

# Bridging the Cultural Divide:



Building a Continuum of Support Services for Latino Families



The Committee for Hispanic  
Children and Families, Inc.

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May 2007

## Acknowledgements



The completion of this report was made possible through the contributions of many individuals and organizations. The Committee for Hispanic Children and Families, Inc. (CHCF) would like to first thank the Hispanic Federation and Ms. Gladys Carrion, former Senior Vice President for Community Investment at United Way of New York City for their generous support of this initiative.

CHCF is also thankful to Mr. Jackson Chin, Esq., at the Puerto Rican Legal Defense Fund, for his assistance in developing our Freedom of Information requests to the Administration for Children Services (ACS).

CHCF would also like to acknowledge the continuous support of the members of the Coalition for Latino Families (CLF), which is comprised of a diverse group of 49 organizations and individuals. We are grateful for their commitment to preserving and strengthening Latino families by advocating for culturally competent family support services.

CHCF is particularly grateful to its staff and interns, including Ms. Brook Padilla for her assistance with editing, and especially Ms. Claudia Urey and Ms. Johanna Rotta, who made significant contributions to the development of this report. In addition, the staff at the Administration for Children Services, Office of Research and Evaluation, for promptly providing the up-to-date data needed to complete this report.

Finally, we would like to thank all the organizations that responded to our survey. It is our sincerest hope that this report will raise awareness about the needs of Latino families and motivate policy-makers to increase support to the many organizations serving our families.

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## About The Committee for Hispanic Children and Families, Inc.

Founded in 1982, The Committee for Hispanic Children and Families, Inc. (CHCF) is dedicated to improving the quality of life for Latino children and their families. Believing that the most effective way to serve Latino families is to build upon their strengths and foster self-sufficiency, CHCF has developed a range of direct services, training, community education and advocacy initiatives to address the needs of Latino children and families. Each year, CHCF provides direct services to over 16,000 children and families. Among its long list of accomplishments, CHCF played an instrumental role in the passage of Kinship Foster Care legislation in New York State which facilitates foster care placement among relatives in order to promote familial and cultural continuity and minimize family destabilization. CHCF created the first and only Latino foster care agency in New York City, the Coalition for Hispanic Family Services, and launched the first National Council of Latino Executives, an advocacy group focused on child welfare issues.

For 25 years, CHCF has been a leading organization, active in the local, state and national policy arenas concerning child welfare and the well-being of Latino families. As an organization grounded in its direct services and advocacy efforts, CHCF has not only gained expertise in identifying the strengths and needs of the Latino community but has developed culturally competent programs that respond to those needs, specifically in the areas of child care, youth development, and family health education.

In response to the affordable child care crisis, CHCF pioneered entrepreneurial programs to train Latinas to become licensed child care providers and has developed numerous youth programs to reduce Latino high school drop-out rates, youth violence, and to educate teens about pregnancy and HIV/AIDS prevention.

In the area of child welfare, CHCF has released several major reports. In 1999, CHCF partnered with the Coalition for Asian American Children and Families and released *Opening the Door*, a report that examined cultural competency practices among preventive service agencies in New York City. In 2004, CHCF issued a policy report entitled *Creating a Latino Child Welfare Agenda: A Strategic Framework for Change*, which provided cutting edge analysis and recommendations for



reforming the child welfare system. Most recently, CHCF collaborated with Fordham University and produced *Voices of Preventive Services: Perspective of Clients and Workers*, a report based on the experience of Latino families receiving preventive services in New York City.

In 2006, to address the failings of the child welfare system, CHCF created the Coalition for Latino Families (CLF) with support from the Hispanic Federation and the United Way of New York City. In just a few months, CLF issued policy recommendations and organized the first Summit on Latino Families in New York City. During the Summit, Commissioner John B. Mattingly from the Administration for Children Services (ACS) met with more than 100 human service providers, families, academics, and policy-makers to outline his plan for reform and to address participants' questions and concerns.

The Coalition for Latino Families now includes 49 members, and 44 organizations that have endorsed its policy recommendations, including organizations such as the NYC Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers, the National Council of La Raza and the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies. Through these efforts and many more, CHCF works to improve the quality of life for Latino children and families, each and every day.

# Bridging the Cultural Divide: Building a Continuum of Support Services for Latino Families

## Executive Summary

Latinos account for 14.5% of the United States population and have become an integral part of this country's identity contributing to the economic, cultural and social capital of this nation. Moreover, Latinos are a relatively young population whose full potential is yet to unfold. According to the U.S. Census 2005 American Community Survey, the median age for Latinos is 27.2 years, more than 10 years younger than whites (40.4). Latino children and youth (under age 20) account for 37% of the total U.S. Latino population and 20% of all youth in the U.S. Their presence in the labor force is predicted to account for 25.8 million workers by 2014. Undoubtedly, Latinos will continue to contribute to the economic prosperity and social well being of our nation.

In New York City, Latinos represent 28% of the population, accounting for 26% of the labor force, and in 2007, represent an estimated \$71 billion in purchasing power for the New York metropolitan area. Latino families are resilient, resourceful, and the bedrock of Latino culture and communities. Overall, Latino families continue to remain strong in large part due to Latino cultural norms which include extended family networks, a tradition of mutual aid and economic support among family members.

Unfortunately, in some cases their strong bonds are weakened by stressors that undermine the family's resiliency and strength. For example, Latino children account for 39% of all children living in poverty and Latino families account for 35% of homeless families.

Under the weight of poverty and homelessness, even the most resilient families can encounter difficulties. In New York City, Latino children account for 39% of substantiated child abuse and neglect cases and 35.6% of children entering foster care. Given the formidable obstacles many Latino families face, developing a culturally and linguistically competent family support system is critical to ensuring the safety and well-being of Latino children.

