

Washington State

2006 Hispanic / Latino Legislative Day

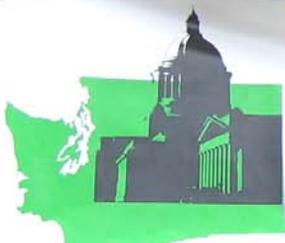
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Capitol hears calls to fund education, health, housing

Hispanics gather to press economic issues

BY DIONNE DESIANO

THE OLYMPIAN

Latino families gathered on the Capitol steps Wednesday for Hispanic Legislative Day, addressing challenges they're up against with health care, education and economic development.

Legislators need to address the economy, ensuring there are more jobs and more opportunities for small businesses, said Carlos Jimenez, president of the Group of Mexico and chairman of Hispanic Legislative Day.

About 100 people attended the rally, but buses carrying about 100 more participants broke down on the freeway, Jimenez said.

The group met to discuss issues, develop strategy and talk with legislators.

Health care and affordable housing were among the top priorities.

Nearly 100,000 children in Washington don't have health care insurance, Jimenez said. Many children are on the waiting list for Medicaid or are not enrolled because their families aren't aware of the opportunity for coverage, he said. Kids, the mentally ill and seniors are especially vulnerable, he said.

Legislators should set aside more money for community housing projects because it can be difficult for farm workers and other low-income families to find affordable housing, Jimenez said.

The group also supports House Bill 2581, which sets up a grant program to reach low-income and minority communities to increase parent and community involvement in student achievement. It is sponsored by Rep. Dave Upthegrove, D-Des Moines.

"These are my roots and these are my constituents," Rep. Mary Skinner, R-Yakima, said after addressing the group in Spanish. "They have needs that we need to address. I want my constituents to be literate, to have the opportunity to go to college and have a productive life, while participating in our culture."

Skinner said she comes from a Hispanic family and lives in the Yakima Valley, where much of the state's Hispanic population lives.

"We will progress and get our rights if we are united," Rep. Phyllis Kenney, D-Seattle, told the group. "You are here because you care about education, health care, affordable housing, human rights, and civil rights."

Schools need to hire more bilingual teachers, Kenney said. And districts need resources to help Hispanic students pass standardized tests. She and other lawmakers are working on programs to address their concerns, she said.

Legislators aren't doing enough for their Hispanic constituents, said Graciela Lopez, 27, of Yakima, who attended the rally.

"We are half a million strong and it is about time that we are heard," she said. "So many kids are without insurance and if they are not healthy, then they can't do well in school. It ends up being a cycle."

OLYMPIA — After a six-year hiatus, Hispanics from around the state gathered Tuesday at the Legislature, where they boned up on issues, got tips on lobbying and then buttonholed lawmakers on education, health care and economic development. About 200 people gathered on the Capitol steps under a morning drizzle to kick off the daylong campaign, chanting "*Si se puede*" — "We can do it." The largest contingent of about 90 came by bus from the Yakima Valley. Others came from Tacoma, Wenatchee, Tri-Cities, Bellingham, Vancouver and other parts of the state. House Speaker Frank Chopp, D-Seattle, and Rep. Phyllis Gutierrez-Kenney, D-Seattle, welcomed the crowd by encouraging them to develop a "strong Latino legislative agenda." "If we send a united message, we will get the things we need," said Gutierrez-Kenney, who grew up in Wapato as the daughter of farm workers.

Not speaking, but present for part of the rally, was Rep. Mary Skinner, R-Yakima, who is Hispanic. Several participants remembered that the last time they gathered in significant numbers for a Hispanic Legislative Day was 1999, when demands included an amnesty program. Since then, smaller groups have visited from time to time.

"There are so many issues we've been facing in our local communities that we just haven't had the time," explained Magdaleno Rose-Avila, the executive director of the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project in Seattle. "But we found that things are becoming so critical it was time to organize again."

Ricardo Garcia of Radio KDNA in Granger credited Mexican Consul Jorge Madrazo with reinvigorating Hispanic political action at the state level. The consul created, for example, Grupo Mexico, a statewide coalition of Hispanic groups, to increase their activism.

