



the

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The Latino Caucus: Four Years Old and Growing

Illinois' Latino population is booming. The 2000 U.S. census shows it increased about 65 percent from the last census, to a total of more than 1.5 million Latinos; most live in Chicago and the suburbs. The increase makes Illinois' Hispanic population the fifth biggest in the country.

After the legislative redistricting that followed the census, more Latinos than ever before were elected to the legislature. About four years ago they formed a caucus, which is co-chaired by Chicago Democrats Sen. Miguel del Valle and Rep. Edward Acevedo. Both are the assistant majority leader in their respective chambers.

The 13-member caucus has accomplished a number of initiatives in its short existence, which Sen. Del Valle talked about in a recent interview about the caucus, its history, and its future.

Q: What are some of the caucus's goals?

A: Number one is education. We want to improve the quality of public education for all children and adults in the state, but as a Latino caucus, we delve into matters that affect the Latino population directly. It's important for us to look at what things need to be done, for example, to reduce the Latino drop-out rate in Illinois, what things we'll need to do to increase the number of Latinos going to college, to increase the retention and completion rates of Latinos going to college, and how we get more individuals trained so they can become certified Hispanic teachers in special ed, early childhood ed, and other areas.

Another is human services. Until the caucus, we had no vehicle for assessing the status of Latinos within the state's human services system on an ongoing basis. So one thing we have worked on is to make sure we have members of the caucus chairing key committees. Caucus member Rep. William Delgado chairs the House Human Services Committee, and he is able to have a significant say in what legislation advances that affects human services in the state.

Whenever there's a discussion regarding changes in human services, we know that Latinos are going to be a part of this discussion because we have somebody on the committee. We've gone from being totally on the outside and basically having to implement programs the way bureaucrats laid them out, and not having any say in those programs, to being in a position to help shape those policies.

Q: What are some of the caucus's goals in housing?

A: Affordable housing.

It's a big issue for us because Latinos in Chicago, in particular, have been affected by gentrification, development, and increased property taxes, and a displacement has gone on. As Latinos try to move closer to where jobs are available, it's important that there be affordable housing in different parts of the state where jobs are. We're not talking about subsidized housing, we're talking about being able to buy a property at an affordable cost.

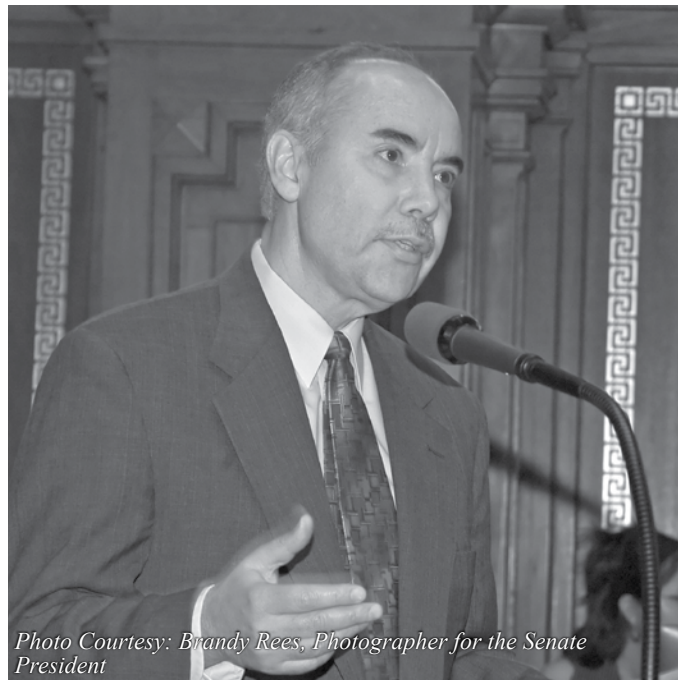


Photo Courtesy: Brandy Rees, Photographer for the Senate President

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Q: What challenges does the caucus face in achieving its goals?

A: Primarily, there's a lot of ground that needs to be covered, in terms of issues that need resolutions. That's why the Caucus established the Illinois Legislative Latino Caucus Foundation (www.illclf.org). The Foundation has annual conferences, we'll have our fourth in December. The conference is the vehicle for public participation in public policy, in generating ideas, input and feedback. We also established the scholarship fund from which we award 13 scholarships a year to college students. The most recent endeavor is the development of a Latino Legislative Caucus Public Policy Institute that will operate in partnership with the University of Illinois, but we hope to include other universities, to cover more ground and be a much more significant player in public policy.

Q: What are some of the caucus's successes?

A: One of our early successes was getting a bill passed and signed by the governor that's known as the in-state tuition bill. It allows students who have resided in Illinois but are not documented, and who have graduated from high school in Illinois, to pay in-state tuition rather than out-of-state tuition because of their immigrant status. That was about three years ago. Since then I sponsored legislation that allowed the governor to reshape the Board of Education and, in part as a result of our work, Jesse H. Ruiz was named by the governor as the chair, the first Hispanic to chair the Illinois State Board of Education.

Q: Would the caucus like to get more Latinos into other state government positions?

A: Yes. If you ask me where there are deficiencies, that's one of them. We're not satisfied with the number of Hispanics that have been appointed by the Blagojevich administration. We're actively working to increase that.

Q: Do you see the number of caucus members increasing in the future?

