

# INVISIBLE & VOICELESS: LATINOS IN COUNCIL BLUFFS, IOWA 2013



OFFICE OF LATINO/LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES (OLLAS)  
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT OMAHA





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# INVISIBLE & VOICELESS

## LATINOS IN COUNCIL BLUFFS, IOWA

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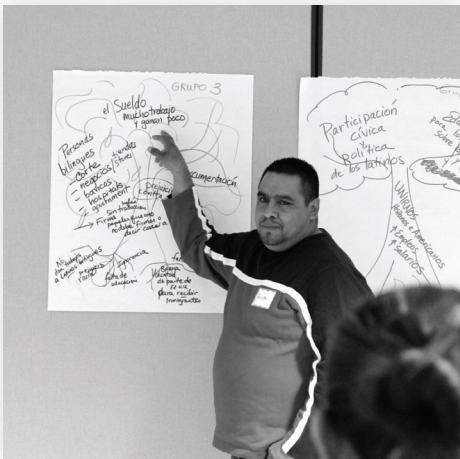
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## DISCLOSURE

The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of collaborating organizations, funders, or the Board of Regents of the University of Nebraska.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Civic and business leaders in Council Bluffs acknowledge the vital place of immigrants in the local economy. Latinos, too, feel they have 'won a place' in Council Bluffs as workers and consumers, but they also experience themselves as largely invisible and without a voice. Findings in this report are based on the analysis of transcripts of twenty-six semi-structured interviews with Council Bluffs civic, government, education, religious, non-profit, and business representatives, as well as meetings with Latino community members in two groups of about thirty each.

Funded in part by the Iowa West Foundation, researchers from the University of Nebraska at Omaha's Office of Latino/Latin American Studies (OLLAS) explored perceptions of the growth, challenges, and contributions of the Latino community in Council Bluffs, now 8.5% of the city's population (5,277 of 62,230) according to the 2010 U. S. Census. We also sought to understand and shed light on Latino economic and civic participation or lack of participation, as well as institutional responses to the growing Latino presence.



## I. Economic Participation

Civic and business leaders acknowledge Council Bluffs employers' high level of dependence on immigrant workers and highlighted Latinos' strong work ethic. Leaders also recognized the difficult work conditions and undesirable wages faced by many Latino workers in Council Bluffs. Latinos acknowledge that they work very hard, sometimes performing the equivalent work of two or three other employees for the same pay. A Latino conversation participant concluded that this is what that has won Latinos a place in Council Bluffs. "Eso es lo que nos ha hecho ganarnos un lugar."

Though Latinos in Council Bluffs are valued for their contributions to the productivity and wealth generation of the community, few participate in decision making or ascend to levels of higher responsibility in industry or any of the city's basic institutions.

### ***The construction of a "trans-river community".***

The participation of Latinos living, earning, and spending in Council Bluffs is a component of a trans-river economic and social dynamic of two communities in one metropolitan area. Latino workers sometimes live in Council Bluffs and work in Omaha and many Latinos live in Omaha and work in Council Bluffs or neighboring communities. Latinos from Council Bluffs frequent Latino-owned restaurants and stores densely located in South Omaha. Latinos are also known to shop at the large Council Bluffs discount stores easily accessible from South Omaha by highway. Regarding the presence of Council Bluffs Latino businesses, an elected official commented, "It's nice to see those businesses spring up here in the local community." But Latinos underscored obstacles faced in starting their own small businesses in Council Bluffs.

Council Bluffs' Latinos stated they need to travel to Omaha

for services such as GED classes in Spanish, assistance with starting their own businesses, affordable urgent care center services, dance hall rentals, and for banking services. Latino community members pointed out that the identification card provided by the Mexican consulate, known in Spanish as 'la matricula consular,' is recognized by many business establishments in Omaha, but not by businesses in Council Bluffs.

## II. Latino Participation in the Wider Community

This study also sought to shed light on how the Latino presence is perceived outside of participation in the economy, how basic institutions are responding, and how both Latinos and community leaders perceive attitudes and interactions. Individual perceptions can be divided into three categories: 1) the invisibility of Latinos to stakeholders, 2) uninformed recognition of change, and 3) acceptance and openness to improving relations. One business leader expressed his desire to support Latino businesspersons and integrate them into the life of the community, but also expressed frustration with not knowing how to bridge cultural differences. Another civic leader commented:

[There is a] long history of Latinos in Council Bluffs dating back to the Railroad days when Council Bluffs was a significant Railroad town and Union Pacific was a large employer. We have the Mexican American families that have been here for years and I know and am friends with some of them. And there's a new population, I know, but I don't really know much about them. You know, I see them working. I know from friends who are in the retail business that they're brand-loyal. I know from banking that they're honest people, and that they put in an honest day's work, but I really don't know much more than that. I think our low unemployment drives people to chase jobs and come here. I think they are doing

OK in our schools. I don't know as much as I probably should.

Institutional practices also evidence a range from lack of awareness of need to initial efforts to serve and integrate the growing Latino immigrant population. The lack of bilingual personnel in Council Bluffs was a strong theme arising from community members at the “Community Conversation” held in November of 2012. Participants and interviewees described the serious consequences and fear of making mistakes, for example, signing papers in court or answering questions incorrectly without adequate interpretation. An elected city official demonstrated some awareness of the city’s need for more bilingual government services. “I don’t think we have enough employees in the city or in law enforcement that can communicate in Spanish.” Bilingual services are provided in some area health care institutions including Jennie Edmundson Hospital and All Care Health Center.

