



## Advocacy in Action: Latino Advocacy Day (Confessions of an advocacy virgin...)

*By Yvette Bello, Executive Director, Latino Community Services*

**Advocacy can take different forms and be on different scales. It may happen between two people or in front of hundreds. The essence of it, however, remains the same. It's about committing to educate people who may not know about your cause.**

Advocacy is important for ALL nonprofits, no matter what your individual cause is or how popular or unpopular it may be. My experience with advocacy is that often times my cause is so important to me and my supporters that I really have to try to understand that it may not be to others, and therefore I need to be out there educating people on the issue. Regardless of how much we have to work at it, we need to have a voice in the process and it is often vital for our constituencies that we are skillful at it.

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cause. My recent advocacy experience for Latino Community Services was at Latino Advocacy Day 2011. It was the largest organized event that I had ever been a part of, and it took a lot of time and effort.

On November 9, 2010 Representative Andres Ayala called together a group of Latino leaders from around the state to discuss Latino Advocacy Day. Two years after our first Latino Advocacy Day, planning began with all the hopes associated with having enough time to plan our message and our delivery strategy. Within a few minutes of our first meeting, the group began recalling the successes and challenges since our first Latino Advocacy Day. It was clear that our organizations and clients had weathered enough challenges to warrant a second, more powerful show of numbers and message.

Our conversations that day left me with two distinct impressions: The first was that there were fewer Latino agencies around the table doing so much more for our communities than just two years ago. It was not because they were unable to meet, but because regardless of the great need for their services, they simply did not survive. We acknowledged that despite revealing the fact that Connecticut's investment in community-based Latino agencies was less than 1% of a multi-billion dollar annual budget in 2009, support had not increased and the economic and political disparity among Latinos caused many agencies to disappear. We knew it was critical to make our collective voice heard.

My second impression was that our organizations are so vibrant, flexible, and relevant to the needs of our communities because we are often led, staffed, and educated by the very community we serve. We shared our successes, which varied from agency to agency. For Latino Community Services, it was being able to leverage our state dollars to attract federal support around the prevention of HIV/AIDS and substance abuse. For others, it was simply feeding and supporting more people with fewer resources than they had two years ago.

I recall that by the end of the meeting the group had my absolute commitment to help plan Latino Advocacy Day 2011. Our group met month after month - sometimes we surged in numbers

and sometimes we contracted, but there was great trust that our message would be developed with enormous care. On March 30, 2011, the day had come! 23 Latino agencies drew roughly 400 people to the Legislative Office Building in support of Latino agencies and the services they provide daily. Our champion, Representative Ayala, drew his colleagues to witness this movement -- including the Governor, a Latino Advocacy Day first! After five months of planning meetings, discussions, logistics, and preparation, we raised our voices and the message was delivered.

The message is that Latino agencies ARE the safety net. We are essential partners with the state and our communities. We

are proud residents of Connecticut. We are business owners, teachers, firefighters, and law enforcement officers. We are families and students — and we all play an increasingly significant role in Connecticut's economy, schools and communities. An investment in Latino agencies is an investment in the state's future.

Too often organizations are intimidated by advocacy. It's easy to be. However advocacy is an extremely important part of all nonprofits. We are leaders and if we don't speak up for our communities, who will? The way I see it, there is a reason why we are leaders of nonprofits, leaders of ordinary groups of people who do extraordinary work daily. We

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# LEADERS

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are leaders of causes for people that others never think twice about, or if they do, it's to draw distinction that "those people" are somehow different from themselves. The reason why we are leaders that advocate is because we stare political, educational, intellectual, economical, and sometimes racial disparity in the face and have yet to turn away.

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