



National Hispanic Leadership Agenda

MEMBER ORGANIZATIONS

January 8, 2016

The Honorable Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama:

On behalf of the National Hispanic Leadership Agenda (NHLA), a coalition of 40 leading Hispanic advocacy organizations in the United States, I respectfully urge you to consider prominent inclusion of the Latino community’s public policy priorities in your State of the Union address. Significant progress has been made in the past year in postponing the immediate impact of sequestration on programs important to Latinos and the nation as a whole, expanding tax credits for working families, enrolling more Latinos in health insurance coverage thanks to the Affordable Care Act, and expanding employment. As you know, much work remains to be done, and new threats have arisen as hateful rhetoric against Latinos, immigrants, and refugees reached new heights in the past year. We respectfully ask that in your State of the Union address, you raise the profile of our community’s urgent priorities, described in greater detail below.

Addressing Puerto Rico’s Financial Crisis

Last fall your Administration presented a plan to address Puerto Rico’s fiscal and humanitarian crisis. This plan can only be implemented through Congressional action. Puerto Rican and allied organizations in the United States, including the NHLA membership, launched an unprecedented campaign to convince Congress to tackle the crisis. Puerto Rican members of Congress aided by the Democratic leadership fought vigorously to include debt restructuring relief and other assistance for Puerto Rico in the 2016 omnibus bill.

Unfortunately, their demands were rebuffed by the Republican-held Congress. Instead, Speaker Paul Ryan promised that the House would craft a Puerto Rico solution by the end of March. This is not soon enough. The fiscal crisis has compelled stateside businesses to leave the Island and local businesses to fold. Every month thousands of Puerto Ricans move to the 50 states in search of jobs. With each departure Puerto Rico’s tax base is further eroded as are its prospects for economic stabilization and growth.

- Alianza Americas
- American G.I. Forum
- ASPIRA Association
- Avance Inc.
- Casa de Esperanza: National Latin@ Network
- Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute
- Cuban American National Council
- Farmworker Justice
- Hispanic Association of Colleges & Universities
- Hispanic Federation
- Hispanic National Bar Association
- Labor Council for Latin American Advancement
- Latino Justice PLDEF
- League of United Latin American Citizens
- MANA, A National Latina Organization
- Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund
- National Association of Hispanic Federal Executives
- National Association of Hispanic Publications
- NALEO Educational Fund
- National Association of Latino Independent Producers
- National Conference of Puerto Rican Women, Inc.
- National Council of La Raza
- National Hispanic Caucus of State Legislators
- National Hispana Leadership Institute
- National Hispanic Council on Aging
- National Hispanic Environmental Council
- National Hispanic Foundation for the Arts
- National Hispanic Medical Association
- National Hispanic Media Coalition
- National Institute for Latino Policy
- National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health
- National Puerto Rican Coalition
- SER Jobs for Progress – National
- Southwest Voter Registration Education Project
- United States Hispanic Chamber of Commerce
- United States Hispanic Leadership Institute
- United States-Mexico Chamber of Commerce
- U.S.- Mexico Foundation

On January 1, Puerto Rico defaulted on \$37 million of a \$1 billion bond payment. Without cash, it will be unable to cover upcoming bond payments of over \$2 billion in 2016. Creditors have already threatened to sue the government of Puerto Rico. The fiscal crisis is compounded by the depletion of Puerto Rico's Affordable Care Act funds and the inequitable allocation of Medicaid and Medicare funds. Without an orderly debt restructuring process and no other forms of federal relief, this crisis will become unmanageable at great expense to American taxpayers.

Congress needs to act fast but the U.S. Treasury and other federal departments need to do more as well. It is imperative that you make this clear in your State of the Union address and show that the welfare of the 3.5 million American citizens living in the territory is a presidential priority.

Voting Rights

Unless Congress acts, this year will host the first presidential election in 50 years without full protections against discriminatory voting policies. Congress needs to act to restore the full strength of the Voting Rights Act, including preclearance provisions, as the Voting Rights Advancement Act (S. 1659/H.R. 2867) would do. The Latino community has been decisive in determining the outcome of the last two presidential elections, but there are active efforts by many to stem the expansion of Latino voting power. NHLA views the restoration and expansion of pre-clearance protections as a critical Latino priority.

In addition to renewing your call to Congress to strengthen the Voting Rights Act, we ask that your Administration address how it will help ensure fair elections and prevent voting rights abuses, such as through enhanced field monitoring in coordination with U.S. Attorneys' offices and advice for concerned citizens and volunteers on how to play a constructive role. NHLA would also support any efforts you undertake to inspire people to participate in elections and encourage local governments to make the voting process understandable and manageable for all voters.

