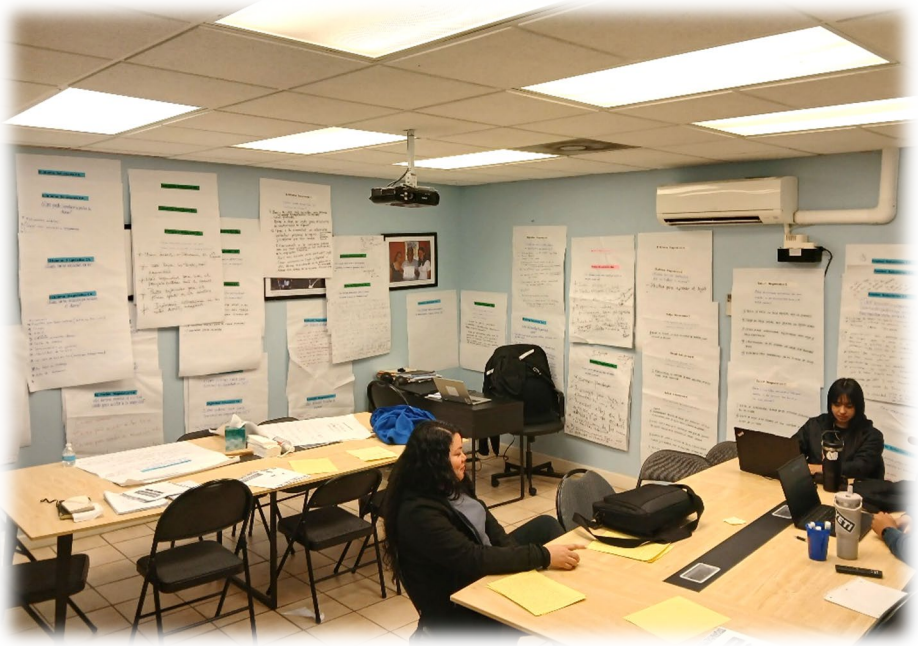

Advancing Equity for the Latino Community in Washington, DC

Policy Brief

Latinos in Washington, DC are essential contributors to the city's cultural and economic vitality, yet persistent inequities continue to affect their access to resources, representation and opportunities. This policy brief examines key challenges faced by the Latino community and presents actionable recommendations to advance equity.

Policy Brief: Advancing Equity for the Latino Community in Washington, DC

INTRODUCTION

The *DC Latino Community Forum Coalition – Foro de la Comunidad Latina de DC* (FCLDC) was established to address the pressing challenges faced by the Latino community in the city. It seeks to understand and address the issues impacting Latinos as they integrate into the city's fabric. This initiative builds on a legacy of community-driven efforts, such as the response to the Mount Pleasant riots in the early 1990s, which brought together stakeholders to tackle barriers and propose actionable solutions. Decades later, the FCLDC continues this tradition by convening leaders and community members to identify current challenges and foster collaboration.

To strengthen its efforts, the FCLDC formed a robust alliance with 11 local agencies dedicated to supporting the Latino community in Washington, DC. From February onward, the coalition organized seven coordination meetings to foster collaboration and align goals. This collective effort ensured a united front among agencies and civil society members, laying the groundwork for a successful forum and ongoing partnerships.

Figure 1: Leadership from local agencies at the community forum held on March 22nd, 2025.

OBJECTIVES

Through its work, the FCLDC has pursued three key objectives:

1. Strengthening connections with the Latino community,
2. Identifying community needs to inform policy recommendations for city leaders
3. Fostering unity among supporting agencies.

This report synthesizes the outcomes of these efforts, including insights from resident surveys, coalition-building activities, and workshops. Together, these initiatives aim to create a roadmap for addressing the needs of the Latino community and ensuring their successful integration into Washington, DC.

METHODOLOGY

Two surveys gathered insights from 1,325 respondents, who came primarily from CARECEN users, tenant workshop participants, and churchgoers, as well as food distribution sites and schools in Wards 1, 3, and 4.