Despite these alarming trends, there are only four Latino community-based organizations funded by ACS to provide services to Latino families throughout New York City. However, a recent survey conducted by CHCF, in conjunction with Community Impact Consulting, indicates that at least 30 additional Latino organizations provide some form of preventive services without any



ACS funding whatsoever. Despite the urgent need faced by Latino families, at best, ACS has taken limited steps to build a continuum of culturally and linguistically competent services to address their needs.

This report critically examines the needs of Latino families, the current gaps in the continuum of child welfare services and glaring funding inequities. CHCF offers six cornerstone recommendations to address these urgent problems, which are briefly summarized below:

1. Increase preventive service funding to organizations providing culturally and linguistically competent family support services.
2. Provide funding and incentives to increase the pipeline of bilingual social workers and case workers.
3. Develop cultural competency standards for child welfare services and provide capacity building assistance to help agencies achieve these standards.
4. Develop a citywide, bilingual child abuse prevention campaign to raise awareness and promptly connect families to needed services.
5. Invest in creating a more comprehensive continuum of services addressing families with special needs.
6. Strengthen community input in the design and delivery of family support services.

By bringing this crucial information to light and offering a blueprint for action, it is our sincerest hope that this report will prompt government officials, policy-makers and advocates to work together to build a continuum of culturally competent services for all families.



Elba Montalvo,  
CHCF Executive Director

## The Strengths and Contributions of Latino Families

Latinos account for 14.5% of the United States population and have become an integral part of this country's identity contributing to the economic, cultural and social capital of this nation.<sup>1</sup> In fact, Latinos are the fastest growing population in the United States representing 40% of U.S. population growth between 1990 and 2000. The U.S. Census Bureau projects that by the year 2050, Latinos will account for 25% of the U.S. population. Latino contributions to the economic prosperity of this nation are also impressive. Since 1997, Latino-owned companies grew 82%, making them among the fastest growing business sector in the country.<sup>2</sup> Presently, Latino participation in the labor force is high, representing one in four entrants into the labor force.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the Latino unemployment rate fell to a historical low of 5.2% in the second quarter of 2006.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, Latino purchasing power has climbed to \$700 billion and is projected to reach \$1 trillion by 2010.<sup>5</sup> Latinos currently represent one in nine Americans and one in five children entering schools, indicating that the Latino community will play a vital role in the future development of the nation's economic and social sectors.<sup>6</sup>

Latinos' connection to family remains strong, as demonstrated by the remittances Latinos send primarily to family members in their countries of origin. In 2005 alone, \$53.6 billion in remittances were sent to Latin America and the Caribbean, a 17% increase from the prior year, making the region the largest remittance market in the world.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the amount of remittances to the region tends to be more than 10 times greater than the amount of U.S. foreign aid sent to these

countries.<sup>8</sup> Still, with all the remittances sent from the U.S., Latin American immigrants that remain in the country spend approximately 90% of their income on U.S. based local economies.<sup>9</sup>

In New York City alone, Latinos represent 28%<sup>10</sup> of the population and have made extraordinary contributions to the City's overall success accounting for 26% of the labor force<sup>11</sup> and representing an estimated \$71 billion in purchasing power in 2007 alone for the metropolitan area of New York.<sup>12</sup>

Latinos are a relatively young population whose full potential is yet to unfold. According to the U.S. Census 2005 American Community Survey, the median age for Latinos is 27.2 years, more than 13 years younger than whites (40.4). Latino children and youth (under age 20) account for 37% of the total U.S. Latino population and 20% of all youth in the U.S.<sup>13</sup> Their presence in the labor force is predicted to account for 25.8 million workers by 2014.<sup>14</sup>

Latino birth rates are higher than any other racial/ethnic group, accounting for 22% of total U.S. births in 2003, and the rate is expected to continue to rise. For example, from 1993-2003, Latino births increased by 39%, while the birthrates declined for whites from 62% to 57%, and dropped from 16% to 14% for African Americans. The increase of young Latino families will significantly impact participation rates in the labor force and demands within the education system and the social service sector.

Furthermore, research has indicated that Latino youth will be increasingly called

upon to enter professions in health, social services, and other industries, especially as the U.S. population continues to age.<sup>16</sup>

Latino families represent a rich body of cultural traditions and values that bind families and communities together. Latino cultural values place significant emphasis on “communalism, collective consciousness, and responsibility to extended family.”<sup>17</sup> Latino families are resilient, resourceful and the bedrock of Latino culture. Families play a critical role in fostering the well-being of Latino children and the Latino community

at large. Their social networks lend the support needed to identify job opportunities and to help navigate health, education, and public service systems and institutions critical to the well-being of families.

Overall, Latino families continue to remain strong in large part due to Latino cultural norms which include the extended family network, a tradition of mutual aid and economic support among family members. Unfortunately, their strong bonds are sometimes weakened by stressors that undermine their resiliency and strength.

## Economic and Social Stressors Faced by Latino Families

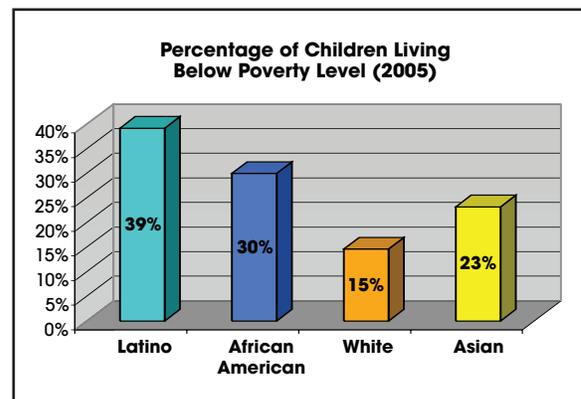
Despite their many contributions, Latino families are still disproportionately poor, experience high rates of homelessness and report poorer health and mental health outcomes. Latinos are among the poorest New Yorkers with 43% of Latino households reporting incomes of less than \$25,000, as compared to only 23% of white households and 37% of African American households.<sup>18</sup>

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that Latino families encounter obstacles to ensuring healthy and safe homes for their families. In September, 2006, under the auspices of Mayor Bloomberg, the Commission for Economic Opportunity (CEO) issued a report which indicated that over 1.5 million New Yorkers are living below the poverty line<sup>19</sup> and Latinos comprised a staggering 29% of poor residents, close to three times the rate of whites (11%).<sup>20</sup> Perhaps more disturbing is the number of Latino children living in poverty.

