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## ***Skinny Cows and Hot Potatoes: Illinois Latinos in the wake of a \$13 billion state deficit***

By Sylvia Puente (June 25, 2010)

Martin Perez, head of the Latino Leadership Alliance of New Jersey, [recently channeled](#) his Puerto Rican grandmother's dicho to describe the distressing fiscal situation in The Garden State: "Estos son dias de la vaca flaca." ("These are the days of the skinny cow.")



Unfortunately, the proverbial "cow" is also pretty skinny here in the Land of Lincoln, where we currently find ourselves \$13 billion dollars in the red. That's approximately 50 percent of the state's General Revenue Fund (GRF) But that's not where the similarities between our two states end.

Illinois has seen dramatic growth in its Latino community - just like New Jersey. Latinos have accounted for over 90 percent of Illinois' population increase over the past decade. In a time where growth in other communities has stagnated, one-in-four Illinois children under the age of five is now Latino.

Illinois' investment in its Latino community has not kept pace with its growth - just as New Jersey hasn't kept up, either. Analysis from my organization, the Latino Policy Forum, recently revealed that in Fiscal Year 2009 (FY09), the State of Illinois awarded just 5.5 percent of all state grants to 120 contracts in Latino organizations. In FY10, that number had dropped to a paltry 85 contracts, who collectively received 13 percent less in actual dollar amounts. Pending budget cuts in FY11 stand to further slash vital grant funding.

Illinois' Latino-serving organizations are fighting to keep their doors

open - just as they are in New Jersey - given the dire fiscal situation in a state which has stopped paying its bills. More than \$10 million is owed to Chicago-area Latino organizations for work completed in FY10 - and that staggering number represents the tally from just 18 local organizations.

And, finally, the Illinois Latino community refuses to resign itself to this difficult situation - just as it did in New Jersey.

Recognizing that the collective's chorus is stronger than a single voice, the Latino Policy Forum and the Midwest Regional Office of MALDEF have convened a group of 46 local Latino-serving organizations. Dubbed the Illinois Latino Agenda, the coalition works to secure equitable resources and investment for the Latino community, while building their power, influence, and leadership of Latinos throughout the state.

The Agenda formally launched barely three months ago but, in this time of economic crisis, has filled its calendar with a whirlwind schedule of appointments with elected officials, including a bipartisan mix of meetings with Illinois House and Senate leaders in April, a sit-down with Illinois Governor Pat Quinn in May, and an audience with State Comptroller Dan Hynes in June. Each time, coalition representatives have delivered the same message: Illinois' future is increasingly intertwined with Latinos' future. It is critical that investment keep pace with growth.

At these meetings, Agenda members shared their on-the-ground perspective of the impact that proposed cuts could have on their organizations. Erie Neighborhood House looks at losing six early childhood education teachers, closing two classrooms, and cutting services to 20 percent of the at-risk children currently begin served in their programs. The Hispanic Housing Development Corporation's 4,600 apartments are home to 11,000 tenants - many of whom are struggling to make their rent payments on time. At El Valor, 1,000 individuals with disabilities will lose critically-needed services that foster their inclusion in society. And at Casa Central, the proposed state budget cuts could impact more than 5,000 individuals, with cuts to a slew of critical programs.

Somewhat ironically, these four organizations - Erie Neighborhood House, Hispanic Housing Development Corporation, El Valor and Casa Central - were recently included in [Hispanic Business' list of Top 25 Latino Nonprofits](#), based on expenditures. If these nonprofits - ostensibly representing the few that are doing well in economically devastating times - stand to be so dramatically impacted by pending budget cuts, what does the story look like in smaller, less financially stable organizations?

Balancing the Illinois budget has become a game of hot potato, and nobody wants to get stuck with the spud - especially in an election year. But the Illinois General Assembly recently placed the ball in Governor Quinn's court: he alone will decide which organizations receive funding - and which will suffer cuts - in next year's budget. Representatives from the 46 members of the Agenda wait anxiously for news of his decision.

The Agenda is moving forward and planning to hold candidates accountable to the Latino community in preparation for mid-term elections this November. In the meantime, we hope that while Governor Quinn mulls the difficult decision before him, he'll remember the voices of the Illinois Latino Agenda - and the millions of Illinois Latinos whose future hangs in the balance at the stroke of his pen.

***[Sylvia Puente](#)** is executive director of the [Latino Policy Forum](#), the only organization in the Chicago area that facilitates the involvement of Latinos at all levels of public decision-making. She has been recognized as one of the "100 Most Influential Hispanics in the U.S." by Hispanic Business magazine. She can be reached at [spuente@latinopolicyforum.org](mailto:spuente@latinopolicyforum.org).*

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