The Adult Learning Center, administered by Iowa Western Community College and located in the Omni Center building, offers face-to-face English classes for adults in Council Bluffs at various levels and on different days and times. However, GED classes are not offered in Spanish in Council Bluffs, nor are Iowa residents allowed to take the test in Nebraska, though Nebraskans are permitted to take the test in Iowa. The nearest place to take the test in Spanish in Iowa is Sioux City.

Iowa Workforce Development employs a coordinator for the New Iowans Program at the Council Bluffs office. This role is held by a Latina professional who has long been active and committed to the well-being of the Latino and broader immigrant community in Council Bluffs.

Fifteen percent (1,307) of the Council Bluffs Community School District population of 9,000 students identify as Hispanic and 647 are English Language Learners. The

system employs one full-time Spanish interpreter. Sunday Catholic services in Spanish are offered weekly at Queen of the Apostles Catholic Church with an estimated participation of four hundred individuals. An associate pastor who serves Latinos at Broadway United Methodist Church said his congregation of 150 to 200 includes Mexicans, Hondurans, Guatemalans, El Salvadorans, as well as families from the Dominican Republic and Cuba. Latino interviewees thought at least two evangelical churches also serve the Latino community.

***Spectrum of attitudes.***

Attitudes perceived on the part of non-Latino members of the Council Bluffs community regarding the presence of Latino immigrants varied widely ranging from hostility on one end of an attitude spectrum, to appreciation and desire for more effective welcome and integration on the other end.

Hostility/ Discriminatory	Tolerance
Ambivalence/ Confusion	Interest
Acceptance Welcome	Appreciation
Desire for Integration	Commitment to Integration

In the view of one community leader, the integration of Latinos is part of on-going class and cultural segregation challenges in Council Bluffs. Another civic leader expressed the view that Latinos are assimilating well into the Council Bluffs community. An educational leader seemed grateful for at least a minimum of what he is convinced is a kind of tolerance.

He stated that at least in Council Bluffs there is “never overt hostility.” He views immigrants as bringing drive and initiative into the community, but worries that fear keeps people from building fruitful relationships. He hopes the wider community can learn to relax, to accept, and to embrace new immigrants.

In answer to a question about what strengths Latinos bring to the community, the educator emphasized their sense of adaptability and adventure, their strong sense of family and extended family, and their eagerness to learn and succeed. The Hispanic minister of the Catholic church admires the resilience, goodness, and mutual respect he sees in members of the Latino immigrant community he has grown to know.

### ***Superficial interactions between communities.***

In addition to perceptions and attitudes, this study also sought to identify behaviors that exemplify interactions taking place between Latinos and non-Latinos. Very few spaces were identified where Latinos and non-Latinos interact meaningfully. Four kinds of interaction were perceived: Latinos receiving services from the dominant community, Latinos providing service to the dominant community, Latinos and others interacting side by side, and attempts at more mutually beneficial exchanges.

## **III. Latino Experience and Desire for a Voice**

If the level of interaction between Latinos and the wider community is a measure, the place Latinos have won in Council Bluffs is limited and tenuous. This section of the report seeks to illuminate this further by focusing on Latino views, experiences, initiatives, and aspirations, gathered mainly during the two “Community Conversations” held at Queen of the Apostles Catholic Church in November 2012 and January 2013 and attended by sixty-one Latino community members.

### ***Motivation for immigrating.***

Latinos stressed that their fundamental motivation for leaving their countries of origin is to forge a future for their children with a better quality of life. “We are here and we are well.”

### ***Skills Latinos bring and struggles encountered.***

Many spoke about the struggle of dealing with deep frustrations facing barriers of language and immigration status and in some cases feeling incapable of finding jobs to utilize their knowledge and skills due to these barriers. Participants were mystified why the government does not seem to see the benefits of passing immigration reform with a path to citizenship. One participant said the first thing he would do after obtaining his ‘papers’ would be to buy a house for his family. He thought there would be many benefits for the country. Beyond frustration, other Latinos described painful experiences of being mistreated. One woman during table presentations at the November Community Conversation stated simply, “We do not feel



comfortable in Council Bluffs.” Another said she and many other Latinos feel “impotent” especially “not being able to defend ourselves from those who insult us.” What makes life difficult, participants explained, are experiences of racism and discrimination, not being able to obtain immigration authorization, the lack of bilingual personnel, and the bad reputation Latinos are sometimes given just for being Latinos. Another participant pointed to the abuse experienced by Latinos at work. He speculated that at the root of this problem is the lack of knowledge of labor rights, the fear people have of losing their jobs, as well as the lack of confidence with the language, and again, lack of ‘documents.’ During a separate interview, this participant agreed that life here has been difficult. “I have had many injuries here. People are mistreated here.” He also thought that being from different countries of origin (e.g. Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala) makes it difficult for workers to know each other well and to help each other in the workplace.

