



**Senate Hispanic Caucus**

**Framing a Latino/a Policy Agenda  
for the 84<sup>th</sup> Legislature:**

**A Texas-Sized Opportunity  
to Improve the Lives of Latino/as  
across the State**

## **Executive Summary**

The Senate Hispanic Caucus conducted a statewide systematic review of policy issues utilizing experts, academics, business leaders, advocates, students, and grassroots leaders in an effort to find out what issues truly matter to the Latino/a community in Texas. This report summarizes this effort in five key areas.<sup>1</sup>

In the education arena, the Latino/a community overwhelmingly supported fixes to the school finance system, bilingual education programs, greater access to higher education, and ending the use of high-stakes standardized testing.

In the area of health care, the largest focus centered on closing the coverage gap and improving access to care, particularly in the areas of mental health and women's health. There was also strong support for programs and incentives to increase the number of health care providers in border and rural areas. The recommendations included the utilization of promotoras, advanced practice nurses, and physician assistants.

On the immigration front, there was passionate support for keeping in-state tuition for Texas Dreamers and opposition to Arizona-style local enforcement of immigration laws. There was also strong support for greater access to driver's licenses, or permits to a lesser extent, to create safer roads for all.

In terms of creating more economic opportunities for working Latino/a families, participants supported reforming predatory lending practices, raising wages, and incentives for college and saving programs.

Perhaps most importantly, discussions about civic engagement in the Latino/a community focused on more opportunities for voter registration and less obstacles to voting, including online voter registration, reducing restrictions on deputy volunteer registrars, expanding the acceptable forms of photo identification at the polls, and incorporating civic engagement and registration processes at high schools across the state.

## **Background**

During the October 2013 Latino/a Summit in Austin, the Senate Hispanic Caucus (SHC) and the Mexican American Legislative Caucus (MALC) assembled five taskforces in the areas of education, health care, civic engagement, immigration, and economic opportunities. The SHC and MALC subsequently hosted seven briefings for Senate and House staff. One briefing was for each of the five taskforces to present their policy recommendations. Two issue-specific briefings were also held; the first covered predatory lending with the Pew Center and the second involved a review of recent Hispanic polling data with the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health. In addition to these staff briefings, the SHC hosted six regional summits in Austin, San Antonio, Dallas, El Paso, Houston, and the Rio Grande Valley. At these regional summits, educators, community activists, students, civic leaders, and service providers were given an opportunity to provide feedback on the recommendations made by the SHC taskforces. Turnout for the summits ranged from over 50 participants in San Antonio to over 100 in Houston. The discussions were meaningful and added significantly to the development of a Latino/a policy agenda informed by the community.

# Latino/a Summit Recommendations for the SHC

## EDUCATION Pre-K thru 12<sup>th</sup> Grade



### **School Finance**

76percent of the participants of the Latino/a Education Taskforce identified school finance as a high priority. In each of the regional summits across the state, school finance was named as the number one issue that should be addressed in the 84<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session. Specifically, the school finance recommendations included:

- **Fully restore budget cuts** from the 2011 Legislative Session, accounting for inflation and growth in student enrollment.
- **Phase out hold harmless funding measures** within two years and run state funding through state property wealth-based formulae.
- **Increase the funding weights for English Language Learners (ELL) and economically disadvantaged students** and base these weights on actual costs of successful programs.
- **Update the Cost of Education Index (CEI) study** to accurately reflect current local and regional variances in operational costs.

### **Teaching Quality**

57percent of the participants identified teaching quality as an area of improvement.

- **Improve teacher preparation for those serving ELL students.** Invest additional resources to expand the capacity of teacher preparation programs to more effectively serve diverse populations. All administrators and teachers serving ELL students, including teachers of core content area courses, should, at minimum, complete six semester credit hours of higher education coursework in ESL methodology, or equivalent professional development. All teachers and administrators serving ELL students should be required to undergo ongoing professional development. Fully-certified teachers with academic and social competencies will ensure that students reach their optimal potential.

