes the need for workers to be aware of their healthcare benefits and to prioritize their own health and well-being through preventive care. The panelists stressed the importance of education and communication to motivate workers to take advantage of available services and to maintain healthy behaviors.

For next steps, panelists recommended developing comprehensive programs and initiatives to educate legislators about union issues and the importance of collective bargaining rights; collaborating with mental health professionals and organizations to provide needed services and support for workers, especially those in high-stress jobs; optimizing the use of social media for union organizing and engagement, including the establishment of a dedicated team for this purpose; running campaigns and workshops to enhance workers' awareness and usage of their healthcare benefits; creating a forum or support groups for transit workers where they can share experiences and learn self-care strategies; setting up a task force to monitor the effective implementation of contract-negotiated benefits; launching an awareness campaign to promote a better understanding of unionism among the general public; fostering an inclusive culture within unions that recognizes and accommodates the diverse abilities of workers; encouraging collective actions and campaigns to fix Tier 6 legislation and ensure pension equity for all union members; and highlighting the diverse contributions made by women in the workforce.

Suburban and Upstate Latino Communities



Chairs: Assemblymember Steven Otis & Assemblymember Phil Ramos

Panelists: Pilar Moya-Mancera, Executive Director of Housing Help, Inc.; Casimiro Rodríguez, Hispanic Heritage Council of Western New York; Beatriz Díaz Taveras, Executive Director, Catholic Charities Community Services; Micky Jiménez, Regional Director for Capital

District Latinos; Julie Burgos, Second Vice President for Long Island Latino Teachers' Association (LILTA)

Abstract: The panel engaged in a wide-ranging discussion of issues touching upon zoning and local control, housing, education, arts and culture and how they affect suburban and upstate Latinos distinctly from non-Latinos, and suburban Latinos from urban Latinos, underscoring the point that Hispanics are not monolithic. While many urban Latinos are renters, a larger proportion of suburban/upstate Latino are homeowners, and they see in homeownership both equity and safety. Suburban/upstate Latinos may approach law enforcement differently from urban Latinos; but they ultimately want to be similarly protected and respected. These Latinos also tended to favor Gov. Hochul's housing compact as a step in the right direction to address and bring into compliance illegal apartments, with accessory units serving to diversify racially and economically homogenous suburban communities. Latino laborers also faced separate challenges with fewer service providers, and subpar transportation options out of urban areas. Education also remains a challenge for upstate/suburban Latinos with 125 school districts with distinct funding sources and local control. Budget formulas tend to perpetuate differences in access to resources, which tend to be equalized with foundation aid. Arts and culture organizations that stem from Latino communities serve Latino communities distinctly to an extent mainstream organizations do not. They also serve as magnet for economic development, but they need to draw people from outside the community to participate in these community-based organization events in order to be self-sustaining.

Dominicans in Higher Education



Chair: Assemblymember Yudelka Tapia

Panelists: Jason Castillo, Doctoral Fellow, Dominican Studies Institute; Dr. Fernández-Ketcham, Vice President of Continuing Education and Workforce Development at Eugenio María de Hostos Community College; Ana I. García Reyes, Dean of Community Relations, Eugenio María de Hostos Community College

Abstract: The panel revolved around the demographic breakdown of the public school system in New York City: 1 in 8 people in NYC is a public school student mostly Latino, particularly of Dominican descent. The schools' curriculum does not adequately reflect the demographic composition of the students: little in terms of Latino studies, Caribbean studies, Dominican studies, and Puerto Rican studies, and less accommodating for the cultural competence of these

communities and lacking in respect for their linguistic practices. Panelists also focused on the little attention or concern about the age 18-29 population at risk of being out of school and out of work. Cultural and structural factors affect the transition to adulthood for immigrant and second-generation Dominicans in the U.S., for instance, staying at home until marriage in some cultures, the economic and educational factors influencing the ability to leave home, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the experiences of young adults. The panel also discussed research findings indicating study that immigrant and second-generation Dominicans often experience a higher level of negativity and instability compared to their white counterparts. The older group felt particularly stuck, possibly due to the pandemic.