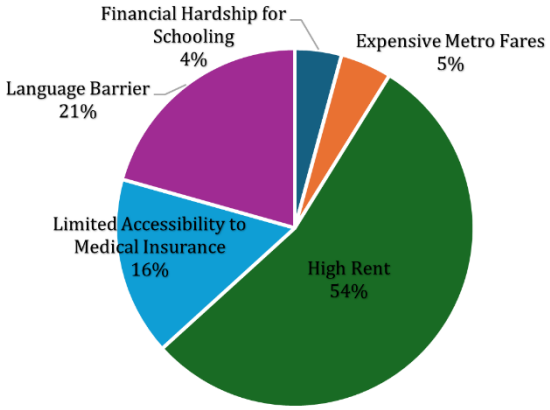

Figure 2: Survey Findings – Key Challenges

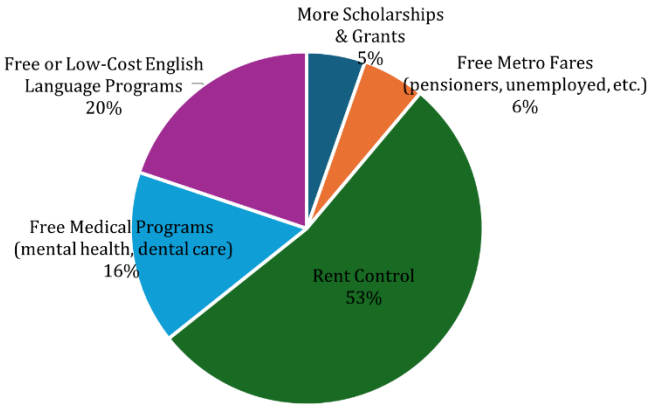

Figure 3: Survey Findings - Proposed Solutions

A community forum was designed around themes from the surveys: education, housing, health, transportation, and language, plus three additional themes: employment opportunities, integration and inclusion, and public safety. Each participating agency or civil society member identified 20-30 individuals to engage in the forum and prepared them for meaningful discussions.

Figure 4: A snapshot of the community forum held on March 22nd, 2025

The forum utilized a "world café" format, with four sectors of eight tables representing the eight themes. Trained facilitators managed the discussions at each table, ensuring structured and productive conversations. Facilitator training was conducted within the two weeks leading up to the event, with five training sessions being held to equip them with the necessary skills. The workshop was divided into two parts:

1. Diagnosis – Assessing the current situation and challenges faced by the Latino community in DC.
2. Solutions – Collaboratively brainstorming actionable recommendations to address these challenges.

The forum had 274 participants. This high level of participation underscored the community's commitment to addressing shared issues and finding solutions.

Figure 5: A snapshot of the community forum held on March 22nd, 2025.

A week following the forum, the FCLDC organized a workshop with experts and community agency representatives to analyze the data and insights collected during the event. The purpose was to consolidate these inputs into actionable recommendations. This collaborative effort aimed to ensure that the voices and concerns of the Latino community were accurately represented in the proposed solutions.

The resulting document synthesizes the key findings and recommendations derived from the activities conducted during the first quarter of the year, providing a comprehensive roadmap for addressing the challenges and advancing the integration of the Latino community in Washington, DC. The summary below presents some of the concerns gathered directly from the Latino community in DC around needs, availability of resources, and possible solutions.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Affordable Legal Services: Many immigrant community members struggle to afford legal representation, leaving them vulnerable during immigration processes.

Short-Term: Facilitate collaboration between organizations and the mayor's office to engage immigration law firms for low-cost consultations or volunteer opportunities.

Medium-Term: Create a fund to cover attorney fees for migrants in need of legal assistance.

Financial Barriers to Higher Education: Many Latino families lack access to information on how to apply to college and support to afford the costs of higher education. Financial insecurity, insufficient early guidance, and additional burdens (e.g., disabilities, caregiving roles) make it harder for students to complete college and higher education.

Short-Term: Offer workshops to students and families about college affordability, scholarship opportunities, AP credits, community college, and FAFSA in multiple languages.

Long-Term: Develop mentorship and college access programs through community and recreation centers focused on scholarship opportunities, college applications, and financial planning for both high school students and adults seeking higher education.