### **School and District Accountability**

- **Accurate drop-out counts.** Increase transparency by preventing school districts from masking drop-out counts through the manipulation of lever codes.
- **Ensure House Bill 5 is not tracking minority students out of college.** Closely monitor the extent to which students opt out of the “Foundation plus Endorsement” default high school curriculum plan to the Foundation plan, as well as the number of endorsements offered and quality of curriculum offerings among and within districts.
- **Accountability for ELL students.** Improve accountability and review process for bilingual education and ESL programs by requiring state monitors to have bilingual and ESL certification. Furthermore, programs should be monitored at the campus level, thus preventing successful bilingual programs in elementary schools from masking failing ESL programs in secondary schools.

### **Access to Quality Curriculum**

Texas public schools should provide all students with access to college-ready curriculum.

- **Align high school graduation requirements and college admissions requirements.** Trade and technical programs within the K-12 context should be optional and viewed as supplemental in nature, and not as a replacement for curriculum that provides all students a fair opportunity to attend college. The state should increase equity in the availability of high school endorsements, dual-credit course options, and early college high school programs across public high schools.
- **Support Ethnic Studies.** All students should be exposed to curricula and texts that acknowledge the contributions of historically underrepresented communities.

### **High-Stakes Testing**

- **Use standardized testing for diagnostic purposes.** Texas should use standardized testing for diagnostic purposes and to trigger the focus of resources to support student achievement, and ultimately move toward a deconstruction of the current state assessment structure. In moving to a multiple-criteria assessment system, the state must couple assessment with professional development for effective implementation.
- The state should study the feasibility of using sample-testing methodology, with data disaggregated by major subgroups.

## Preserving Public Education

- **Charter school accountability.** Maintain cap that limits the further expansion of corporate charter schools in Texas. Require charter campuses to elect local representatives that will play a role in oversight and governance of those schools. Require charter schools to meet the same standards as public schools.
- **Reject voucher policies**, such as "Tax Credit Scholarships." Across all participants, no individual or organization cited the need to increase vouchers, expand charter schools, or home rule policies.
- **Reject** the expansion of **full-time virtual schooling**.

## Parental and Community Engagement

The idea that Latino/a families do not care about their children's education is a myth. Parents seek transparency and respect from educators and to work collaboratively to improve education.

- **Support Pilot Programs that promote parental engagement.** Texas should invest in families by replicating successful parent peer organizing models that support *promotoras*—volunteer community liaisons who engage other families to improve schools and help increase families' access to local community and school resources. Pilot programs should include Salas Comunitarias (Community Living Rooms) that serve as safe spaces in schools and launch pads for parent engagement. Texas should also pilot university-community, after-school collaborations, such as La Clase Mágicaix (already implemented in some San Antonio school districts), which are supported by decades of empirical research discussing the benefits of engaging parents of English Language Learners and using technology to increase biliteracy and critical thinking.

# Higher Education

## Access

The Latino/a Education Taskforce ranked access to higher education as the top higher education issue facing Latino/a students.

- Reject any attempts to repeal or weaken the **Texas Top Ten Percent Plan**.
- Reauthorize and **fund the Doctoral Incentive Loan Repayment Program** and study whether tenure-track professor positions should better reflect the diversity of Texas.
- Examine improvements to help community college students in the persistence, transfer, and completion of four-year degrees.

## Affordability

- **Protect in-state tuition for eligible Texas high school graduates, regardless of immigration status**, also referred to as H.B. 1403 and the Texas Dream Act.
- **Reject** additional measures to add so-called "**merit-based**" criteria for Texas GRANT funding that disproportionately impact Latino/a students.
- **Reverse course on the tuition deregulation** measures passed in 2003.
- Examine **increasing the number of flagship institutions** in Texas.