For next steps, panelists recommended advocating for the inclusion of Latino and Caribbean Studies and engaging in conversations with school, curriculum, and policy makers to push for a more culturally relevant curriculum; improving representation by developing strategies to counteract the negative portrayal of young Dominicans and promote a more positive and realistic image; enhancing support for immigrant and second-generation Dominicans by developing resources and support systems to assist these groups in their transition into adulthood; conducting further research on the cultural nuances of Latinos and Dominicans, focusing on the reasons behind their tendency to support others, the differences between immigrant and second-generation Dominicans, and the role of switching majors in completing a degree; and promoting equality and resource development at CUNY Schools by advocating for better resource allocation and ensure equal opportunities for all students regardless of their cultural background.

NYC Housing Crisis and Solutions



Chairs: Assemblymember John Zaccaro & Councilmember Rafael Salamanca

Panelists: Adolfo Carrión, Jr, Commissioner, NYC Department of Housing, Preservation and Development; Rachel Fee, Executive Director, NY Housing Conference; Elizabeth Vélez, President, The Velez Organization; Matthew Washington, Vice-President & Chief of Staff, Phipps Houses

Abstract: New York City has had a housing crisis since the 1930s, and various efforts have been made to address affordability, availability, and housing quality. The city’s population has increased, but affordable housing supply has not kept pace. There is growing awareness of the housing supply shortage, leading to extreme rent burden, especially for low-income individuals. The crisis is also impacting the middle class, millennials, seniors, and exacerbating racial disparities in homeownership. The city has been a leader in investing in affordable housing and aims to provide high-quality housing in every neighborhood for every income level. They want to spread the opportunity and not concentrate affordable housing only in low-income communities. The administration plans to change zoning rules, increase affordable housing construction, and work closely with the city council and state leadership to achieve these goals. The panel also discussed resistance to housing compact initiatives in suburban areas and the need to overcome this resistance in order to increase housing density; the issue of nonpayment of rent

in public and affordable housing and the need for solutions to prevent widespread evictions; the importance of incorporating climate change considerations into long-term development strategies; and a focus on community engagement and the need to include minority developers in the housing development network.

For next steps, panelists recommended reevaluating current housing affordability calculations, revising them to reflect the increasing cost of living; implementing new zoning rules and increase the construction of affordable housing in collaboration with city council and state leadership; converting commercial spaces into residential units to boost housing supply; developing strategies to overcome resistance to housing density initiatives in suburban areas; addressing the issue of nonpayment of rent in public and affordable housing to prevent potential evictions; incorporating climate change considerations into long-term housing development strategies; improving community engagement and focus on inclusivity, particularly for minority developers in housing development; and considering both short-term and long-term solutions, including improving the housing application process and implementing bold policies to increase the housing supply.

Broadband Adoption



Chair: Assemblymember Brian Cunningham

Panelists: Eric Henry, Director, Government Affairs, Altice USA; Larissa Larrier, Digital Navigation, Manager, Brooklyn Public Library; Jodial Vanel, Federal Program Officer, New York NTIA; Marc Colón, Director of Public Engagement NTIA

Abstract: The panelists discussed various initiatives and programs aimed at providing affordable and reliable high-speed internet to underserved communities. A \$65 billion promise made by the President to connect everyone in America and close the digital divide would be implemented through programs like the Broadband Equity Access and Deployment (BEAD) program, overseen by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA). The panel emphasized the importance of access and opportunity for all communities, especially those that still struggle with basic needs such as paying bills and putting food on the table, and the need for community input and stakeholder engagement in the planning and implementation process. They also highlighted the Affordable Connectivity program, which provides a \$30 monthly subsidy to eligible individuals. The panelists discussed their roles in promoting broadband access, including the efforts of the Brooklyn Public Library to assist individuals with the application process and Optimum's partnership with the city of New York to provide free broadband access to shelters and public housing developments. They highlighted the success of these initiatives in increasing adoption rates in underserved neighborhoods. The panel concluded by advocating for the replication of these models throughout New York State and other parts of the country to ensure affordable and accessible internet for all.

For next steps, panelists recommended advocating for the replication of successful broadband access models throughout New York State and other parts of the country; encouraging the

audience and stakeholders to get involved and support the organizations mentioned; improving communication and outreach efforts to make more people aware of these programs; working on resolving identified barriers, such as the application process, trust, language, and cost; and encouraging the efficient implementation of the promised federal investment and the various programs aimed at bridging the digital divide.