Latino children are poorer than any other group in New York City, accounting for

39% of children living in poverty, as compared to 15% of white children and 30% of African American children.<sup>21</sup>

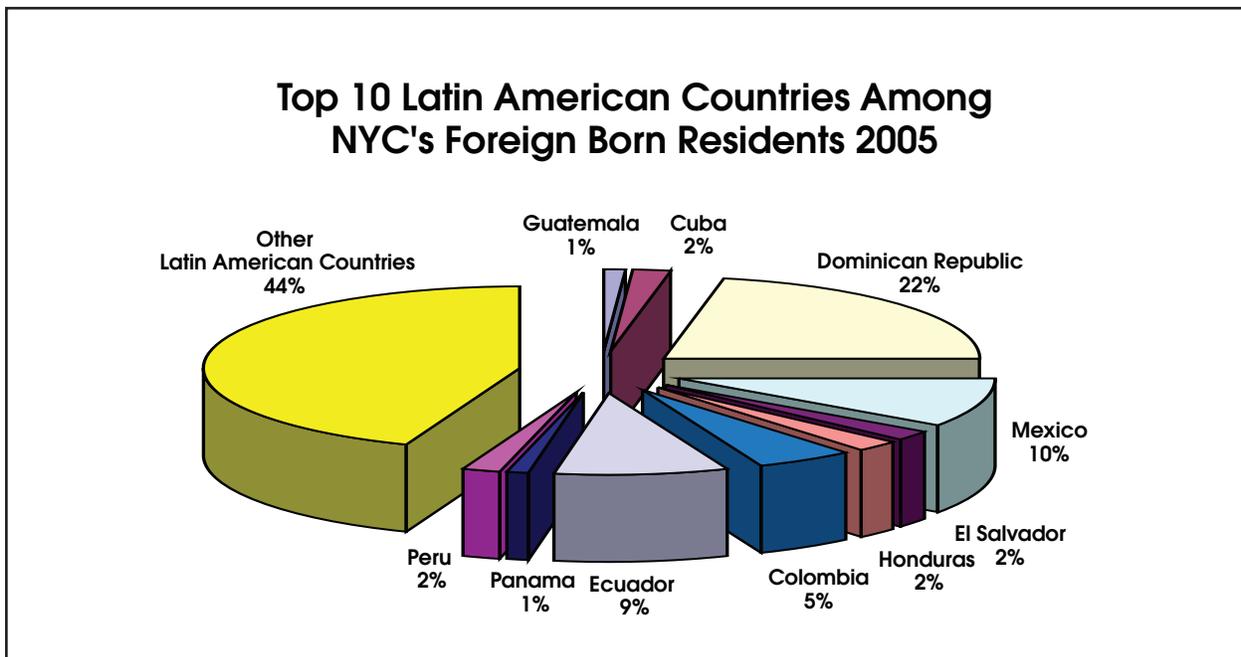
Moreover, the number of Latino families experiencing poverty is actually much greater than the above statistics indicate. According to the National Center for Children in Poverty at Columbia University, on average, families need an income of about twice the federal poverty level to make ends meet.<sup>22</sup> Latino families, in particular immigrant families, are often unaware or fearful



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2005 American Community Survey

of securing public benefits to which they are eligible. Children born in the U.S. to undocumented parents are automatically eligible for public assistance; however, studies indicate they are less likely to receive income assistance or food stamps as compared to the children of native born parents.<sup>23</sup> Much of this is due to lack of information and knowledge about eligibility requirements, fear of deportation, and other access barriers. Connecting poor families to public benefits is a simple remedy that can help ease some of the stressors associated with poverty.

population is foreign born and 52.5% of those foreign born emigrated from Latin American countries.<sup>24</sup> For Latino immigrant families, the process of adapting to a new environment is often fraught with challenges. In learning to navigate a new country with different norms and cultural practices, Latinos have come to rely on safe and trusted Latino organizations to help them make the transition. The support services offered through community based organizations are important to the Latino community and lend the necessary resources



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2005 American Community Survey

Unfortunately, poverty is not the only prevalent stressor among Latinos families. Latino families face major challenges that affect their lives, including language barriers, unemployment, proper legal documentation, lack of quality education and access to health insurance and health care services.

These stressors vary among Latino families and are especially challenging for immigrant families. In New York City, 36.6% of the

to help build stronger families. Persistent poverty makes Latinos families especially vulnerable to becoming homeless. Presently, Latino families account for 35% of homeless families in New York City's family shelter system.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, more than 20% of Latino New Yorkers are uninsured leaving families disconnected from preventive and primary health care services that ultimately can prevent chronic and life-threatening health conditions.