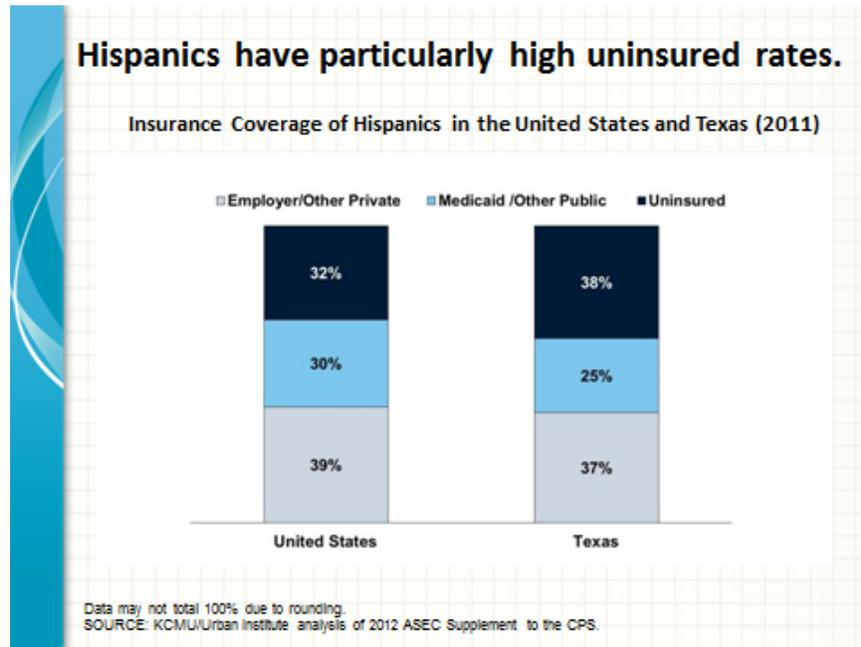
- Create financial incentives and **loan forgiveness** options for students who obtain **ESL and bilingual education certifications** and work in schools with teacher shortages.

### **Climate**

- **Support Mexican American Studies** and other ethnic studies programs at institutions across the state
- Review whether instances of discrimination, sexual harassment, and assault are being properly reported and investigated at Texas' public colleges and universities

The recommendations presented by the education taskforce were fully endorsed at every regional summit. The participants at the regional summits placed additional emphasis on certain recommendations to the Senate Hispanic Caucus. Additional financial support for public education was the number one priority at every summit. Support for universal pre-K and reducing high-stakes testing were also discussed in depth. In Dallas, participants strongly supported English Language programs and funding, while participants at the Rio Grande Valley summit prioritized Early College High Schools and drop-out recovery programs.

# HEALTH CARE



Both taskforce and summit participants emphasized that the number one health care priority is finding a Texas solution to close the coverage gap, or an alternative approach to provide health care coverage to the estimated one million adults that would have otherwise been covered by expansion of the traditional Medicaid program. Below are brief highlights of the taskforce's recommendations:

## **Close the Coverage Gap**

- The Texas Legislature should follow the example of other red states and Republican governors who have already found ways to negotiate solutions with federal Medicaid officials to close the coverage gap in lieu of traditional Medicaid expansion.
- Any solution should meet the following principles:
  - coverage is equally available statewide in Texas;
  - support health coverage and health homes for all family members;
  - offer comprehensive benefits that are at least as good as commercial and small business standards;
  - include personal responsibility provisions, such as affordable cost-sharing (e.g., co-payments, premiums for adults above the poverty line) that is not punitive to family members with serious or chronic illness; and incentives for wellness behaviors that are evidence-based and not punitive to persons who are ill;
  - include reasonable policies to ensure ongoing access to community safety net providers; and
  - pursue good faith negotiations (i.e., free from "poison pills") with federal Medicaid authorities.

- Participants note that ensuring statewide coverage access does not rule out a key role for considering the input, leadership, needs, and voices of Texas communities, local and county officials, and safety net health care providers. Broad engagement across the state must help guide legislative progress toward a solution to accept federal funding and close the Texas coverage gap.

#### **Protect Existing Safety Net Programs and Ensure Care for All Populations**

- A number of critical programs that reach underserved Texans are funded with General Revenue, and it is crucial that Texas' already-limited health care safety net stays protected.

#### **Perinatal Health and Women's Health**

- **Healthy babies, children and families should be a priority.** Support a seamless continuum of care for women, before, during, and after pregnancy through family planning, prenatal care, and postpartum care. Encourage policies to prevent prematurity of infants, support breastfeeding programs, early childhood intervention systems, auto-enrollment into the Texas Women's Health Program for women who have Medicaid-paid births, and increased access to women's health care in light of recent clinic closures.

#### **Children's Mental Health**

- Supporting the mental well-being of students will promote success in school and later in adulthood. Legislators should replicate programs across the state, such as the Family Service Association's Early Childhood Well-Being Project in San Antonio and Project Launch's Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation program in El Paso.