### ***Latino initiative.***

Regarding ways Latinos have demonstrated leadership to improve the situation for their community in Council Bluffs, one example was the success of obtaining a Catholic service in Spanish in 2009 after collecting hundreds of signatures and presenting them to the Bishop of the Des Moines Catholic Diocese. At this Spanish worship service, researchers observed leadership participation from males and females of various ages in a variety of ministry roles. Individual Latino advocates have also served the

community over the years through various institutions including the Centro Latino. One adult educator and advocate was mentioned by both Latinos and non-Latinos for her initiatives and effective service to the Latino community of Council Bluffs. Individual Latino entrepreneurs have founded and led their businesses in the community, employing others, and contributing to Latino groups such as athletic clubs or school events. In 2013, Latino students and staff supporters at Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson high Schools formed Latino clubs to promote Latino culture and academic advancement.

### ***Desire for a voice – Civic participation.***

Latinos expressed a desire for a voice and role in the broader Council Bluffs community. Latino participants recognized they need to put in effort to obtain the tools to help their own community including the development of English language skills, knowledge of their rights, and encouragement of their children to stay in school and become bilingual professionals. Conversation participants recognized that no Latino-led organization exists in Council Bluffs promoting Latino civic engagement. Latinos see the need to organize a group to help them unite, to help them learn about and defend their rights, to support each other in learning English, and to give their community a stronger voice. Latinos expressed the desire for a Latino-led organization in Council Bluffs with the purpose of helping Latino community members develop their capacity to identify issues they wish to change and develop the leadership and power to make those changes.



## ○ INTRODUCTION

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With a four percent unemployment rate, we're in need of workers. If we don't have workers, we don't get businesses. A significant majority of the Iowa population is retirement age. Families aren't growing the way they used to. So the only way to increase our work population is through immigration.

This view from a civic and business leader in Council Bluffs represents an acknowledgment of the vital place of immigrants in the local economy. Latinos, too, feel they have 'won a place' in Council Bluffs as workers and consumers, but they also see themselves as largely invisible and without a voice. This report is based on twenty-six semi-structured interviews with Council Bluffs civic, government, education, religious, non-profit, and business representatives, as well as meetings with Latino community members. Interviews were transcribed and themes identified and grouped using MAXQDA software for qualitative data analysis.

Funded in part by the Iowa West Foundation, researchers

from the University of Nebraska at Omaha's Office of Latino/Latin American Studies (OLLAS) explored perceptions of the growth, challenges, and contributions of the Latino community in Council Bluffs, now 8.5% of the city's population (5,277 of 62,230) according to the 2010 U. S. Census. We also sought to understand and shed light on Latino economic and civic participation or lack of participation as well as responses of basic institutions to the growing Latino presence. This report is divided into three main parts: The first section presents findings on work locations, work conditions, as well as how Latinos as workers and consumers move between Council Bluffs and Omaha in what we describe as a "trans-river community." The second section reports on perceptions, attitudes, and interactions with the majority community, highlighting institutional responses to the growing Latino population. The third section focuses on life in Council Bluffs for Latinos, and their desire and call for greater integration. The report concludes with policy and practical recommendations.





## I. Economic Participation

### **As workers**

#### ***Growing dependence on Latino workers.***

Civic and business leaders acknowledge Council Bluffs employers' high level of dependence on immigrant workers and commented often about their strong work ethic. They also recognized the difficult work conditions and undesirable wages faced by many Latino workers in Council Bluffs. An operations manager at a food processing facility described Latinos and the employment situation in this way: "They have a very good work ethic. They are very dedicated. We'd be in trouble without them. There are not a lot of qualified candidates outside of this group. A lot don't want this kind of work, these adverse conditions." A casino representative said "Latinos are here every day, on time. They do their job." A civic leader agreed: "I think employers, non-Hispanic employers, are pleased with their Hispanic workforce. Hispanic workers want to do it right, and will do it right, and work hard without a lot of prodding."

A chamber of commerce representative echoed this perspective:

We have a large Latino population that works at a lot of our larger industries. We have become so dependent on the immigrant population to help fill our jobs. There's [sic] not enough people in the country that are willing to work for those wages and those hours and the type of work that they do, and so they rely very heavily on the Hispanic population.

#### ***Employers and Latino businesses.***

Major employers of Latino immigrants in Council Bluffs include Tyson Foods, ConAgra Frozen Foods, and Plum Rose USA. Other businesses employing significant numbers of Latinos in Pottawattamie and neighboring Harrison and Mills counties include Oakland Foods, Midwest Manufacturing and Heartland Dairy. In addition, apple orchards, nurseries, ranches, vegetable farms and hog, chicken and egg producers employ many Latinos. A

manager at one of the large food processors estimated that Latinos comprise between fifty and sixty percent of its fulltime work force.

Within Council Bluffs, large employers with significant, but smaller, percentages of Latino employees include the three casinos and the large retail stores. Carpet installers, cement and concrete workers, roofers, house-painters, and remodelers were specified as jobs Latinos perform in the construction and building trades in Council Bluffs. Latinos also work in restaurants, and Latino-owned businesses. Current Latino businesses identified in Council Bluffs include two hair salons, an auto sales and auto body repair business, four restaurants, one with an adjacent grocery store, and a variety of small businesses engaged in home repair, painting, cleaning, child care, and specialty food preparation and sales. Some of these are licensed and some are informal. One of the beauty salons has been in business for nine years and employs four people in addition to the owner.