New Deal for CUNY—The People’s University



Chair: Assemblymember Steve Raga

Panelists: James Davis, Professional Staff Congress-CUNY; Salmatou Dounbouya, University Student Senate (CUNY); Remy Salas, professor, Borough of Manhattan Community College

Abstract: Panelists discussed higher education issues from the perspective of students and workers. The Professional Staff Congress is a union that represents 30,000 members throughout the CUNY system. The University Student Senate represents some 350,000 students. Enrollment has declined which is why the University Student Senate is striving to bring student enrollment up, and bring students back in a comfortable environment where they get the education that they deserve in the environment that they should be in. CUNY’s mission calls for reflecting the people of New York City in its student body, faculty and staff. There are 80% students of color at CUNY. For many people CUNY means an engine for social upward economic mobility: a place where probably the system or the conditions in their family that they were born in did not allow them to ever dream of being there. However, the university’s budget is under threat: \$127 million are slated to be cut out of individual college budgets in total to try to make up for deficits that have been inherited and carried over time. A great deal of federal stimulus money has run out. The cuts effectively added up to an 18% per student decrease over the Cuomo era budgets. A proposed 3% tuition increase for SUNY and CUNY along with proposed cuts will prevent many students from enrolling, by adding financial burdens for students coping with non-tuition expenses such as transportation, mental health, food security, and the disproportionate impact on immigrant students. CUNY also needs capital improvement funding since more than half of 300 buildings are 50 years old or older and only 8% are in a state of good repair. Moreover, the faculty and professional staff of the university have been operating without a contract since February.

Improving School Climate—Addressing Implicit Bias



Chairs: Assemblymember Manny De Los Santos & Senator John Liu
Panelists: Philippe Abraham, Secretary-treasurer of New York State United Teachers; Ilyana Frias, United Federation of Teachers; Wendy Palladino, Bellport Teachers Association

Abstract: Panel discussion focused on the importance of addressing implicit bias and promoting equity and fairness in public schools, discussing the guiding questions of what a great public school would look like, feel like, and sound like if it were systemically fair and equitable. They emphasized the need to challenge implicit biases and create inclusive and welcoming environments. The conversation touched on the impact of implicit biases on decision-making and the importance of recognizing and addressing them. The panelists also highlighted the consequences of implicit bias in various areas, including housing, employment, healthcare, and education. They discussed the prevalence of microaggressions and the need to challenge and address them. The panelists emphasized the importance of being brave in calling out microaggressions and educating oneself and others to promote racial and social justice. The panel concluded with a call to action, encouraging participants to continue the work of challenging implicit biases, advocating for equitable systems, and creating inclusive environments in schools and communities.

For next steps, panelists recommended passing the "School Solution, not School Suspension" bill to address inequities in school discipline practices; implementing workshops about implicit bias in schools for staff, students, and parents to raise awareness, improve understanding, and promote actionable change; encouraging individuals to engage in 'mirror work' and 'window work' - to reflect on their own biases and expose themselves to diverse perspectives; encouraging active calling out and education about microaggressions; strengthening partnerships with organizations committed to promoting religious diversity education and combating hate crimes in public schools; fostering stronger relationships between schools and parents to understand the needs and challenges of students better; exploring ways to leverage technology to mitigate the impact of societal changes and the pandemic on diverse school communities; supporting and enhancing the role of Parent Associations in promoting equity and preventing bias in school communities; emphasizing ongoing education for all community members about the importance of respect, understanding, and accountability.

Community Violence Intervention



Chairs: Senator Jamaal Bailey & Assemblymember George Álvarez
Panelists: David Caba, B.R.A.G. (Bronx Rises Against Gun Violence); Yadira Moncion, Senior Vocational/Educational Case Manager, New York State Unified Court System; Erik Marketan, Saint Barnabas Hospital

Abstract: The panel discussed the importance of investing in mental health and public safety to address the issue of gun violence. Panelists highlighted the evidence-based models of Cure Violence and hospital response programs that aim to reduce violence in communities: interrupting and mediating conflicts, identifying and supporting high-risk individuals, and conducting public education campaigns. Crisis management system supports these programs by offering wrap-around services such as therapy, legal support, school conflict mediation, and employment opportunities. The panelists shared success stories and statistics demonstrating the impact of these interventions in reducing shootings and homicides in their respective districts. They also emphasized the need for a holistic approach, involving various agencies and addressing social determinants of violence. The role of hospitals in partnering with community programs and implementing trauma-informed care was discussed, along with the importance of timely interventions and building trust with patients. The panel concluded with the recognition of the ongoing work and the call for continued investment and collaboration to address gun violence effectively. The funding from the city was highlighted as essential for programming and resources, allowing them to reach more communities, as well as the need to measure the efficacy of the partnership and the importance of Medicaid reimbursement for hospital-based gun violence programs.