According to the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, 38% of adults in Latino households with incomes of less than \$25,000 reported being in poor to fair health, compared to 28% of whites and 25% of African Americans.<sup>26</sup> Latinos are at high risk of being diagnosed with diabetes, asthma and obesity, among other health problems. One third of Latino elementary school children (grades K-5) are obese, leaving them prone to future health problems such as diabetes.<sup>27</sup> In 2003, Latino children also accounted for 38% of new lead poisoning cases among New York City's children.<sup>28</sup> Latinos account for 35% of HIV infected children and 30.2% of HIV infected youth between the ages of 13-19.<sup>29</sup>

Additionally, Latinas have the highest teen pregnancy rate among any group; in 2005, 12% of live births in NYC were to Latina teenagers compared to 10% for African

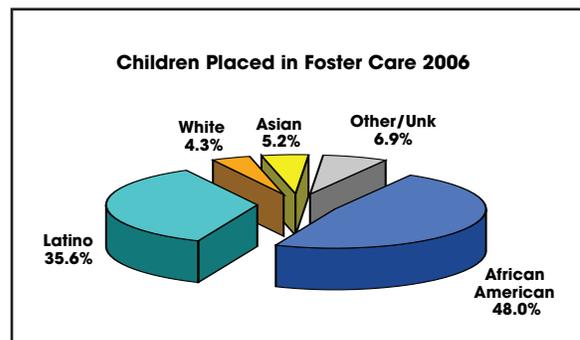
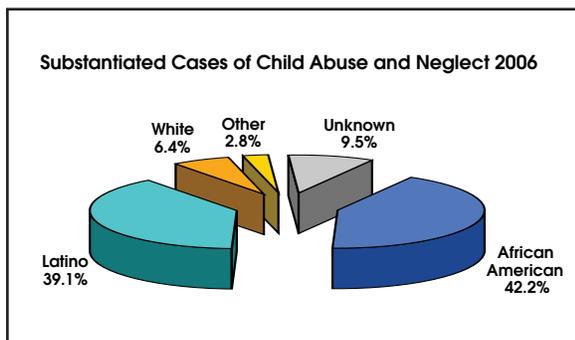
American teens and 2% for white teens.<sup>30</sup> And, an alarming 7.2% of Latinas received late or no prenatal care, a factor that can lead to infant mortality or delivery of low birth-weight babies with serious health complications.<sup>31</sup> In fact, Latinos account for 30% of all infant mortality cases in New York City.<sup>32</sup>

In the area of mental health, an alarming 16% of adult Latinos reported experiencing stress, depression and/or emotional distress for at least 14 days in a one month period.<sup>33</sup> Latino children represented even higher rates of distress, accounting for 41.4% of children receiving mental health services.<sup>34</sup>

**Yet despite these circumstances, the City of New York has not invested sufficient resources or implemented the urgent reforms required to assist Latino families in need, and the price paid by Latino children is unconscionable.**

## Latinos and the NYC Child Welfare System

Under the weight of poverty and homelessness, even the most resilient families can encounter difficulties. **In New York City, Latino children account for 39% of substantiated child abuse and neglect cases, and 35.6% of children entering foster care.**<sup>35</sup> Given the formidable obstacles many Latino families face, developing a culturally and linguistically competent family support system is critical to ensuring the safety and well-being of Latino children.



Source: NYC Administration for Children Services, 2007

In 2006, the NYC Administration for Children Services (ACS) received 96,051 suspected child abuse and neglect reports. Of these reports, 41,015 cases or 43% were found to be substantiated and 7,576 children were removed and placed in foster care, a 57.8% increase in placements from the prior year.<sup>36</sup>

Subsequent to the tragic death of Nixzmary Brown in January 2006, ACS witnessed a 31.6% increase in child abuse and neglect reports.<sup>37</sup> While the number of Latino children placed in foster care increased 7.4% between 2000 and 2005; in the subsequent one year period, the percentage of Latino children placed in foster care skyrocketed by 61.4%.<sup>38</sup>

Presently, ACS identifies 18 community districts as “high need” areas based on the number of children placed in foster care. **Close examination of the 18 high need districts clearly indicates that Latino families and communities are exceptionally vulnerable.** In 50% of the 18 high need districts, Latino children accounted for 37% or more of all foster care placements.

**Fifty percent of the high need districts are neighborhoods where Latinos represent more than half of the population. Moreover, a staggering 17 of the 18 high need districts are areas where Latinos account for more than half of all residents who are not proficient in English.**

Overview of Key Characteristics of the 18 “High Need” Community Districts								
CD	NYC Administration for Children Services High Need Community Districts 2005	Number of Placements 2005	% of Latino Children Placed in Foster Care	Substantiated Child Abuse & Neglect Cases	CD Total Population	CD Latino Population	% of Foreign Residents from Latin America	% of Spanish-Speakers* Among Residents Not Proficient in English
QN12	Jamaica/Hollis	270	14%	479	223602	13.7%	22.9%	62.5%
BX04	Highbridge/Concourse	226	42%	650	139563	58.4%	71.6%	90.9%
BX09	Parkchester/Soundview	205	47%	876	167859	55.2%	52.9%	88.1%
MN11	East Harlem	203	39%	607	117743	52.1%	68.5%	88.5%
MN10	Central Harlem	192	21%	606	107109	16.8%	40.0%	64.3%
BX05	Fordham/University Heights	187	51%	582	128313	61.6%	72.6%	93.0%
BX01	Mott Haven/Melrose	173	37%	714	82159	70.8%	85.5%	97.2%
BK05	East New York/Starrett City	164	26%	573	173198	37.7%	42.2%	76.7%
BX03	Morrisania/Crotona	162	37%	460	68574	52.9%	71.4%	94.1%
SI01	St. George/Stapleton	156	20%	416	162609	19.8%	28.5%	54.4%
BX07	Kingsbridge Heights/Bedford Park	151	39%	1054	141411	59.2%	58.2%	79.2%
BX06	Belmont/East Tremont	150	47%	493	75688	61.3%	69.0%	92.1%
BX12	Williamsbridge/Baychester	150	19%	504	149077	18.2%	9.7%	71.2%
BK03	Bedford Stuyvesant	148	23%	450	143867	18.1%	29.2%	77.4%
BK16	Brownsville	126	17%	390	85343	18.0%	23.1%	78.5%
QN14	Rockaway/Broad Channel	113	23%	325	106686	17.7%	28.6%	59.9%
BX02	Hunts Point/Longwood	112	52%	318	46828	75.8%	86.0%	98.1%
QN13	Queens Village	104	10%	306	196284	10.4%	11.9%	30.9%
	<b>Top 18 Total</b>	<b>2992</b>						
	<b>Total Citywide Placement</b>	<b>4800</b>						

\* Includes residents that are not proficient in English, speaking Spanish and/or indigenous languages spoken in Mexico, Latin America and other Spanish speaking countries in the Caribbean.