### **Work conditions.**

An operations manager in a food processing facility described work conditions as “challenging.” He said the facility has two production shifts and one sanitation shift and for seven or eight years the facility has been working every day to respond to the demand for its products.

We work long hours, seven days a week, ten-hour days. It is a very manual job. Our efficiency is very high and our production is high. Employee engagement, that’s a different story. We have trouble finding people who want to work the schedule, live the lifestyle of this kind of manufacturing.

Regarding the work in hotels, casinos, and restaurants, a business organization representative said: “It’s pretty demanding work. You’re on your feet a lot and dealing with people all the time and taking abuse in some cases you know.” Latinos provided examples.

Carmen shared an experience of having been forced to work for an extra hour ‘off the clock’ after punching her

card. She was told if she could not continue then she should leave.

Ana described bad conditions at a food processing plant: “They have raised the speed of the line so that it is four times as fast. They have the people horribly enslaved. We go to the meetings and we complain and they tell us ‘if you don’t like it, there’s the door. We have 1,000 applications.’ So we hold on.”

Latinos acknowledge that they work very hard, sometimes performing the equivalent work of two or three other employees for the same pay. *“Desgraciadamente pues nosotros trabajamos más y por la misma paga.”*

Describing her work as a prep cook and service leader at a chain restaurant, Margarita explained that she liked working alone and would accomplish the same work done by three others in the same time frame. *“Yo trabajaba solita, lo hacía mientras que las otras personas, ellos trabajaban de tres personas lo que yo hacía solita.”*

Regarding his experience as a painter working for a large painting company, Paco described working twice as hard as others and in more difficult tasks, but being paid less. *“El trabajo que hay que hacer en dos días, yo se los hago en un día.”* A Latino pastor said he has seen people sacrifice their free time and over-work in order to keep their jobs. Some who work seven days a week are wearing out he thought. *“Se están acabando.”* A Latino conversation participant concluded that it is the incredible work ethic displayed by Latinos that has won them a place in Council Bluffs. *“Eso es lo que nos ha hecho ganarnos un lugar.”*

### **Invisible in decision-making.**

Though Latino immigrants seem to have won a place in Council Bluffs where they are valued for their contributions to the productivity and wealth generation of the community, few participate in decision-making or ascend to levels of higher responsibility in industry or any of the city’s basic institutions. A community foundation member stated, “I’m sure there are areas where Hispanic and

foreign-born folks are working in management positions, but to tell you the truth, I don't know if I know where they are." A social service director stated, "I haven't really seen that in Council Bluffs. Either in the private sector, in the public sector, or in the non-profit sector, there really is not a Latino presence." When asked about Latino managers in city government, a representative said, "I am not aware of any."

At one of the Council Bluffs casinos, three percent of Latino employees work in upper management. Eighty-eight percent are employed in the lowest of seven employment categories, which include jobs such as washing dishes, cleaning and maintenance of the indoor and outdoor areas. At a carpeting business, six of eleven installation crews are all-Latino crews. No Latinos work on the showroom floor. Five percent of 455 employees at a high-volume discount department store are Latinos, although Latinos are believed to generate thirty percent of sales, and a store representative stated the need for bilingual personnel is great. No managers at this business are Latino. At a large manufacturing plant, when asked if Latinos are employed at supervisory levels, managers explained that many Latinos are "line-leads," supervisors who are paid hourly and are responsible for the workers

on one line. Few, if any, Latinos work in a salary-level supervisory position, responsible for workers on multiple lines. The U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey data for the period 2006-2010 did not report any Latinos employed in Council Bluffs in the categories "professional, scientific, and technical services," "management of companies and enterprises," or real estate. In addition to a lack of Latinos in management, interviewees identified very few Latino or Latina professionals in the community. A school system official explained: "We are very disappointed in the number of minority teachers we have, the same for Latino teachers. I think you would find Latino and other minority employees are concentrated in the service areas of the district." Of the few Latino professionals and higher-level employees identified in interviews, those who were noted include a physician, two dental assistants, two teachers at a Catholic school, two public school employees, two employees of a youth organization, a state employee, a pastor, and several professionals living in Council Bluffs but working in Omaha.

### **Participation as consumers**

An elected official acknowledged the success of Council Bluffs retailers who have learned to target the Latino market. "The Latino population is brand-oriented and loyal, and so if you make inroads into that population, they'll support you. And so, as far as addressing your business to meet some needs of the Latino population, it's been beneficial for business." A representative from the large discount business described earlier explained that the store began to sell groceries in 1999. "You could see the increase. Hispanics, they cook with fresh ingredients. They have had a large impact on the produce section, and the entire store." The store has increased the volume and variety of Latino products and brands. The representative stated that "Latinos are a huge part of our customer base. I would say, this store here, is probably thirty percent." A lawyer interviewed said that he prefers Latino clients, lauding them for always paying, fully, and on time.