Citizenship

NHLA welcomes your launch of the "Stand Stronger" citizenship awareness campaign to encourage the 8.8 million lawful permanent residents living in the United States to commit to naturalize as U.S. citizens. We believe this issue is worthy of mention in your State of the Union address and in addition to continuing to promote citizenship throughout the coming year, we urge you to commit to delaying any increase in the naturalization fee, which is the single greatest barrier to naturalization.

Immigration

We appreciate your Administration's continued efforts to defend the legal challenges against the executive actions you took over a year ago, in light of Congressional inaction, to address some of the most immediate and damaging flaws in the federal government's immigration practices. We have

repeatedly called on Congress to focus its efforts on constructive immigration reform rather than punitive, counter-productive legislation that merely reacts to the overblown headlines of the day. Despite the House Speaker's and Senate Majority Leader's statements that they will not take action on responsible reform, we will continue to urge them and members of both parties to do so, and we hope you will join us in doing the same.

For those immigrants and asylum-seekers finding themselves in detention, we urge you to announce steps in your final year in office to humanely reform detention facilities, including efforts to combat the abuse of detainees, and replacing detention facilities for women and children with alternatives to detention.

We also call on you to cease the immigration raids that are taking place around the country. These raids target refugees rather than violent criminals and have resulted in further trauma to asylees, refugees, other immigrants, their families, and their communities.

Education

With your enactment of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the nation has an opportunity to make increasing progress in eliminating the education gap faced by African American and Latino students. Latinos now account for a quarter of public school students nationwide, and this amply demonstrates why eliminating the education gap is an imperative to our future national economy and national security. However, necessary congressional compromise in ESSA provides great discretion to states and localities. The local and state track record, however, demonstrates the continued need for strong federal leadership – in exhortation and regulation – on ensuring that federal dollars in education yield real progress on reducing the education gap. Your State of the Union address is a prime opportunity to focus public attention on the necessity of holding ourselves, in public education, accountable to our nation's future.

Labor

This country needs to ensure that hard-working people have the opportunity to earn a decent living to support their families. The federal minimum wage has fallen drastically in real economic terms and should be increased substantially. There are many working women and men – in agriculture, food processing, restaurants, building services and others sectors – who are suffering violations of basic employment protections, including the minimum wage and overtime; enduring workplace sexual harassment and abuse; facing gender inequity in their pay and other unfair terms and conditions of employment; and experiencing retaliation when they seek to challenge unfair or illegal employment practices. Some businesses, when accused of violating the minimum wage, claim that their own workers are “self-employed” or are only employed by a labor contractor. The government must better enforce the rights of workers and protect law-abiding employers against unfair competition from businesses that undermine labor standards.

Health

The Latino community has greatly benefitted from the reforms of the Affordable Care Act, which have given our community the tools to narrow Latino health disparities through prevention programs; affordable, quality health care; lower prescription drug costs; and increased opportunities to expand the number of Latino health professionals through STEM funds for premedical student mentoring pathways, Hispanic health research and leadership development programs for health professionals.

Enrollment efforts in the new health insurance marketplaces have resulted in a significant 9.7 percentage point drop in the rate of uninsured Latinos from 2013 to October 2015. As you know, repealing the Affordable Care Act would be a major step backwards for the health and well-being of Latinos. We support your position of vetoing any legislation that would erode the benefits the ACA is providing to Latinos and others across the nation.

Furthermore, NHLA will continue to build on the gains of the ACA to ensure access to coverage and care for these families. As such, we urge the President to rescind barriers to healthcare coverage for those individuals granted deferred action through Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)--or any future beneficiaries of administrative relief, such as Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents--consistent with current health coverage for all other deferred action grantees.

Latino Inclusion in the Federal Government Workforce

We applaud the diverse appointments you have made to your cabinet and other important leadership positions in various departments and agencies. Unfortunately, Latino representation across the remainder of the federal government continues to lag, and we encourage you to take bold steps to improve Latino hiring in the civil service, such as through the announcement of an executive order on Hispanic federal employment that outlines an aggressive program to substantially and affirmatively increase the number of Hispanics in the federal workforce, including increased representation of Hispanics in the career Senior Executive Service.

Environment

The Administration's continued efforts to enforce existing public health and environmental laws and to designate new national parks and protected lands has broad support from Latinos coast to coast. To further address the causes and impact of climate change, we urge the Administration to significantly increase efforts across the federal government to curtail greenhouse gas emissions and promote renewable energy. Additionally, we urge the President to continue to exercise his executive authority under the Antiquities Act to designate additional national parks and protected lands that are near Latino communities and recognize our rich history and contributions to the United States.

The priorities above are not just important to the Hispanic community – they are the cornerstones of a strong future for America and its territories. By elevating these priorities in your State of the Union address, you will send a strong message to the nation and be able to count on the support of Latinos across the nation in helping you make them a reality.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "H. Sanchez", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Hector Sanchez
Chair, National Hispanic Leadership Agenda