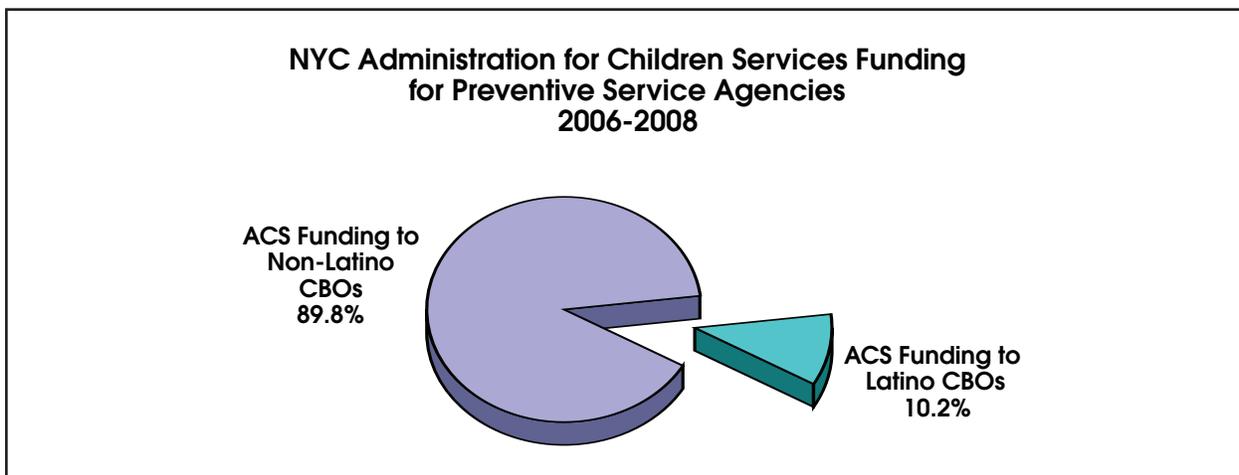
## The Critical Role of Latino Community Based Organizations

Typically, Latino families seeking family support services reach out to trusted organizations, especially Latino community based organizations (CBOs) with bilingual workers who are familiar with Latino cultural values, beliefs and practices, and are skilled at accessing and navigating Latino social support networks.

**Although ACS contracts with over seventy preventive services organizations, only four of these are Latino CBOs, representing less than 6% of all ACS contracted preventive service agencies.\*** Additionally, Queens does not have an ACS-funded Latino

**inadequate to meet the needs of the Latino community.** Accounting for only 10.2% of ACS preventive service funding, the capacity to expand services for Latino families is limited.

It is estimated that with the current level of ACS funding, the four Latino CBOs providing ACS contracted preventive services are able to reach approximately 10% of the Latino families in need, leaving many families without the benefit of receiving culturally and linguistically competent services.



Source: NYC Administration for Children Services

agency providing comprehensive preventive services although in 2006, Latino children accounted for 24.4% of the foster care placements in Queens.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, although Latinos account for 35.6% of children placed in foster care, ACS contracts with the only one Latino foster care agency in all of New York City. **Presently, the total funding allocated to the four Latino preventive service agencies is wholly**

CHCF believes that Latino families can also be served well by non-Latino organizations that provide culturally and linguistically appropriate services, however few organizations appear to have the current resources to meet this need. Since 2006, the overwhelming majority of ACS contracted agencies providing preventive services have been at or above full capacity resulting in few or no available slots to serve families in need.<sup>40</sup>

\* The four Latino CBOs contracted by ACS are: The Puerto Rican Family Institute, Alianza Dominicana, East Harlem Council for Community Improvement, and Dominican Women's Development Center.

Moreover, the U.S. Latino population growth rate continues to climb. In fact, the Latino population increased by 21.5% in just five years, from 2000 to 2005, and 20% of these Latinos are foreign born, suggesting that the need for Spanish language services will continue to be a foremost priority.<sup>41</sup> Against this backdrop, ACS must prepare to significantly expand efforts to build a continuum of culturally and linguistically competent services to serve these families.

While many Latino and non-Latino community based organizations outside of the ACS network provide quality services, at present it is uncertain how the City's administration is working with local CBOs to ensure families are promptly connected to these services when ACS contracted agencies are filled to capacity.

For decades, Latino community based organizations have played a vital role in helping Latino families by providing cultur-

ally competent services when such services were otherwise unavailable. In fact, Latino community based organizations are often the first and sometimes the only recourse for Latino families.

Because of their Latino specific mission, Latino community based organizations are more likely to have:

1. Higher levels of bilingual staff.
2. Extensive knowledge of Latino cultural values and norms.
3. Experience integrating cultural values and practices into programming.
4. A commitment to delivering culturally competent services enabling them to garner and maintain the trust of Latino community members.
5. Knowledge and access to informal, culturally based social networks within Latino communities that can support families.

## Why Cultural and Linguistic Competency Matters

The lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate services has been a concern for many child welfare advocates. Keeping children safe should be a top priority for New

York City and building a continuum of culturally and linguistically appropriate services should be considered a critically important component of any child welfare strategy.

“Culture and ethnicity may influence how individuals cope with problems and interact with each other. To fully understand and appreciate these differences, workers must be familiar with the varying cultural traditions and norms. Clients' cultural backgrounds may affect their help-seeking behaviors as well. The ways in which social services are planned and implemented need to be culturally sensitive to be effective.”

National Association of Social Workers  
Standards for Cultural Competence

To achieve a continuum of culturally competent services, all staff, from senior administrators to frontline workers must commit to learning about the dynamics of culture and their importance in service delivery.