Regarding the purchase of vehicles and homes, a pastor stated that many in his Latino congregation were buying homes and often owned several vehicles. *“En la iglesia, la mayoría de la gente que tenemos está comprando su casa y por supuesto tienen sus carros, este, yo podría decir que tienen de dos a tres carros dependiendo del número de la familia.”* A real estate agent interviewed for the study thought Council Bluffs would be attractive to Latinos because the community has less crime, it has affordable rents, there is “less racial commentary,” the schools are good, and there is less gang activity. Two interviewees with knowledge of the realty business said they did not know anyone working specifically with the Latino community in that area, although a Latina business promoter in Omaha was aware of two Latino realtors from Omaha working with Latino families in Council Bluffs. A social services administrator said she has a relative who has discovered the need for bilingual real estate services in Council Bluffs and is now studying Spanish because he is eager “to fill that niche.” A Latino businessman interviewed thought many Latinos in Council Bluffs tended to rent rather than to buy homes because of their precarious immigration status and fear of losing their assets if something happened. According to the 2010 census, fifty-four percent of Latinos live in owner-occupied housing units and forty-six percent live in renter-occupied housing in Council Bluffs.

### ***The construction of a “trans-river community”.***

The participation of Latinos living, earning, and spending in Council Bluffs is a component of a trans-river economic and social dynamic of two communities in one metropolitan area. Those interviewed noted that Latino workers sometimes live in Council Bluffs and work in Omaha and that many live in Omaha and work in Council Bluffs or neighboring communities. Jorge, a Council Bluffs resident who works just outside of the city and is active in a Council Bluffs church, formerly worked at several plants in Omaha. He knows of Latinos who commute from

Omaha to work at the three food processing plants in Council Bluffs, the manufacturing plant in Shelby, and the orchards, dairies, and farms in the communities near Council Bluffs. *“Muchos vienen de Omaha, pues si, casi la mayoría son de Omaha.”*

Latinos are known to drive from Council Bluffs to enjoy Latino restaurants and shopping at the Latino-owned stores in South Omaha, especially in the evenings and on weekends. One interviewee reported that “24th Street is saturated with people, as are Q and L Streets.” Latinos from Omaha are also known to frequent large Council Bluffs discount stores, which are easily accessible by the highway from South Omaha. The flow of people and dollars between Council Bluffs and Omaha benefits both cities. A closer look at the trans-river dynamic uncovers challenges. One interviewee indicated that Council Bluffs agencies face a challenge in recruiting Latino professionals to work in the community. A school system administrator noted the impact the trans-river community reality has had on recruiting and retaining minority teachers. He said that if teachers want to be where there are larger concentrations of minority students, it is understandable that they might choose to work in Omaha instead of Council Bluffs. Several Council Bluffs Latinos said that in addition to a relative lack of ethnic businesses, Council Bluffs lacks several services they value and travel to Omaha to obtain, even though they would prefer to access them in their own community. Council Bluffs Latinos stated they need to travel to Omaha for GED classes in Spanish, for dance hall rentals, for assistance with starting their own businesses, for affordable urgent care center services, and for banking services. Latino community members pointed out that the identification card provided by the Mexican consulate, referred to as *“la matricula,”* is recognized by many business establishments in Omaha, but not by businesses in Council Bluffs. *“No valen para nada la matricula, ni en el casino.”* More on these challenges will be described in the section on institutional responses to the Latino presence.

A Latino business developer in Omaha reports having assisted twenty-five micro-entrepreneurs from the Council Bluffs area in the past four years. "Our people are very entrepreneurial," she said. At the time of the interview, she was working with individuals from Council Bluffs interested in starting businesses in child care, a *paletería* (a store that sells Mexican frozen fruit bars), a Mexican grocery store, and a restaurant. Researchers have found that immigrants in ethnic networks often choose self-employment, especially if they are disadvantaged in the wage-earning sector because of a lack of English language proficiency and formal education (Toussant-Comeau, 2008). Researchers have calculated that the entire U.S. net growth in low-skilled self-employment (low-skilled is defined here to be individuals without formal education beyond high school) from 1980 to 2007 stems from immigration (Lofstrom, 2011).

Regarding the presence of Council Bluffs Latino businesses, an elected official said: "It's nice to see those businesses spring up here in the local community." But Latinos reported difficulty in getting the support they needed. A business leader said: "A lot of times banks are very hesitant to loan money you know, to Hispanics or Asians or whatever, if they don't see the history behind their earnings and those types of things." Cristina lamented the obstacles Latinos face in starting their own small businesses in Council Bluffs. It is difficult for her to understand why a person cannot sell food for example, as a vendor on the street or outside a workplace as is done in Omaha.

*Aquí está bien difícil querer poner un negocio. Te ponen muchas trabas a uno. En México cualquiera puede poner un negocio, hasta afuera de su casa. Y aquí no. En México hay loncheras donde quiera. Donde quiera venden comida, afuera de los trabajos. Aquí no.*

Other interviewees also mentioned that Council Bluffs is perceived as unfriendly to street vendors and food trucks and it is not clear if the city has a policy against this prac-

tice, which Latinos view as contributing to the economy and a sense of community in Council Bluffs.

Jorge mentioned that at one time a taco truck from an Omaha restaurant was selling on 28th and Broadway, but he believes they were "kicked out." He knows of a Mexican food vendor who is allowed to sell inside a plant, but not outside. He told another story about a young man who sells *paletas*, Mexican frozen fruit bars on the streets. "They do not want him to sell these. He does it anyway. Any day they can pass by and pick him up and take him away. I don't know if it is for health reasons, or if a permit is needed, I don't know, but sometimes people need to do this to make ends meet." He contrasted Council Bluffs with Omaha.