Expanding Educational Access for Adults: Latinos have a limited awareness of available resources and educational programs. Many adult learners want to obtain a GED, college degree, or to have their prior education validated.

Short-Term: Organize program fairs and targeted outreach to inform people about educational opportunities. Offer short-term or foundational courses, including high school equivalency and basic literacy.

Long-Term: Assign dedicated staff to support adult learners through the school enrollment and degree validation process. Design inclusive curricula with multiple learning levels and styles to accommodate varied educational backgrounds.

Improving Awareness of Workers' Rights: Latino workers often face discrimination and wage violations due to limited knowledge of their rights, including protections around wage theft and paid family leave.

Short-Term: Partner with organizations to deliver "Know Your Rights in the Workplace" trainings. Provide free legal consultations to explore options for adjusting or renewing work permit categories.

Long-Term: Expand and sustain outreach efforts to ensure ongoing education and empowerment of Latino workers across DC. Collaborate with unions to protect vulnerable workers and enforce labor rights. Collaborate with embassies to ensure they support their citizens' worker rights.

Language & Disability Access: Individuals who do not speak English often face compounded barriers when accessing public services, including a lack of interpreters, inaccessible documentation, and untrained staff.

Short-Term: Host workshops on how to use laptops, electronic devices, and accessibility apps. Provide education on language access rights, including how to request interpreters and file complaints when services are denied.

Long-Term: Develop and offer inclusive courses tailored to various disabilities (e.g., for those who are blind, hard of hearing, or have limited mobility). Increase public service spaces (e.g., post offices) with trained staff and language assistance. Strengthen enforcement of DC's language access laws to ensure consistent, respectful service for all.

Expanding English Class Availability for Working Adults: Limited class schedules make it difficult for working individuals to access English learning opportunities.

Short-Term: Offer free English Classes. Pilot afternoon and weekend classes in partnership with organizations to assess demand.

Long-Term: Expand virtual and self-paced course offerings to accommodate diverse schedules. Provide internet access support for students without reliable home connectivity.

Specialized English Courses for Professionals: Immigrants with specialized careers often face language barriers and lack access to career-specific guidance, limiting their ability to use degrees or experience from their home countries.

Short-Term: Connect individuals with bilingual English instructors within their career fields to provide vocabulary used in that sector.

Long-Term: Establish a centralized resource center using a "clearing house" model to offer individualized career guidance, bilingual materials, and connections to field-specific resources (e.g., for bilingual courses). Collaborate with professionals in specialized roles to ensure accurate, trusted information and promote long-term independence.

Culturally Sensitive Healthcare Access: Many Latinos and residents do not have healthcare or health insurance. Latinos need culturally and linguistically appropriate healthcare.

Short-Term: Provide informative talks for people on accessing health insurance (e.g., DC Alliance, Affordable Care Act, etc.) and affordable healthcare for low-income individuals.

Long-Term: Invest in community health centers that provide mental and physical healthcare for low-income families. Maintain Medicaid and the DC Alliance. Currently, Medicaid reimbursement rates are higher than the DC Alliance reimbursement rates; reaching parity would be positive. Insurance renewal every 2 years instead of 1 year.

Short-Term: Culturally sensitive training and education of healthcare personnel.

Long-Term: Facilitating access to interpreters in medical institutions – penalizing system for violations.

High Rent: The rent is extremely high, and the local DC residents cannot afford it and compete in the housing market since wages are stagnant, but the cost-of-living increases.

Short-Term: Look into policies to keep the cost of living affordable. Eliminate rent increases for the elderly and disabled, or give rent increases every 2-3 years instead of yearly. Keep the rent increase to a steady 3% for good.

Long-Term: The waiting list for housing programs such as Section 8 vouchers are too long. The waiting lists should be public to have more transparency. One solution was to have a Tenant Union or Liaison. The main solutions would be for the district to build more public housing and mandate mixed housing, including many truly affordable housing units in any new private development.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We extend our deepest gratitude to the participating local agencies and students from American University for their invaluable contributions to the development of this policy brief. Your dedication, expertise in the community, and collaboration have been instrumental in shaping this document, ensuring that it reflects the voices, needs and aspirations of the Latino residents in Washington DC.