Culture is a pattern of human behavior encompassing values, beliefs, customs, practices, languages, methods of communicating and interacting within and across cultural groups that permeates all aspects of daily life.<sup>42</sup>

To be effective, child welfare workers must first seek to understand how culture influences perceptions and behaviors related to family life. Service providers must become knowledgeable about culturally based attitudes and beliefs related to parenting, discipline, care and nurturance, childhood education, family communication, problem solving, decision making and help-seeking behaviors.

Secondly, child welfare workers must be able to weave this cultural knowledge into the development of sound interventions and service strategies that draw upon familial and cultural strengths. Thirdly, child welfare workers must become adept at engaging informal support systems upon which families rely, such as extended family members, indigenous or spiritual healers, and other cultural or community gatekeepers.

Thus, cultural competency includes the capacity to understand and incorporate cultural beliefs, practices, and values in service delivery in a manner that is not only respectful to the cultural group, but draws upon cultural strengths and resources.

Culturally competent practices enable service providers to:

1. Obtain more specific and complete information upon which to form an assessment.
2. Develop a service plan that is more likely to be adhered to by the family or client system.
3. Enhance trust and overall communication with the family, factors which can facilitate family engagement and positively impact case outcomes.<sup>43</sup>

Similarly, a review of social welfare literature indicates that the provision of linguistically accessible services is critical to the process of accurate assessment, counseling and effective therapeutic practices.<sup>44</sup> This is especially important in New York City, where more than one million Latino New Yorkers report speaking English “less than very well.”<sup>45</sup>

**A review of ACS staffing reports indicates there are approximately only 239 bilingual (Spanish/English) case planners, social workers and case aides employed by ACS contracted preventive services agencies<sup>46</sup> in a workforce of over 1,140 individuals.<sup>47</sup>**

The lack of bilingual social workers has reached crisis proportions in New York City and throughout the nation. In fact, **according to the New York City Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers, (NASW) “the shortage of bilingual, bicultural, and culturally competent social workers to serve Hispanic communities in the United States is a national crisis that requires concerted action by the social work profession to turn the crisis around.”<sup>48</sup>**

The delay or lack of Spanish language services can have severe consequences for Latino families ranging from lack of understanding and input into the preventive services plan to an adverse case disposition such as foster care placement.<sup>49</sup> As such, failure to provide Spanish language services constitutes a form of discrimination.

These same concerns led to litigation in Chicago, Illinois where a lawsuit brought by a group of community advocates and parents in 1977 generated the Burgos Consent Decree. During this time, Spanish-speaking children and their families were being denied services in their primary language.<sup>50</sup> The decree ordered the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, and its vendors to provide child welfare services in Spanish to Latino clients whose primary language is Spanish. The Burgos Consent Decree also required children with Spanish-speaking parents to be placed with Spanish-speaking foster parents and individual or general written communications to Spanish-speaking clients be delivered in the Spanish language. Implementation of the Burgos Consent Decree has been helpful in ensuring the

delivery of linguistically appropriate services and has had a transformative impact upon Chicago's child welfare system.<sup>51</sup>

Access to linguistically accessible services is a federal mandate which cannot be disregarded. Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act prohibits discrimination by any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance on the grounds of race, color or national origin.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, Executive Order 13166 mandates that each federally funded agency examine "the services it provides and develop and implement a system by which persons with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) can meaningfully access those services."<sup>53</sup> Additionally, New York City's Equal Access to Human Services Act of 2003 (Local Law 73) states that "individuals should not face obstacles to receiving social services for which they may be eligible because they do not speak English."<sup>54</sup>

Despite the legal mandate for linguistically accessible services, enforcement of these laws is at best inconsistent, leaving many families facing significant barriers to obtaining culturally and linguistically appropriate services.

"If Spanish-language services are available but limited, such as having long waiting lists or distant locations, this may result in delays that could adversely affect case disposition and constitutes discrimination."

Layla Suleiman, Ph.D.  
DePaul University  
Former Court Monitor for the Burgos Consent Decree

## The Value-Added Services Provided by Latino Organizations

In 2006, The Committee for Hispanic Children and Families, Inc. (CHCF), with the assistance of Community Impact Consulting (CIC), designed and conducted a survey to learn more about the needs of Latino families and the family support services offered by community based organizations (CBOs). In all, 118 CBOs received the survey and 66 agencies responded including 54 agencies that identified as Latino CBOs and 12 non-Latino agencies. For purposes of the survey, a Latino organization was defined as an agency with a mission statement that specifically included serving Latinos and whose client or constituency base was 51% Latino or higher.

The survey sought to identify the range of family support services provided by participating agencies, modalities utilized for delivering culturally and linguistically competent services, capacity building barriers encountered and perceptions about the unmet needs of Latino families and children.

Another objective of the survey was to identify those organizations currently providing culturally and linguistically appropriate preventive services but not funded by ACS. According to ACS, child abuse and neglect prevention services include *“family or individual counseling, parenting classes, substance abuse treatment, domestic violence intervention, home care, support for pregnant and parenting teens, and other services.”*<sup>55</sup>

Utilizing the aforementioned definition and based on CHCF’s research findings, **many existing Latino community based organizations are providing preventive services but do not receive any ACS funding whatsoever. In fact, of the 49 non-ACS-**

**funded Latino organizations participating in the survey, 63% (30 Latino organizations) reported providing culturally competent, preventive services of some kind.**

The survey also revealed the urgent need for culturally competent and linguistically accessible preventive services:

- 73% of the 66 agencies surveyed reported serving a majority Latino population with a client base that is over 60% predominantly Spanish-speaking.
- 38% of participating nonprofit agencies identified child abuse/neglect as one of the top 10 most important issues facing Latino families.