For next steps, panelists recommended continuing investment in evidence-based models like Cure Violence and hospital response programs; partnering hospitals more closely with community programs and implement trauma-informed care; encouraging meaningful clinical services and develop a culture within hospitals to accept new approaches to violence prevention; seeking funding to ensure sustainability of programming and resource availability; regularly measuring the efficacy of the partnerships and programs, and explore opportunities for Medicaid reimbursement; leading the conversation on public safety, emphasizing the importance of community-based organizations and multi-agency collaboration; addressing underlying social issues such as poverty, housing, and education; promoting community involvement, including working with high-risk individuals and older adults; implementing programs to engage young people and keep them off the streets, such as career workshops and fitness activities; and encouraging and facilitating a culture of openness and communication among different stakeholders in community violence prevention.

Uplifting Nuyorican History through the Arts



Chairs: Assemblymember Kenny Burgos & Senator José Serrano

Panelists: Victoria Benítez, Lincoln Center for Performing Arts; Bobby Sanabría, Co-Artistic Director, Bronx Music Heritage Center; Elena Martinez, Co-Artistic Director, Bronx Music Heritage Center

Abstract: Panelists discussed the Puerto Rican migration to New York City in the first half of the 20th century, particularly focusing on the neighborhood of San Juan Hill. The panelists discussed the displacement of Puerto Rican families and businesses in the 1950s due to urban renewal programs. They emphasized the importance of not forgetting these communities and

their contributions to the arts and culture of the city. Panelists further touched on the effectiveness of arts and culture in telling the story of the Puerto Rican diaspora and addressing issues of social justice and equality. They discussed how arts, including music, dance, poetry, and literature, have played a transformative role in shaping the cultural landscape of New York City and call for greater recognition and appreciation of the Puerto Rican community's contributions. The conversation also explored the relationship between arts, culture, community organizing, and social justice issues. The panelists discussed how the arts can be used as a tool for empowerment, resistance, and revolution, reflecting the struggles and experiences of their communities. They stressed the need to pass down cultural knowledge and inspire younger generations to engage with their artistic history and heritage. The participants recognized the role of cultural institutions, advocacy organizations, and artists in preserving and promoting their community's identity and history. They expressed the challenges of maintaining cultural traditions in a fragmented media landscape and the importance of community-driven efforts to counter mainstream narratives.

Recommendations proposed by panelists included utilizing arts as a means to bring difficult issues to light and as a vehicle for social change, since joy and creativity can be potent forms of resistance; implementing initiatives to enhance the portrayal of minority communities in the arts, helping to boost confidence and inspire success within these communities; advocating for inclusion of these historical and cultural narratives in public education; increasing support for cultural institutions, advocacy organizations, and artists working to preserve and promote their community's identity and history; amplifying community-driven efforts to counter mainstream narratives and preserve cultural traditions in a fragmented media landscape; and continuing to empower, educate, and inspire younger generations to engage with their cultural history and heritage.

Organizing the Latina GOTV in the Digital Space: ¡Bien Puesta pa' Votar!



Chairs: Councilmember Amanda Farías & Senator Kristen González
Panelists: Mino Lora, Executive Director, People's Theater Project; María Reyes, Co-Director, La Mesa Boricua; Rebecca Rodríguez, Principal Consultant, Eco Strategies

Abstract: Panelists discussed digital organizing, its challenges and best practices, including the need to adapt to newer technologies and build strategies while facing barriers such as the digital divide, age, and digital literacy. They emphasized the importance of leveraging digital platforms to reach broader audiences and engage the community effectively, providing examples like running an Instagram show, organizing marches, conducting online polls, and utilizing influencers to educate and mobilize voters. Panelists further highlighted the significance of digital tools in political education and strategic organizing while acknowledging that in-person interactions remain crucial. The conversation also touches on the measurement of success in digital organizing and the necessity of driving people to the polls, especially in a hybrid world, as well as the importance of connecting with young people and understanding their needs and

concerns. The panelists discussed the need for political education, clear intentions, targeting specific communities, and quantifying success to ensure effective engagement and voter turnout.