I like to go to Omaha because there I can walk on 24th Street and see women selling candy, hot dogs... It makes me happy to see people who struggle to live being able to do this. Here there are people in need who want to promote their business, but it is not allowed. It is a roadblock they put up for people.... Or perhaps they are afraid.

The Latino economic developer explained that for some immigrants it is becoming more difficult to start businesses. "Regulations are requiring more licenses and there is a need to be seen as professionals and provide receipts and that type of thing." Still, she said that for some people, the informal is the only option and many Latinos provide good products and services. "*Mira, decirte que no lo hay sería mentira, porque hay alguna gente que de pronto por su situación legal lo hace de esa forma, cierto.*" She explained that business owners without authorized immigration status pay taxes with an Individual Tax Identification Number (ITIN) provided to them by the Internal Revenue Service. "People want to have their history of work in this country – with the hope of legalizing." If they are working for a sales distribution company (e.g. health supplements or beauty products): "The company pays the taxes. They receive a salary and declare it with an ITIN or with a Social Security number."



## II. Latino Participation in the Wider Community

It is evident that Latinos participate in the Council Bluffs and area economy as workers and consumers and that this participation is part of a trans-river community dynamic. This study also sought to shed light on how the Latino presence is perceived outside of participation in the economy, how basic institutions are responding, and how both Latinos and community leaders perceive attitudes and interactions. (We recognize the artificial nature of this separation, but offer it for the sake of analysis and discussion.) Individual perceptions and institutional responses can be divided into three categories: 1) the invisibility of Latinos to stakeholders, 2) uninformed recognition of change, and 3) acceptance and openness to improving relations.

### **Spectrum of Perceptions**

#### ***Invisible and silent.***

Some Council Bluffs stakeholders observe little change and growth regarding the Latino presence. A business leader judged that Council Bluffs has a “relatively small Hispanic

population that lives here.” An attorney stated he doesn’t “see a lot of Latinos in the Council Bluffs area.” I really haven’t seen the growth other than opening a new office [Centro Latino] across the street.” A social agency leader initially said, “I would say I don’t see it [Latino presence] much. I would really say that. I would say it’s not very visible to me.” Upon further reflection, she said, “I see an increase actually, a little bit, when I am out shopping in our community. I notice Hispanics a little bit. She added that “I’ve seen there’s a lot more [Latino] laborers in the community, in the construction business, which are men, you know, of course, I’ve noticed that.”

Comments from an African-American businesswoman emphasized the silent nature of the Latino presence. “I can see that there are a lot of Latino workers at ConAgra and that’s just when there’s a shift change and you happen to notice. The only time I see a large crew of guys, like Latino workers, is after a hail storm [when they are fixing roofs]. They’re silent. It’s almost like they’re unheard of, and I know they’re here.”

### ***Recognition that things are changing.***

Two civic leaders' reflections represent a second kind of awareness that the community is changing, but are also an admission that they do not know as much about the new immigrants as they think they should and struggle with how best to respond. One reflected on his awareness of the history of Latinos in the Council Bluffs community and his positive encounters with new immigrants in his business roles, but concluded that his knowledge of newer immigrant Latinos is less than it should be.

[There is a] long history of Latinos in Council Bluffs dating back to the railroad days when Council Bluffs was a significant railroad town and Union Pacific was a large employer. We have the Mexican-American families that have been here for years and I know and am friends with some of them. And there's a new population, I know, but I don't really know much about them. You know, I see them working. I know from friends who are in the retail business that they're brand-loyal. I know from banking that they're honest people, and that they put in an honest day's work, but I really don't know much more than that. I think our low unemployment drives people to chase jobs and come here. I think they are doing OK in our schools. I don't know as much as I probably should.

The second leader's comments reflect his desire to support Latino businesspersons and integrate them into the life of the community, but they also express his frustration with not knowing how to bridge cultural chasms.

[Regarding] personal backing from the investors, and all that stuff that we have to go through that we're all relatively used to, that's not what they're used to and so it's very intimidating when we start to, you know, get them involved in our programs and things like that. The other thing that's intimidating, you know, part of our networking, they'll come to a networking event and they're probably one out of a hundred people, they're probably one of five Hispanics that's there. So it's just difficult to integrate. Maybe they speak English well, maybe they don't, and so it's just difficult for

them to be integrated, and that's the problem we see in a lot of our things. We get them in as a chamber member, and then how do we, other than patronize their business, how do we get them involved? Do we create a Hispanic section of our chamber specifically for Hispanics, and I think actually Omaha has. We've had a couple of Latino businesses that have been members of the chamber and unfortunately [they] have not been successful.

### ***Acceptance and desire to improve.***

A social service agency head exemplifies a perspective of awareness, acceptance, and commitment to action. She monitors educational and demographic trends in the community and nationally and has "seen the demographic shift." "In order to be a responsive organization, we need to tackle that [changing demographics.]" They have hired Latino staff. "I strive to be inclusive to reach the children in need."

### **Institutional Responses**

Looking closer at institutional responses to the Latino presence in Council Bluffs, we see a range of practices that correspond with perceptions of the importance of the Latino presence. Some institutional practices are evidence of a lack of awareness of needs and a measure of ambivalence. Other institutional responses present examples of initial efforts to serve and to integrate the growing population.