Moreover, **survey findings suggest that when compared to non-Latino agencies, Latino community based organizations are more likely to offer culturally competent services.** Among Latino organizations (N=54), 87% reported incorporating at least 5 out of the 9 culturally competent practices specified above as compared to 66.6% of non-Latino CBOs.

Understanding the barriers Latino families face in accessing services is an important element in building a continuum of culturally competent family support services. To gain a better understanding of the experience of service providers serving Latino families, CHCF also conducted a focus group with ACS contracted and non-contracted family support service providers in New York City. In all, nine service providers representing seven agencies (only one of seven agencies identified as a Latino CBO) from throughout the City participated. **The majority of the focus group participants stated that more**

**Cultural Competency Indicators Used to Identify  
Agencies Providing Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services**

<b>Cultural Competency Indicators</b>	<b>Nonprofits Identifying as Latino Organizations N=54</b>	<b>Non-Latino Nonprofit Organizations N=12</b>
Provide informational materials in Spanish	<b>98%</b>	<b>67%</b>
Provide bilingual or multilingual services	<b>91%</b>	<b>67%</b>
Provide culturally responsive programs	<b>89%</b>	<b>67%</b>
Incorporate Latino foods, music, culture, and arts into programming	<b>78%</b>	<b>50%</b>
Utilize cultural gatekeepers and indigenous leaders in the planning, delivery, and evaluation of services	<b>50%</b>	<b>42%</b>
Recruit, hire and train community residents as peer leaders, peer advocates and staff members	<b>61%</b>	<b>42%</b>
Provide advocacy, translation and accompaniment to appointments for non-English speaking clients	<b>67%</b>	<b>50%</b>
Conduct outreach in the Latino community	<b>78%</b>	<b>75%</b>
Provide cultural competency training for staff members	<b>41%</b>	<b>33%</b>

**than 50% of the families served by their agencies were Latinos.**

When asked about the services “most requested”, focus group participants reported Latino families needed assistance with housing, immigration, bilingual mental health services, access to public benefits, and health care. Furthermore, service providers commented that Latino families were in need of culturally and linguistically competent services, explaining that improper and disempowering practices such as, “children translating for parents” continue to be an issue.

Undoubtedly, the lack of bilingual/bicultural case workers has been a growing concern in light of the increased number of Latino families in the child welfare system. In 2006, the New York City Council allocated \$4.2 million to ACS in order to reduce caseloads for social workers from 15:1 to a lower ratio of 12:1.<sup>56</sup> Subsequently, most agencies have been able to hire additional staff to reduce their caseloads. However, agencies serving predominantly non-English speaking families have faced barriers in hiring bilingual/bicultural staff.

## Building Stronger Partnerships with Latino CBOs: A Key Cultural Competency Strategy

As mentioned earlier, only four Latino community based organizations are funded by ACS to provide preventive services, even though Latino children account for 39% of substantiated child abuse and neglect cases. **Although the ACS preventive services budget increased 59% between 2005 and 2007 from \$118.5 million to \$187.9 million,<sup>57</sup> no additional Latino CBOs have been contracted to help serve the increased number of Latino families in the child welfare system. Finally, the minimal funding increases received by the four Latino CBOs amounted to little more than an adjustment for inflation.**

In fact, in 2006, Latino CBOs received only 10.2% of ACS preventive service dollars for a three year contract period ending in 2008. This suggests that ACS does not have immediate plans to address the urgent need to expand the continuum of culturally competent services needed by Latino families. This defies logic given the high number of substantiated child abuse and neglect cases among Latino children and that leading organizations such as the National Association for Social Workers have called for urgent reforms in this area.

“ACS needs to assure that its staff, and contract agency staff, adequately reflects the population they serve. They should have sufficient capacity to communicate effectively with families whose primary language is not English, and that staff at all levels are trained in culturally-competent methods of service delivery. The diverse cultural and language needs of families must also be considered in the provision of contract agency support services.”

National Association for Social Workers  
New York City Chapter

## Recommendations

“I am committed to building a workforce from top to bottom that is as culturally competent as the communities it serves. What we will need is people’s help.”

ACS Commissioner John B. Mattingly  
CHCF Summit on Latino Families  
May 28, 2006

Building on the promise made by ACS Commissioner John B. Mattingly, CHCF proposes the following recommendations that,

if implemented, will dramatically improve New York City’s ability to provide culturally competent services to families in need.

## **1. Increase Preventive Services Funding to CBOs Providing Culturally and Linguistically Competent Family Support Services**

Latino children accounted for 39% of substantiated child abuse and neglect reports in 2006 yet only four of the seventy organizations receiving ACS preventive services funding are Latino community based organizations with substantial expertise in providing culturally competent services. In fact, in 2006 Latino CBOs received only 10.2% of over \$180 million dollars available for preventive services enabling Latino CBOs to serve only an estimated 1,000 families in total. This is especially disconcerting given that 16,019 substantiated child abuse and neglect cases occurred among Latino children in that same year.

**CHCF's survey findings clearly indicate that there are at least 30 Latino community based organizations providing some form of culturally competent, preventive services for Latino families, without the benefit of any ACS funding whatsoever.** Given the expected increase in NYC's Latino population within the next decade and the dire need for culturally and linguistically competent services, it is imperative that ACS expand funding to Latino community based organizations providing preventive services as one of several strategies aimed at building a culturally competent continuum of services.

At a time when **New York City is benefiting from a surplus of over \$4.4 billion dollars,**<sup>58</sup> allocating additional funding to expand culturally competent family support services should be considered a priority. Latino CBOs spend on average between \$21,500 and \$22,000 to provide preventive services to a family referred by ACS.<sup>59</sup> Allocating a minimum of \$10 million in additional funding will enable culturally competent services to

be offered to an additional 450 families and **represents little more than 6% of ACS preventive services' budget.**

Additional preventive services funding should be directed to high need community districts and other underserved areas, especially in areas such as Queens, where Latino children account for 24.4% of foster care placements.