For next steps, panelists recommended ongoing learning and understanding of evolving platforms to ensure the success of future campaigns and initiatives; building strategies to bridge the digital divide, improve digital literacy, and leverage digital platforms effectively for community engagement; advocating for clear strategies targeting specific communities, focusing on political education and driving people to the polls; recognizing the importance of trust-building and consistency in outreach efforts and suggest creating 'bite-sized' organizing opportunities for broader participation; enhancing engagement with young people, understanding their needs and concerns, and making relatable content to drive their participation. To measure success, panelists suggested a shift from simply counting clicks and likes towards evaluating meaningful conversations and collecting usable data; and the need for cultural competence to connect with diverse communities effectively.

Latinos in the Judiciary



Chairs: Assemblymember Yudelka Tapia & Senator Luis Sepúlveda
Panelists: Justice Carmen R. Velásquez; Justice Bianka Pérez, Civil Court of NY (Bronx); Eric González, District Attorney, Kings County; Stefano Pérez, Associate Counsel for NYS Assembly (minority)

Abstract: Panelists focused their attention on the overall underrepresentation of Latinos in the NYS judiciary in the aftermath of the confirmation process of judge Hector LaSalle. Lack of Hispanic diversity was evident on the bench in New York States at all levels (e.g., family court, supreme court, appellate division) as well as in the different district attorneys' offices nationally (Latinos are less than 2% of 2,200 D.A.s). Panelists discussed the issue of obstacles in a pipeline of judicial appointees and nominees that originates in the school and university systems and is then perpetuated by the gatekeeping institutions after law school. Screening committees at county level do not screen sufficient number of Latinos for judicial nomination consideration. Panelists suggested individual jurists become mentors to younger generation of students and lawyers and encourage them through screening/vetting processes. They also stated former prosecutors are seen as among the best judges, with D.A. offices serving as proving ground for jurists.

Raise the Wage in NY State



Chairs: Senator Jessica Ramos & Assemblymember Marcela Mitaynes

Panelist: Whitney Hu, director of civic engagement and research, Churches United for Fair Housing

Abstract: The panel revolved around the Raise the Wage Act and the importance of increasing the minimum wage in New York State. The panelists discussed the need for a higher minimum wage to address the issue of working families struggling to cover the cost of living. They argued that the current minimum wage of \$15 per hour is no longer sufficient due to inflation and rising prices. They proposed raising the minimum wage to \$21.25 per hour by 2026 and indexing it to inflation thereafter. They emphasized that a higher minimum wage is not only fair for workers but also beneficial for businesses and the overall economy. The panelists also highlighted the impact of poverty and the need to address disparities based on race, gender, and immigration status. They called for support and action from elected representatives and encourage individuals to join the campaign for a fair minimum wage.

For next steps, panelists recommended advocating for the Raise the Wage Act and the proposed increase of minimum wage to \$21.25 by 2026; developing resources and programs to support minimum wage workers, such as food and housing subsidies or additional work benefits; implementing stronger legislation and enforcement to prevent wage theft, particularly focusing on protecting immigrant workers; conducting further research on the impact of a raised minimum wage on businesses and the economy; working on policy changes to address disparities in wages based on race, gender, and immigration status; initiating public campaigns to raise awareness about the need for a fair minimum wage and mobilize public support; continuing dialogues with elected representatives to push for supportive action in favor of increasing the minimum wage; exploring options for financial aid or subsidies for those affected by increases in public service costs like subway fares and CUNY school fees.

No Rent Poor New Yorker



Chairs: Senator Julia Salazar & Assemblymember Marcela Mitaynes

Panelists: Monsignor Sullivan, Catholic Charities; Maria Doulis, Deputy Comptroller for Budget and Policy Analysis; Grace Bonilla, CEO, United Way; Nic Rangel, Esq., M.P.A., Legal Aid Society of Northeastern New York; Larissa Story, Catholic Charities NY Homebase Director

Abstract: Panelists discussed the high level of families being displaced from their homes due to lack of affordability and instability in the housing market as a result of the high rent burden. They identified the Good Cause Eviction Bill and the Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act (TOPA) as potential solutions to protect tenants and promote affordable housing. Solutions to

housing insecurity also requires fighting discrimination against tenants with housing vouchers and the need for legal representation for tenants facing eviction. Programs and policies like rent control, right to counsel, and rental subsidies also serve as tools to address housing insecurity. Mobile home residents face distinct challenges as homeowners of the structure, but they are also tenants of the land the home sits on, without the protection of tenants who rent in immobile homes. The conversation also highlighted the importance of education for both tenants and landlords. Panelists acknowledged the need for financial literacy education to be provided proactively, ideally at the time of receiving or seeking housing assistance, rather than in response to crises like evictions or financial instability. Lessons learned from the pandemic, such as the effectiveness of income tax credits for tenants and landlords, were discussed as a means of addressing housing affordability.