#### **Children's Medicaid and CHIP**

- The state has not adopted legislation to **correct conflicts between federal laws and state Medicaid and CHIP laws.** Ensure that children can continue to qualify for segments of six-month continuous coverage and eliminate the current exclusion of children from Texas CHIP unless they have been uninsured for at least three months. Children should not have to go without health coverage.

#### **Health and Fitness**

- **Limit the marketing and availability of unhealthy foods and beverages in schools,** promote community opportunities for physical activity, and increase access to affordable and healthy foods through school-based initiatives, community gardens, and farmer's markets.

#### **Medicaid Managed Care Consumer Assistance and Ombudsman**

- With a goal of an integrated network of consumer assistance that serves all Medicaid enrollees, **create a network of local/regional assisters and enhance the capacity at the HHSC Ombudsman office** to better serve all Medicaid Managed Care enrollees who need assistance accessing care and navigating the system. Raise network adequacy standards by requiring HHSC to enforce, monitor, and report on current requirements that Medicaid Managed Care plans post on a quarterly basis, with a focus on best practices.

### **Establish services of certified promotoras/es (community health workers) as a Texas Medicaid service benefit**

- Promotoras/es fill critical gaps in access to health care and could do more, especially with Texas Medicaid, such as connecting new and expecting mothers with the proper services and helping Medicaid Managed Care enrollees and their family members in navigating the system, learning self-advocacy skills, and overcoming barriers to care. One particular obstacle that must be overcome is that promotoras/es services are currently funded as an administrative activity of the Medicaid Managed Care health plans, which limits their use.

### **Scope of Practice for Advanced Practice Registered Nurses and Physician Assistants**

- Allowing Texas health care practitioners to serve to the full capacity of their licensure and training is a sensitive subject. However, it is critical to **enable Advanced Practice Registered Nurses (APRNs) and Physician Assistants (PAs) to serve more Texans**, especially in rural and border areas in light of Texas' serious primary care provider shortages. A 2013 law was interpreted by many to allow APRNs and PAs to serve as Medicaid providers even if the doctors under whose delegation they practice are not, but now that interpretation is in dispute.

### **Address Health Care Professional Shortages**

- **Increase capacity in training, loan repayment programs, and residency placements (GME) across the spectrum of primary care and behavioral health professionals.** Invest in growing the Texas primary care workforce through increased funding for loan repayment programs and pursuing other proven and promising approaches to effectively reduce provider shortages and encourage providers to practice in the border and rural areas.

### **Increase Outreach and Application Assistance Capacity for all Texans**

- Marketing, outreach, and application assistance are needed by Texans for access to both private commercial insurance and Medicaid-CHIP. **HHSC and TDI budgets should include support for statewide networks of culturally competent application assistance and health care navigation** across the full spectrum of public and private insurance programs.

In addition to the set of recommendations presented by the health care taskforce, the participants at the regional summits made the following recommendations: better health care coverage for seniors and support for senior health centers; fair and adequate coverage for immigrants; automatic continuous coverage for young adults, who are mobile and are less likely to fill out paperwork; finding innovative solutions to support hospitals in their role as health care providers for the uninsured; addressing the mental health issues of those who are incarcerated and providing alternatives to incarceration within the judicial system; teaching public health in medical schools so that doctors are more aware of public programs; incentives to encourage more Latino/as to enter the medical field; and encouraging Latino/a medical professionals to stay and/or return to their communities rather than relocating to where they complete their residency programs.

# IMMIGRATION

## **Defend Against Proposals to Restrict Immigrants' Rights that would harm the Texas economy**

The Taskforce and participants emphasized that any state policy towards immigrants should recognize the vital contributions that undocumented and authorized immigrants provide to the Texas and national economy. Anti-immigrant proposals should be rejected for economic, legal, national security, and moral grounds.