### ***Tension and confusion.***

One social service agency leader stated that "we don't have anybody on staff here in Iowa that is bilingual in our outpatient office." She said the Latino community is "not a huge part of our business... I don't think there is a big need in this town." At the same time she indicated an uncertainty over whether or not to prioritize services for Hispanics. She said her agency struggles with the question of whether it should advertise services in the Latino community if it is not certain it has the capacity to serve. A civic leader explained that over the years, leaders have



discussed pros and cons of the influx of new immigrants into the area.

The pros of course, are, people here. They would buy houses here. They would buy their groceries here. They would do commerce here, pay property taxes, pay sales taxes, you know, enrich our culture. All those types of things have been talked about as pros. The cons are we don't have enough housing to accommodate that many people, especially in their price ranges. That's the other thing, you know, being able to afford a house based upon what they're making... we just don't have the amount of housing available in those price ranges. And if there is, it's probably not very well suited.

I'm not sure that we have the infrastructure to handle the large influx of Hispanic workers and families. Socially, from a social human service perspective, from an educational institution perspective, from even an emergency hospital type perspective, we just don't have that. And it's not just Council Bluffs in all honesty. I think it's the state of Iowa, and maybe the state of Nebraska, too. I don't know. But, you know, in Iowa, we say yes, we want all of your workers, we want all these immigrants, but then they move in and we're not ready for them. We don't have the ability in our schools to teach all these kids who don't speak English. We don't have the ability to do that, especially in the smaller school districts, you know. We don't have that ability to hire more teachers. And we don't have that ability to have independent study programs for the kids who don't speak English. And, you know, we have kids that come into our schools that, you know, aren't fluent in their own language, let alone fluent in our language.

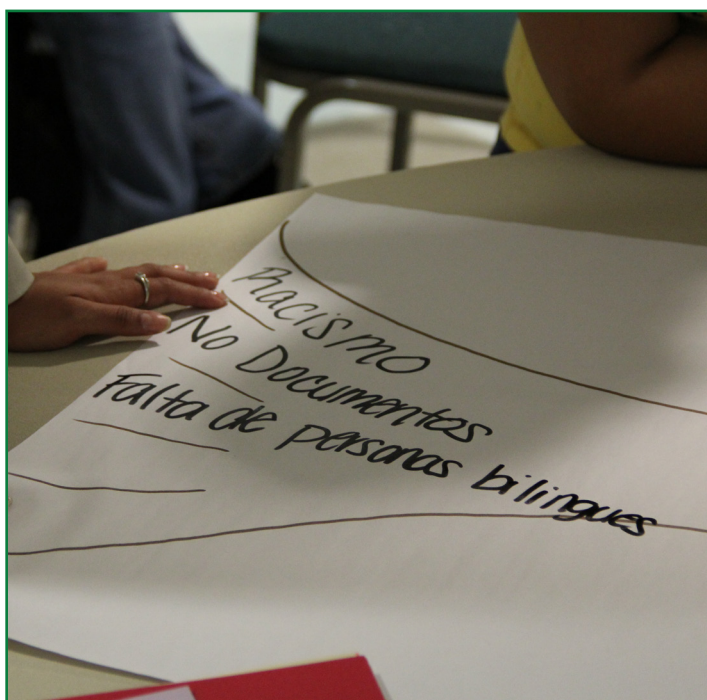
### ***Lack of bilingual government services.***

The lack of bilingual personnel in Council Bluffs was a strong theme arising from community members at the "Community Conversation" held in November of 2012. Participants stated specific needs for bilingual personnel

in hospitals, pharmacies, banks, the courthouse and government offices, stores and other businesses. Participants and interviewees described the serious consequences, and fear, of making mistakes such as incorrectly signing papers in court or answering questions without adequate interpretation. "Sometimes in government offices they throw you out because of no communication," one person said. A Latina immigrant interviewee, Manuela, explained the difficulties she experienced obtaining a state ID and a driver's license. The attendant asked her for more proof of her residency than was necessary when she applied for her state ID after she became a naturalized citizen. She was able to take the written part of the driver's test in Spanish, although she felt the translation was confusing and worded poorly. For the behind-the-wheel test she needed a vehicle with insurance. She could not obtain the insurance on her own vehicle without the license so she needed to borrow a car with insurance. No bilingual persons were on staff to conduct the driver's test, so she was required to take along her own interpreter. She passed the test and obtained her license, but again had to take her own interpreter in order to obtain her license plates. Manuela also explained that she and her husband were interested in opening their own business in house remodeling. She sought information at the courthouse about how to obtain a business license. She was inhibited and discouraged when she found no bilingual persons on staff and has not returned to pursue this business interest further. In Council Bluffs work locations, bilingual services for employees vary. Interpreters are provided for orientation of new hires at one casino. The casino representative believed that the business worked to make sure new employees "understand our policies and procedures." She thought "very few people have left after that not feeling comfortable." All benefits are explained in Spanish. In contrast, at a large manufacturing/food processing plant, an interviewee described "lots of communication problems" and misunderstandings, especially of leave policies and what employees need to do when a child is sick.

An attorney interviewed said he is committed to obtaining an interpreter whenever one is needed. He said he has a list of people who are court-certified translators. He commented: "Any attorney who's worth their weight is going to have an interpreter there... to, if nothing else, cover their own ass. I've seen people who are stumbling through without an interpreter, and they sign something without even knowing what they are signing with great long-term effects."