For next steps, panelists recommended advocating for the Good Cause Eviction Bill and TOPA to ensure tenants' protection and affordable housing; pushing for policy changes to grant more protections to mobile home park residents; implementing programs to educate both tenants and landlords about their rights and responsibilities, ideally at the time of housing assistance; advocating against discrimination of tenants with housing vouchers and ensure their access to legal representation; introducing financial literacy workshops at the point of housing assistance and make them more accessible to tenants; advocating for the extension and expansion of income tax credits and food benefits to reduce poverty rates and aid families with rent payments; reviewing rental assistance programs to ensure their effectiveness in relation to the current cost of rent; adjusting the housing voucher rate to keep up with rent increases; proposing and advocating for a policy capping rent at 30% for those below the median income; create programs to facilitate homeownership among the working and middle-class populations; and engaging in a consistent dialogue with the real estate industry to correct misconceptions about legislative proposals protecting tenant rights, and consider the concerns of small property owners.

Delivering Mental Health Support to Immigrant and Asylum-Seeking Children in NYC Schools



Chair: Assemblymember Amanda Séptimo

Panelists: Jerry Hypolite, Chief of Staff, Partnership for Children; Dr. Anju J. Rupchandani, Executive Director, Zone 126; Angela Jefferson, Chief Program Officer, Partnership for Children; Christine Salazar, Program Director, Partnership for Children

Abstract: Panelists focused on the challenges and solutions related to mental health support in New York City schools, particularly for immigrant and asylum-seeking children. They discussed the traumas and experiences faced by these students and emphasized the need for adequate funding and best practices to address their mental health needs. They emphasized the importance of trauma-informed care and the need for holistic support for students. Challenges mentioned include the loss of parents and caregivers during the pandemic, language barriers, lack of resources, and the difficulties of navigating a new country and education system. The panelists stressed the significance of connection, listening, and responding to the needs of immigrant and asylum-seeking families, while acknowledging the need to address burnout among social

workers. The conversation concluded with a discussion on community schools and the role they play in providing comprehensive support to students, with an emphasis on trauma-informed practices and personalized approaches.

For next steps, panelists recommended advocating for increased funding to better address the mental health needs of immigrant and asylum-seeking students in schools; working with the Department of Education to implement more robust language services and resource provisions in schools; engaging with community organizations to improve partnerships and increase support for students outside of the school environment; prioritizing the implementation and expansion of the Community School model, and emphasize the inclusion of mental health services; developing summer programs and other initiatives that provide ongoing support for immigrant students and their families; highlighting the significance of individualized care and tailor resources and support services to meet the unique needs of each student; addressing the issue of social worker burnout by providing more support and resources for these critical roles; and promoting trauma-informed practices and personalized approaches in schools and other support services.

African Slavery's Influence on Latino Cultures



Chair: Assemblymember Inez Dickens

Panelists: Ricardo Aguirre, Counsel, Assemblymember Inez Dickens; Melody Capote, Executive Director of the Caribbean Cultural Center

Abstract: Panelists discussed the influence of African slavery on Latino culture, specifically in Puerto Rico, its history and the abolitionist movement in Puerto Rico, highlighting the role of black women in the fight for freedom. They emphasized the importance of recognizing and honoring the contributions of Afro-descendant communities in shaping cultural identity. The speakers also touched on the work of their respective organizations, the Caribbean Cultural Center and the Bronx Music Heritage Center, in promoting cultural equity and celebrating the artistic achievements of women. They emphasized the need to overcome divisions and unite as a community to fight against systemic oppression and white supremacy. The conversation highlighted the power of culture in fostering self-love and understanding, and called for embracing and reclaiming Afro-Latino heritage. Further, panelists highlighted how Puerto Rico Financial Oversight and Management Board's (La Junta) supervision and decision-making authority over the elected government have led to the dismantling of Puerto Rico, with the closure of the public university, labor reform that diminished employee rights, the deterioration of the health system, the closure of schools, and the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, which resulted in the death of thousands of people. The panel also emphasized the importance of cultural sustainability, autonomy, and advocacy for marginalized communities in Puerto Rico, highlighting projects like Revista Etnica and Piye as examples of community-led initiatives. The conversation touched on the role of art as activism and the need for institutional support for artists and cultural workers. Finally, the panelists emphasized the importance of representation,

fighting against racism, and advocating for freedom and better conditions in Puerto Rico and other U.S. territories.