## **2. Provide Funding and Incentives to Increase the Pipeline of Bilingual Social Workers and Case Workers**

As noted by the National Association of Social Workers, the shortage of bilingual, social workers to serve Hispanic communities in the United States is a national crisis. The need to address this crisis is particularly urgent in New York City where there are more than one million limited English proficient residents. In a workforce of more than 1,100 serving over 30,000 families there are approximately only 239 bilingual workers. ACS should take immediate measures to increase its bilingual workforce through aggressive recruitment and incentive programs.

Additionally, ACS should develop a five-year pilot project in cooperation with local graduate schools of social work in order to develop and test the efficacy of various strategies aimed at increasing the bilingual child welfare workforce over the next decade. Moreover, further support should be provided to the ongoing efforts of groups such as the Latino Social Work Task Force, spearheaded by the Puerto Rican Family Institute and NASW, who work to increase the bilingual service workforce.

Efforts to recruit and retain qualified bilingual professionals could include various incentive programs such as BSW and MSW level scholarships, college tuition assistance, student loan repayment and

forgiveness programs, sign-on bonuses, and salary differentials that recognize language competency as a skill involving extra work and time in serving families with limited English proficiency (e.g. ongoing translation).

### **3. Develop Culturally Competent Standards for Child Welfare Services and Provide Capacity Building Assistance to Help ACS Funded Agencies Achieve These Standards**

While CHCF recognizes the vital role that Latino CBOs play in serving Latino families, CHCF also believes that all service providers must strive to achieve cultural competency. Drawing upon the example set by the health care field,<sup>60</sup> ACS should work with leaders and experts in the field of cultural competency to develop *Cultural Competency Standards for Child Welfare Services* in order to assist all service providers to better serve families and children of diverse cultural backgrounds.

Culturally competent standards and benchmarks should be incorporated in all aspects of program design and service provisions. These standards should be reflected in requests for proposals (RFPs), strategic planning and evaluation documents as well as in staff development plans, assessment tools such as the Evaluation and Quality Improvement Protocol (EQUIP) and in service plans, goals and deliverables.

However, establishing cultural competency baseline standards is not enough, ACS needs to commit funding to provide agencies with the necessary technical expertise and organizational development assistance needed to initiate and sustain their cultural competency efforts. While participation in James

Satterwhite Academy\* sponsored trainings are an important first step in learning about cultural competency, ACS should fund a large scale, capacity building initiative that provides onsite, multicultural training, team coaching and organizational development assistance to contracted agencies.

Through the identification of best practices, the articulation of specific standards and benchmarks, coupled with capacity building assistance, ACS can ensure that all contracted service providers have the resources and technical assistance needed to provide culturally competent services, an absolute necessity in a city where 36.6% of the population is foreign born.

### **4. Develop a City-wide, Bilingual Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Campaign to Increase Awareness and Facilitate Early Intervention**

Latino children account for almost 40% of substantiated child abuse and neglect cases, as well as more than one third of the children in foster care. It is imperative that ACS work closely with Latino leaders and services providers to design and implement a city-wide Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Campaign aimed at raising awareness and encouraging Latino families to promptly seek help.

Careful attention must be paid to developing messages that are consistent with Latino cultural norms and are not “deficit driven” but rather, focus on Latino family strengths. Latino CBOs should be heavily involved in helping to design, monitor and evaluate the Bilingual Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Campaign which should include MTA social marketing ads, Spanish language radio, television and print media

\* James Satterwhite Academy provides child welfare training to ACS staff.

among other communication channels. Cultural gatekeepers and icons play an important role in how messages are received by community members—therefore efforts must be made to have respected figures within the Latino community support and promote the prevention campaign.

Moreover, the prevention campaign will only be effective to the extent that services are available to meet clients' needs. Thus it is imperative that any prevention campaign be linked to a strategy to provide immediate, comprehensive, and culturally and linguistically appropriate family support services.

### **5. Continue to Invest in Preventive Services while Building a Stronger and Comprehensive Continuum which serves Families with Special Needs**

One size does not fit all. ACS needs to concentrate on building a comprehensive continuum of services to address the serious problems that work to undermine Latino families. ACS must focus on the myriad of socio-economic problems faced by families including hunger and homelessness, poor health and increased mental health difficulties. The Mayor's Office and ACS should spearhead meaningful, appropriately staffed and well funded interagency initiatives that can develop comprehensive strategies to alleviate these family stressors.

Furthermore, services must be tailored to meet the distinct needs of families, including undocumented/immigrant families, HIV/AIDS affected families, single parent families and households where domestic violence is present.

The role of cultural continuity in the lives of Latino children is central to their sense of identity, self-esteem and overall well-being.

Thus, it is critical to invest greater resources to build a culturally competent and comprehensive continuum of services including: prevention and early intervention programs, respite care, kinship foster care placement, after care programs, increased recruitment and training of Latino foster care parents and initiatives designed to promote the adoption of children by Latino families.

### **6. Strengthen Community Input in the Design and Delivery of Family Support Services**

ACS should create ongoing and effective mechanisms for securing community input on policy reforms and evaluating their implementation at the community level. An important step in this direction would be to partner with locally trusted CBOs to hold ongoing neighborhood based "town hall" meetings with built-in accountability measures. This effort would allow diverse groups of service providers, child welfare advocates and community members to meet with high ranking ACS and other city agency representatives to address gaps in services and the efficacy of policy reform efforts.

This is especially important given that ACS' efforts to establish neighborhood networks have met with limited success. Service providers and advocates have expressed disappointment at the lack of access to ACS officials with the authority to effect policy changes.<sup>61</sup> Additionally advocates report the networks are under-staffed and under-funded and therefore place additional responsibilities on already overburdened service providers. While we support the concept of neighborhood networks, they must be fully funded and appropriately staffed in order to be successful.

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