<b>Selected Measures of Per-Capita Losses in Business Activity Among States with the Greatest Relative Dependence on Undocumented Workers</b>						
State	<i>Static Scenario</i>			<i>Dynamic Scenario</i>		
	Expenditures losses per capita	Output losses per capita	Income losses per capita	Expenditures losses per capita	Output losses per capita	Income losses per capita
California	\$14,314	\$5,306	\$3,415	\$4,492	\$1,995	\$1,251
Arizona	\$13,255	\$4,914	\$3,162	\$4,160	\$1,848	\$1,159
Nevada	\$12,002	\$4,449	\$2,863	\$3,767	\$1,673	\$1,049
Texas	\$9,231	\$3,422	\$2,202	\$2,897	\$1,287	\$807
New Jersey	\$8,873	\$3,289	\$2,117	\$2,785	\$1,237	\$776
Maryland	\$8,688	\$3,221	\$2,073	\$2,727	\$1,211	\$760
Florida	\$7,663	\$2,841	\$1,828	\$2,405	\$1,068	\$670
Washington	\$7,143	\$2,648	\$1,704	\$2,242	\$996	\$624
Georgia	\$7,120	\$2,639	\$1,699	\$2,234	\$992	\$622
Illinois	\$6,356	\$2,356	\$1,516	\$1,995	\$886	\$556
US	\$5,827	\$2,160	\$1,390	\$1,829	\$812	\$509

Note: All monetary values in 2007 dollars.

Source: Perryman Report

- **Oppose legislation aimed at so-called "sanctuary cities."** Prioritize opposition to bills similar to Arizona's infamous S.B. 1070 ("show me your papers" law) or any proposed ban on so-called sanctuary cities. In 2011, one such bill would have prevented police chiefs from setting local priorities and allowed rogue police officers to inquire about a person's immigration status.
- **Support in-state tuition for Dreamers.** Ensure Texas continues to grant certain immigrant students, including undocumented students, access to in-state tuition rates at Texas public institutions of higher education. Ending such eligibility would take Texas backward at a time when other states are moving to allow those students to obtain professional licensing in fields in which they are trained.
- **Oppose e-verify requirements.** Oppose legislation seeking to require Texas businesses or agencies to use E-Verify, a voluntary employment verification program that often incorrectly identifies authorized workers as undocumented.

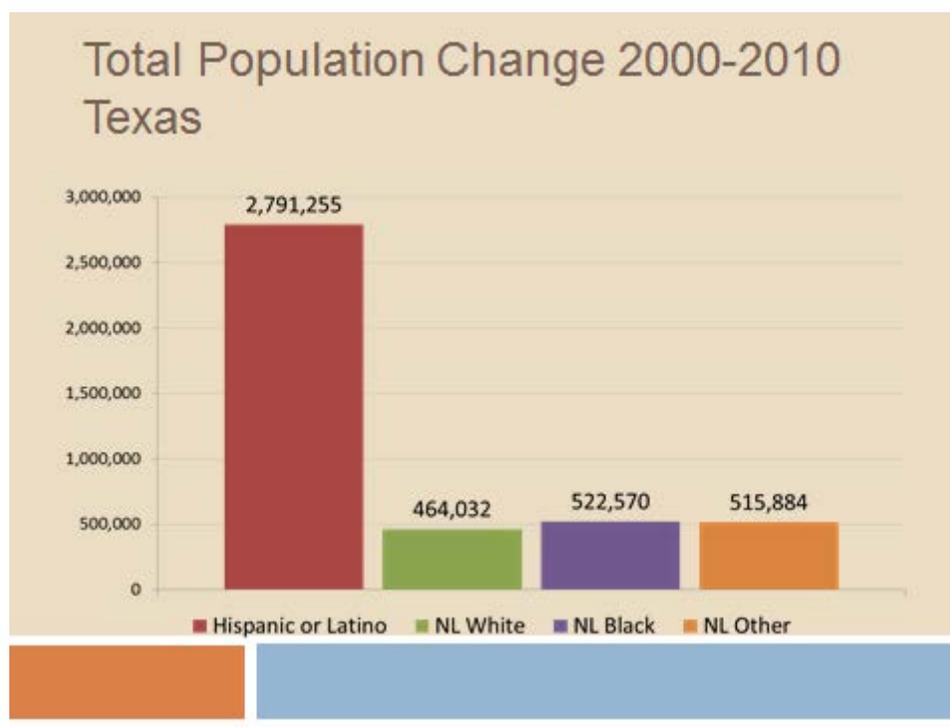
## **Support Legislation to Expand Immigrants' Rights**

- **Expand access to driver's licenses for all Texas residents.** Access to driver's licenses or permits would reduce uninsured driving, and assist law enforcement and employers.