For next steps, panelists recommended encouraging cultural organizations to promote equity and celebrate artistic achievements of women and marginalized communities; advocating for measures to repair and restore public services and employee rights in Puerto Rico; supporting cultural sustainability and autonomy initiatives in Puerto Rico and other U.S. territories; increasing institutional support for artists and cultural workers, particularly those engaged in activism; enhancing representation and fight against racism in Puerto Rico through various mediums such as art, literature, and music; engage more with community-led initiatives to bolster grassroots efforts; promoting the history and contributions of Afro-descendant communities in shaping cultural identity in education and public discourse; and fostering a culture of unity to fight against systemic oppression, focusing on overcoming divisions within the community.

The New Frontier: Opportunities in the Tech Industry



Chair: Assemblymember Kenny Burgos

Panelists: Alejandra Molina, Beepboop; Debbie Román, Per Scholas; Alicia Sepúlveda Maule, Give Pact; Jovanni Luna, Pursuit; Jukay Hsu, Pursuit; Joste Ordóñez, Airpals

Abstract: The panel discussed the massive growth in technology, with more companies and jobs and more wealth in the market than ever before. As an example, Micron has provided a billion-dollar investment. The presentations turned on how to make sure that all New Yorkers from all backgrounds can participate in that sector of the economy. Panelists stressed the need to build that workforce and the pipeline of talent to make that investment work. Key to this goal is getting the skills in order to be able to get the job and succeed at the job. Meaningful partnerships that emphasize rigorous training and internships and connection between existing professional networks can open opportunities in I.T. support, cybersecurity, engineering and restart. Black and Latinos represent 21% of the tech sector workforce. While better than the 8.5% in the San Francisco Bay area and 10% in Boston, 21% is still half of the 43% of the total workforce in New York. Panelists provided examples of programs that have worked in increasing the talent pool of Black and Latino youth in the tech sector. Some are based on the initiative of existing tech companies establishing connections with local schools in the Bronx or Queens. But panelists coincided on the need of cooperation between the private sector, government, the philanthropic and non-for-profit sector. Crucial also is access to the technology used by the tech sector: broadband and WiFi expansion need not be luxuries. The New York State Public Banking Act bill is also important to mitigate the limited access to capital that many entrepreneurs from communities of color face.

A Green Opportunity? A Deep Dive into NY's Adult Use of Cannabis Market



Chairs: Assemblymember Crystal People Stokes & Buffalo Deputy Mayor Crystal Rodríguez-Dabney

Panelists: Aliya J. Nelson, President of the United States CannaBusiness Chamber of Commerce; Herb Barbot is the Director of Operations, Office of Cannabis Management; Jessica Garcia, Board of Office of Cannabis Management; Jennifer Cabrera, Partner, Vicente's New York office

Abstract: The panel conversation focused on promoting social equity, addressing challenges, and fostering collaboration within the cannabis industry in New York, focusing on opportunities for people of color, particularly those affected by mass incarceration and the war on drugs the potential for communities of color to build generational wealth. Panelists highlighted the challenges faced by social equity licensees, particularly regarding access to capital and the prevalence of predatory practices. The Office of Cannabis Management (OCM) was praised for its efforts to prioritize applications based on race and gender, with a focus on ensuring racial and gender parity in cannabis business ownership. Panelists also stressed the need to ensure that banks and insurers understand their social responsibility and participate in the industry. They also touched on concerns about concentration of dispensaries in specific communities and the need for balancing economic development and community interests.

For next steps, panelists recommended encouraging banks and insurers to prioritize social responsibility in their dealings with the cannabis industry; collecting and analyzing data to assess progress and identify areas for improvement, addressing disparities and challenges faced by different groups; providing support and mentorship programs for applicants, particularly those from underrepresented communities; facilitating collaboration and knowledge sharing among industry professionals to foster growth and innovation; mitigating the concentration of dispensaries in certain communities through thoughtful planning and community engagement; and fostering education and awareness to break down stigmas and stereotypes associated with the cannabis industry.