"He's been very visible," Garcia said of Madrazo. "He doesn't just sit in Seattle. He gets involved." Madrazo fired up the group later in a brief talk, saying immigrants respect the laws of every country but not at the expense of human rights.

"We don't want charity. Those of us without papers, we want a visa, a work permit, a passport. We don't want to swim across the river. We want to be stopped at checkpoints and be able to show our legal documents."

Carlos Olivares, executive director of the Yakima Valley Farm Workers Clinic, urged participants to lobby legislators for money for immigrant children's health care, which was substantially cut two years ago.

"It is a matter of justice," he said.

Earlier, Chopp, a powerful Democrat with the ear of Gov. Chris Gregoire, said an effort is under way to include something in the budget for immigrant health care through Medicare. But there's a wide gap between the approximately \$20 million sought by advocates and the \$5 million being talked about. More than 1,000 Yakima children are on a waiting list for state-funded health care.

Hispanics from the 14th legislative district stopped Rep. Jim Clements, R-Selah, on his way to the Capitol for a floor session, and asked him to support a host of measures, from more money for small business development to removing the 60 percent supermajority required for passage of voter-approved school bond levies.

Clements said he's with them on supporting small business, but not on dismantling the high standard for voter-approved levies. "I just can't support that," he said, explaining that when it comes to taxes, he believes there should be a higher hurdle.

Hector Franco, a Yakima business consultant, said the state should buy more goods and services from Hispanic businesses.

"I'm with you on that," said Clements.

Clements surprised some by saying the state is pouring too much money into the Washington Assessment of Student Learning standardized test. Gregoire's budget calls for about \$40 million on summer school classes for those who fail this spring.

"I'll be very blunt. Don't spend another dime on the WASL," Clements said. Many Hispanic groups are concerned the test is culturally insensitive and dooms them to lower scores, worsening an already high dropout rate.

Carlos Diaz, director of the Washington State Migrant Council, encouraged Skinner, also on her way to the House floor, to support Gregoire's call for a new agency on early childhood education. "We really need to bring that all under one umbrella," Diaz said. Skinner was noncommittal, but praised the group for making its presence felt. "You have to get involved politically or you're not at the table," she said.

Jose Guzman of Tieton said, after talking to Clements and Skinner, that he made a difference.

"It seems like they are interested in our issues," Guzman said.

Franco, who wants to see more Hispanics appointed to high-level jobs in state agencies that deal with economic development, took more of a wait-and-see attitude.

"It's a start," he said.

Hispanics rally to promote unity

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By Chris Mulick, Herald Olympia bureau

OLYMPIA -- Chants of "Si, se puede" -- "yes we can" -- went up on the Capitol steps Wednesday from about 150 Hispanics gathering to bring their call for better education, health care and business opportunities to state government. As many as 300 students, farmworkers, teachers, business professionals and others were expected for lobby day activities, the first event of its kind in recent memory.

"We need to do this on a more regular basis," Homero Tamez, director of the Tri-Cities Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, said while the crowd stood in a light drizzle to hear speakers. "They don't have a voice in Olympia. We're going to use today as a rally point."

Organizers have developed a five-point agenda they're promoting to legislators.

They want state-funded health care programs for children and the working poor expanded and are pushing for new educational programs and more bilingual teachers to help high school students meet graduation requirements.

Lobby day organizers also are calling for more employment and health protections as well as improved housing for farm workers. They want to discourage state and local governments from enforcing federal immigration laws, leaving that to federal agents.

Further, they are pressing for more services provided to Hispanic businesses through bilingual agents, more appointments to state boards and commissions dealing with economic development as well as funding for a Hispanic economic development summit.

"We don't want a handout," Tamez said. "We want to be able to say, 'Here are the things that are impeding our success.'" Organizers began developing the agenda and planning the event last summer as an opportunity "To open the doors for all of us so we can be in contact with our legislators," said event chairman Carlos Jiminez. "This is a great opportunity to bring up our issues."

The right people were listening. House Speaker Frank Chopp, D-Seattle, told the crowd lawmakers are working on boosting spending on expanding health care and farm worker housing and thanked participants for making the trip.

"It's great to see real people here," he said.

"If we stand united we will progress," Rep. Phyllis Gutierrez Kenney, D-Seattle, told the crowd. "We will get the things we fight for."

State Legislative Reception













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