- **Dial 911 without fear.** Strengthen the relationship between police and immigrant communities by prohibiting peace officers from asking the nationality or immigration status of a victim of or witness to a crime.
- **Support and fund counties** to comply with Texas law requiring law enforcement to **collect and submit DNA samples of the unidentified remains of migrants** crossing the border. By law, samples must be sent to the University of North Texas' Center for Human Identification, but non-compliance has led to human rights concerns.
- **Improve accountability of DPS' activities on the border.** Create a community taskforce to review and make recommendations on the Department of Public Safety's priorities and border enforcement operations. A community taskforce should provide input on how to ensure that DPS strategies are coordinated with the communities it serves. For example, the community taskforce should work with DPS to establish certain benchmarks, such as evidence of serious organized crime, before deploying checkpoints, entering into border security contracts, or initiating "surges." DPS should make such benchmark data public. A community taskforce would include local legislators, local community leaders, local law enforcement, civil rights groups, businesses, academic experts, and faith leaders, etc.
  - In light of DPS' increased role in border enforcement, checkpoints that have allegedly led to racial profiling, and security contracts that have resulted in fatal shootings, a community taskforce would add to DPS' transparency and, in turn, build the public's trust in DPS, provide information on how its policies impact communities, and offer recommendations on community collaboration, and personnel training, etc.
- **End Texas DPS' use of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Systematic Alien Verification for Entitlements (SAVE) program.** The SAVE program's inaccuracies have caused lawful immigrants and recipients of Deferred Action of Childhood Arrivals (DACA) extended delays in obtaining a Texas identification card or driver's license.
- **Support Congressional effort to end immigrant detention quotas.** Violations of immigration law are civil, not criminal. Immigrants have a constitutional right to be free from an arbitrary deprivation of liberty. Moreover, an absolute quota that incentivizes incarceration without regard to individual circumstances should not drive immigration detention policy.

The recommendations presented by the immigration taskforce were fully endorsed at every regional summit. The participants at the regional summits rated protecting in-state tuition for undocumented youth, known as Texas Dreamers, as the number one priority. There was debate on supporting driver's licenses or driver permits for undocumented immigrants living in Texas. Ultimately, more support existed for licenses, but permits were also supported by some participants to help reduce uninsured driving, and to allow law enforcement to focus more on criminals and less on undocumented workers. In South Texas and in El Paso, concerns about the militarization of the border through DPS and National Guard troops are on the rise, and participants supported clear guidelines and accountability of law enforcement operating on the Texas border.

## CIVIC ENGAGEMENT



### **Increase Voter Registration**

Texas ranked a dismal 49<sup>th</sup> in the nation in voter turnout for the 2012 general election. For the 2010 general election, we were dead last. In large part, this is due to the fact that our state was 42<sup>nd</sup> in voter registration in 2010, with only 61.6 percent of voting-eligible Texans reporting they were registered to vote that year. The participants were especially concerned that without the voting rights protections established by Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act, we will continue to see a diminishing of minority voting strength. The Texas Senate Hispanic Caucus is committed to vigilantly opposing local and state electoral changes that will diminish the voting strength of Texas' racial and ethnic minorities. Participants suggested the following:

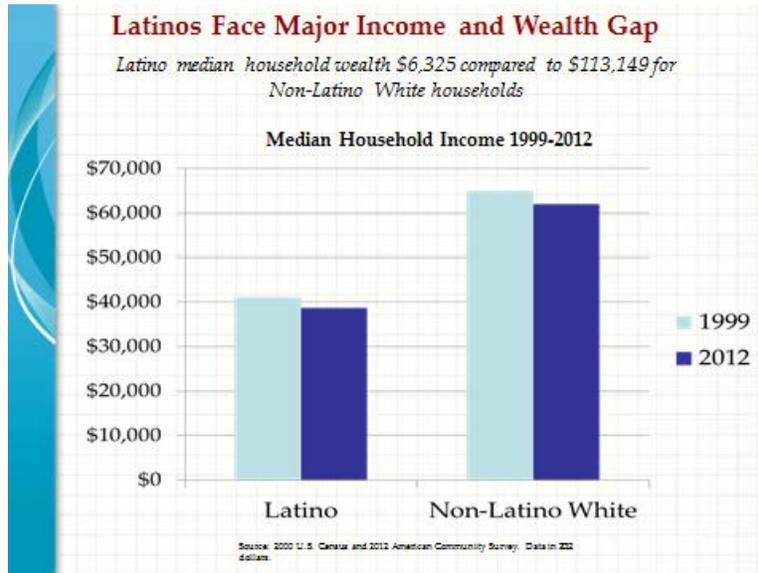
- **Provide online voter registration.**
- **Modify or drop volunteer registrar deputization requirements** because changes in the 82<sup>nd</sup> Legislature to the volunteer deputization requirements have resulted in undesirable obstacles to registration. Counties are not providing sufficient trainings, and good faith registration efforts are hindered by county restrictions.
  - Require election offices to provide more volunteer registrar deputization training.
- **Provide electronic voter registration at all government agencies**, as is already done at Department of Public Safety offices.
- **Move voter registration deadline to last day of early voting** or alternatively to 10 days prior to election day.
- **Take more proactive actions to register eligible high school students**, including mandates to the Secretary of State to partner with schools.

## **Voting Procedures**

- **Abolish or reduce the burdens of the restrictive photo ID law**
  - Increase the acceptable forms of identification at the polls, including student IDs, state-issued employer IDs, and identification issued by the federal government.
  - Provide easier and cheaper access to underlying documents necessary for required photo ID.
  - Allow other governmental agencies the ability to provide photo IDs, including school districts.
- **Expand early voting** to include two weekends and open polls all day on Saturdays and Sundays.
- Do more to include the importance of voting in the school curriculum.
- Examine the possibility of uniform election dates for local elections.

The recommendations presented by the civic engagement taskforce were fully endorsed at every regional summit with the caveat that online voter registration not be in-lieu of paper voter registration. Every regional summit supported more efforts to register high school seniors that are eligible to vote. Participants expressed frustration about low voter turnout and voter confusion between local, state, and national issues and candidates.

# **ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES**



## **Reduce or Eliminate Predatory Lending Practices**

- Latino/as use payday lenders at a 50 percent higher rate than Anglos, which traps borrowers in a cycle of debt in which interest rates are about 500 percent in Texas. Several Texas cities have already imposed common-sense limits on payday lending, and it is time for the Legislature to enact statewide reforms to reduce predatory lending.
- Protect cities' ability to address payday loan regulation at the local level and limit excessive interest rates that erode workers' ability to pay for necessities.
- Rein in abusive payday and auto title lending practices.
- Add to protections against abusive property tax lending practices and require counties to offer affordable payment plans to homeowners as an alternative.
- Require for-profit colleges to provide students with information from the *TWC Directory of Licensed Career Schools & Colleges* to students prior to enrollment and expand the directory to include the average student loan burden at the end of the program and student loan default rates.
- Prohibit institutions of post-secondary education from paying commissions or incentives to recruiters.

## **Repeal the Driver Responsibility Program**

- In Texas, access to transportation is often required for employment, especially self-employment. However, the Texas Driver Responsibility Program (DRP), while well intentioned, has caused the licenses of more than 1.3 million Texas drivers to be suspended. The DRP creates fees for those with moving violations that are unaffordable for working-class Texans and have been shown to have no effect on reducing DUIs or other driving offenses. The DRP is driving millions of Texas families into economic crisis and endangering their employment.

## **Asset Building**

### **Encourage Savings**

- Amend SNAP and TANF asset limits to encourage household savings and create more opportunities for children to save for college.

### **Housing**

- Increase funding for the Housing Trust Fund.
- Establish a dedicated revenue source to fund the Affordable Housing Trust Fund.

### **Capital and Capacity-Building for Small Businesses**

- Fund the Texas Capital Access Program.
- Determine the size of average Latino/a businesses that could benefit from this type of program and define small business to complement Latino/a business needs. Set aside a portion of the Texas Capital Access Program for these types of businesses.