The Latino Money Movement: Closing the Wealth Gap



Chairs: Assemblymember Manny De Los Santos & Assemblymember George Álvarez

Panelists: Ariel Ferreira, Licensed Financial Professional; Wendy Velazquez, Community Manager, Chase Bank; Evelyn Ortiz, Senior Deputy Commissioner, Suffolk County Department of Labor, Licensing, and Consumer Affairs; Quenia Abreu, President & CEO, New York Women's Chamber of Commerce

Abstract: The panel focused on the importance of financial education and empowerment within the Latino community in order to address the lack of financial leadership in the community, the

need to promote financial literacy, and the challenges faced in building wealth. They emphasized the significance of budgeting, debt management, emergency funds, proper protection, building wealth, and preserving wealth, as well as the importance of starting financial conversations at home and empowering the next generation with the necessary knowledge and tools for financial success. They provided examples of initiatives such as connecting underserved communities with financial tools, providing mentorship to small business owners, offering financial education from kindergarten to older adults, and working towards increasing Hispanic representation in the workforce. Minority and women entrepreneurs face particular challenges disproportionately, particularly in accessing capital and planning for retirement.

For next steps, panelists recommended advocating for financial education legislation; collaborating with organizations like Literacy Inc and the New York Women's Chamber of Commerce; promoting the importance of comprehensive financial strategies; encouraging tax planning; and facilitating open discussions on financial topics.

Advancing a Vision of a Welcoming NY: The Access to Representation Act and Promoting Immigrant Freedom and Family Unity



Chairs: Assemblymember Catalina Cruz and Assemblymember Jonathan Rivera

Panelists: Karin Anderson Ponzer, Neighborhoods Link; Tia, Columbia County Sanctuary Movement; Joaris, Queer Detainee Empowerment Project; Rosie Wang, Vera Institute of Justice

Abstract: Panelists discussed the critical need for legal services and representation for immigrant communities, particularly in New York. The speakers highlighted the Access to Representation Act (ARA) as an essential solution to existing injustices in the legal system. Panelists underscored the severe repercussions of deportation proceedings, with immigration law being a civil matter offering fewer protections than criminal law. AM Cruz argued for the implementation of the ARA, which would guarantee legal counsel access to individuals facing deportation regardless of their financial status. Personal testimonies painted a picture of the struggles immigrants face, such as difficulties in finding affordable, quality legal representation, and experiences of detention, discrimination, and lack of language and legal support. Panelists also stressed the complex and dynamic nature of immigration law, with immigrants facing numerous hurdles such as interviews, documentation requirements, and discretionary judgment. Legal representation significantly improves success rates in immigration cases. Opposition to ARA stems from budget concerns and skepticism towards providing services to immigrants. But panelists highlighted the economic contributions of immigrants.

For next steps, panelists recommended advocating for the passing and implementation of the Access to Representation Act to ensure legal representation for all individuals facing deportation, irrespective of their financial status; lobbying for increased funding and resources dedicated to providing affordable legal services to immigrants; developing programs to better inform

immigrants about their legal rights and the immigration process, mitigating the risk of scams and exploitation; addressing language and cultural barriers through interpreter services and cultural competency training for legal service providers; encouraging community outreach, advocacy, and storytelling to change public perception and garner support for immigrants' rights; implementing protections for immigrants against discrimination and abuse, with a particular focus on LGBTQ+ individuals and other marginalized communities; advocating for supportive infrastructure throughout the immigration process to assist immigrants in navigating legal challenges and documentation requirements.

CONCLUSION

The SOMOS 2023 Spring conference in Albany gathered hundreds of people who attended a wide variety of panels spanning subject matters of intense interest and mobilization for Hispanics in the state of New York. The nearly thirty panels touched upon issues of general welfare, public safety and violence prevention, immigration, housing, education, technology, inter-Latino diversity, economic opportunity and wealth creation. These panels, which included more than one hundred speakers, represent some of the leading issues advocated for by Latino activists, researched on by scholars, and attended to by elected officials and other government officials. These issues reflect the body of politically relevant matters requiring the attention of the New York State Legislature. Some of the panels were simply convened to provide information and raise awareness of different problems affecting Hispanic New Yorkers. Other panels sought not simply to inform, but to mobilize and organize into legislative action in order to translate recommended solutions into public policies that may attend to the problems identified. These panels convened at this conference represent a salient aspect of the involvement of Latinos in the public decision-making process in the state.

This report was made possible with the indispensable assistance of student-scholars and the staff of Fordham University (Center for Community Engaged Learning) and the staff of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies (Hunter College-CUNY).