A: Yes. Our bylaws indicate that to be a member you have to be a Latino or represent a Latino-majority district. That's why Dan Burke, who's not Latino, is a member, because his district is 70 percent or more Latino. As the Latino population continues to grow,

my guess is non-Latino individuals will be able to become part of the caucus. Even though we don't have a Republican on the caucus now, we did for a while -- Frank Aguilar represented Cicero, he was a key member. Currently there aren't any Hispanic Republicans in the General Assembly. We hope when you see the Republican Party supporting Hispanics for legislative offices, those individuals will be able to join the caucus.

Q. Do you see the caucus's influence growing as well?

A. Absolutely. That influence grows by the year, as demonstrated during the last session in the Senate when four Latino senators delayed the vote on the budget. (During the final days of the spring session, Senators in the Latino Caucus threatened to withhold their votes for the budget unless issues such as school funding, school construction, and school security were addressed. Their concerns about these other issues, including "communication," were met after hours of discussions with the governor and legislative leaders.) This demonstrated, at least when a partisan roll call is involved, you need every single Latino vote to get something passed. That was a success for the caucus. It's necessary in order to make your presence felt.

Q: Is there anything else the caucus wants to do?

A. One purpose of the caucus is to help educate our colleagues in the General Assembly and to sensitize the administration. You have lots of legislators, both Republicans and Democrats, throughout the state who are learning about the Latino population. We consider it one of our most important duties to educate them so they're better informed as they make decisions about their districts.



Photo Courtesy: Brandy Rees, Photographer for the Senate President

2006 Session Wrap-Up



Photo Courtesy: Jeff Schuette/Russ Nagel, Office of the Speaker Illinois House of Representatives

This year's spring legislative session was marked by an early adjournment, partisan voting, increased spending, and new programs. This was set against a backdrop of flat state revenues, greater demands for funding and new programs, and an election year when lawmakers want to pass non-controversial legislation.

The Illinois General Assembly adjourned on May 4 after approving an estimated \$56 billion budget for the state's 2007 fiscal year, which began July 1. The legislature's early adjournment was necessary for a major renovation of the House and Senate.

The 2007 budget's main programs include monies for: preschool for at-risk children; increased health care for children, child care workers, veterans and others; increased funding for early childhood, elementary, secondary, and higher education; and, public safety and economic development.

The budget was approved on a partisan vote in both chambers after Republicans refused to vote for it, saying they'd been excluded from budget talks and felt the budget overspends, increases state debt, takes money from the state's pension systems, and delays already overdue Medicaid payments. Overall spending in the General Revenue Fund for this budget is estimated to be \$1.4 billion, or five percent more than last year's.

Democrats said the budget was balanced and met key needs in education, social services, health-care, and public safety.



Budget Highlights

Education:

- \$421 million hike in spending for elementary and secondary education
- \$48 million increase for higher education
- \$45 million for early childhood education

Healthcare:

- \$46 million for All Kids healthcare program for uninsured children
- \$34.3 million cost of living increase for child care workers

Public Safety:

- \$8.4 million for 300 new police cars
- \$6.7 million to open part of Thomson Correction Center

Economic/Business Growth/

Transportation:

- \$250 million increase in State's Road Programs
- \$74.8 million for Downstate Urbanized Transit Systems

Environment:

- \$29 million to preserve open spaces, purchase hunting lands, increase grants for Open Space Lands Acquisition and Development Program, and initiate a Natural Areas Inventory
- \$20 million for investing in bio-diesel and ethanol facilities

For details about how the FY 2007 budget affects individual state agencies, call the agency or visit <http://www.illinois.gov/government/agency.cfm>



Web Sightings: Illinois Getaways

Whether you want an end-of-summer break or a cool fall getaway, discover the possibilities our diverse state offers at the Illinois Bureau of Tourism Web site: www.enjoyillinois.com.

Movie buffs can learn where movies have been filmed in the state and get an itinerary for visiting past film sites in Chicago, where numerous movies including *The Fugitive*, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, and *The Blues Brothers* have been filmed. (Did you know several Chicagoans spontaneously started dancing to the music in a downtown parade scene in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, and were included in the movie? Find this and other Illinois film trivia here.)

Find out about food festivals around the state, museum exhibitions (such as the King Tut show at The Field Museum in Chicago), and seasonal activities. It has a search engine where you can look for various types of events, destinations or activities by region or date.

Bureau staff have already planned three-day trips around the state based on themes: outdoors, family fun, romance, arts, and more. Book hotels through the site's Expedia.com link.

Sign up for special offers at the Bureau's site as well, such as free travel guides and maps, contests, or discount coupons. Browse the goodies in the "Offbeat Illinois" online store. Admit it -- you want that Illinois State Fair butter cow coffee mug. It's all at: www.enjoyillinois.com



Transitions

Near the end of July, **Abner Mikva** was named chair of the Illinois Human Rights Commission. Mikva has been a state legislator, congressman and federal judge.

The Illinois General Assembly lost two members this spring. On May 8, **Rep. Lovana Jones**, a Democrat who represented Chicago's south side, died. **Elga L. Jefferies** has taken her position. **Former Senator Bob Madigan** passed away on May 4. A Republican from Lincoln, Madigan represented central Illinois in the Senate from 1987 to 2001.

Rep. Art Tenhouse, a Republican from Liberty, left office and is now a lobbyist. He has been replaced by **Jil Tracy**.



On August 2, former **Rep. Mary Jeanne "Dolly" Hallstrom** died in Evanston at the age of 81. She served in the House from 1978 to 1982.