### **Redirect Business Subsidies to Small Businesses**

- Latino/a-owned businesses in Texas are overwhelmingly small businesses, most without any employees beyond the owner. Texas offers several economic support programs for business, especially retailers, who received over \$115 million in FY 2013 to help defray costs of administering the sales tax. However, this subsidy went overwhelmingly to large, national, out-of-state businesses. The Legislature should look to generally redirect any business subsidies so that they help in-state, small businesses who are crucial to Latino/a employment and wealth building.
- Set aside a portion of the Texas Enterprise Fund for these types of businesses.

### **Increase Access to Banking for All Texans:**

- Texas ranks 49<sup>th</sup> in the nation in terms of "unbanked" residents – those who do not have a bank account. Latino/as are more than twice as likely as Texans as a whole to not have a bank account: 12.8 percent of Texas households have no bank account at all, and 37.2 percent have no savings account. In contrast, 28.1 percent of Latino/a households have no bank account at all, and 52.8 percent have no savings account. Access to banking and saving are critical tools for economic advancement. The Legislature should look to expand Latino/a access to banking. One proposal is to fund a statewide education campaign to inform Texans about how to open a bank account and the value of doing this. This campaign could include precautions against borrowing from predatory lenders and the benefits of using free financial resources like VITA tax centers.

## **Workforce Issues**

### **Raise the State Minimum Wage**

- Congress has failed to adopt a minimum wage increase proposal from the current poverty level of \$7.25 an hour to a proposed \$10.10. As of August 2014, 23 states and the District of Columbia had acted on their own authority to raise the minimum wage above the federal level. On Nov. 4, voters in four additional states – Alaska, Nebraska, Arkansas and South Dakota – approved referenda raising their states' minimum wages

above \$7.25 an hour. Texas has the power to adopt a minimum wage that is higher than the federal rate. A minimum wage increase would directly affect 2.8 million Texans, including 1.5 million women, 917,000 parents and nearly 370,000 Texans who are over the age of 55. A full 56 percent of Texas workers who would be affected by a minimum wage increase are Hispanic.

#### **Authorize Local Governments to Raise the Minimum Wage**

- Currently, municipalities have no authority to approve a general minimum wage increase. Legislation could restore that authority and leave the issue to local control.

#### **Enact a Pay Raise for Teachers and School Support Personnel**

- The state can raise these wages directly or indirectly by increasing per-pupil school district funding.

#### **Enact a Pay Raise for State Employees**

- State employees have lost significant purchasing power in recent legislative sessions. A general pay raise is long overdue, especially if rising health insurance or pension contributions keep increasing.

#### **Strengthen Wage Theft Laws**

- Wage theft is a wage cut. We should strengthen existing laws on wage theft and give law enforcement and civil attorneys the necessary tools to go after bad-faith employers.

#### **Fight Misclassification of Workers**

- Texas needs to do more to discourage businesses from listing employees as independent contractors to avoid meeting federal and state employer obligations, including Social Security and Unemployment Insurance. Misclassification harms businesses that take the high road.

#### **Improve Workers' Compensation for Injured Employees**

- As the only state that allows employers to decline to purchase workers' compensation coverage, Texas often leaves injured employees well short of the support they need to return to work or receive compensation for career-ending injuries. All Texas employers should be part of the workers' compensation system.

#### **Ban the Box**

- Give formerly incarcerated persons that have served their time a chance to successfully return to our communities and gain employment after jail or prison.

In addition to the set of recommendations presented by the economic opportunities taskforce, the participants at the regional summits also provided additional recommendations to the Senate Hispanic Caucus. There was discussion about additional efforts for wealth building, continued support for Historically Underutilized Businesses (HUBs), and reducing barriers to home ownership and small business loans. Lastly, wage growth should be valued as much as job creation in terms of measuring economic success in Texas.

## Conclusion

As we enter the 2015 Legislative Session, it is essential we do a better a job of communicating and including the Latino/a community in our policy making and deliberations. All of us are concerned about the lack of Latino/a turnout in the 2014 election cycle, and therefore, we should craft a vision that speaks to the community and engages this crucial electorate not just for the sake of the Latino/a community, but for the entire state as well.

We look forward to working with you on legislation that is in line with the recommendations and continuing the work on behalf of the community.

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