An elected city official demonstrated some awareness of the city's need for more bilingual government services. "I don't think we have enough employees in the city or in law enforcement that can communicate in Spanish to Latin Americans that don't speak English." Bilingual services are provided in some area health care institutions including Jennie Edmundson Hospital in Council Bluffs. Carlos said many Latinos access their emergency services at "Jennie's." A benefits specialist at a large business in Council Bluffs said she is dismayed that urgent care services, with more affordable co-pays of \$20 to \$30 instead of \$150 for the hospital emergency room, are not available for the Spanish-speaking in Council Bluffs.



### ***Institutional efforts.***

The Adult Learning Center, administered by Iowa Western Community College and located in the Omni Center building, offers face-to-face English classes for adults in Council Bluffs at various levels and on different days and times. The coordinator explained that her Spanish-speaking students were "definitely the majority" of her 135 steady students and the numbers are increasing. She recognized that GED classes are not offered in Spanish in Council Bluffs nor are Iowa residents allowed to take the test in Nebraska, although Nebraskans are permitted to take the test in Iowa. The adult education coordinator speculated that the nearest place to take the test in Spanish in Iowa is Sioux City.

A representative from the Council Bluffs Community School District (CBCS) administration described seeing an increase in the number of minority students in the district from two percent minority when he started twenty-nine years ago to twenty-two percent today, with 1,300 students, fifteen percent, identifying as Hispanic. He noted that two elementary schools are now twenty-three percent Latino. Out of a student population of 9,000, CBCS has 1,307 Latino students (fifteen percent) and 647 English Language Learners. The system employs one full-time Spanish interpreter.

From the Latino perspective, Manuela expressed her gratitude that at her parent-teacher conference this year, an interpreter was present at her child's elementary school. She had requested this in writing in the past. She said she was proud that her son was now a tutor in a program he had once participated in, receiving help learning to read. She appreciated that her son was trained to know how to "befriend the younger children, keep their confidences" and help them learn.

Another Latino parent and small-business owner also had positive things to say about the school system. She said she thought the Council Bluffs schools were very good and very strict with all of the children. Her two youngest

children were not reading when they entered kindergarten and by first grade, thanks to a special program, they were reading and counting.

*Los que están estudiando, si miro que están bien y más aquí ...pues yo estudié en Phoenix y yo he oído de Omaha, pues conozco mucha gente de Omaha, pero el distrito de Council Bluffs es muy bueno, muy estricto con todos los niños. Como mis dos más chicos que no podían leer en kindergarten y ya para primero quieren que lean, que cuente y ya lo hacen. Les ponen un programa. Vamos a los programas y ya mi niño puede contar, puede leer las palabras. Veo que si está todo bien, pienso yo, para los niños que están encarredarditos.*

Not all participants in the research project had positive experiences with the school system. One parent shared a negative experience with the interpreting service. Even when she notified the school ahead of time, she said, she was not provided with an interpreter for her child's parent-teacher conference. She also described a time when her child was sick and she tried calling the number on a card given to her for interpretation services with the school. She said no one answered. Her child was marked absent. "This is a problem for the child and for the parents. After, they even want to send the police after you." *"Es un problema para el niño y para los papas. Y despues le quieren hechar uno hasta la policía."*

A school system official emphasized the positive efforts being made. He noted that the minority students consistently have a lower dropout rate than non-minority students. This year, out of fifty-one students who dropped out of school, three were Latinos. This administrator emphasized that the schools are a safe place for immigrants regardless of their status "I swear to God, we are a safe place. We don't talk to U.S. immigration. Our school officers don't give a hoot about what kid is or isn't... We only want to

do the best job we know how to get you an education." He also recognized the importance and competence of a Latina professional in one school.

She tends not to be, what I would call 'loud' as a Hispanic advocate, but she's obviously very, very aware of all of the needs of her kids, and she also clearly understands that minority kids in the majority environment certainly see the world somewhat differently than those of us on the other side.

On the state level, Iowa Workforce Development employs a coordinator for the New Iowans Program at the Council Bluffs office. This role is held by a Latina professional who has long been active and committed to the well-being of the Latino and broader immigrant community in Council Bluffs. She described her current responsibilities as overseeing the language-learning computer lab, helping individuals with resumes and with preparing for job interviews, referring potential applicants to places where they can obtain appropriate clothes for job interviews at no cost, and teaching the citizenship class. When she previously worked as director of a foundation-funded immigrant outreach effort, she had help from volunteers and additional staff. In her current position, she is not able to obtain assistance and she said so many people want her services that she feels like she is on a production line. *"Hay tantísima gente."*

Manuela spoke with gratitude for the citizenship classes taught by this Latina educator and advocate. She described a teaching style that enabled students to understand the citizenship concepts in Spanish and then learn the answers to test questions in English. The teacher herself spoke with pride about having graduated 256 students. All had passed their citizenship tests. At Workforce Development, formal English classes aren't offered, but computers are provided with the language-learning program Rosetta Stone. Students create their profiles and work at their own pace and level to improve their English skills. The federally-funded Community Health Center of Council

Bluffs recently changed its name to All Care Health Center and moved to a location near a popular Latino store and restaurant and the community service agency, *El Centro Latino*. The director of All Care expressed pride that five of thirty-two employees were bilingual. She praised the services of a very committed bilingual Latina doctor on staff and four other bilingual staff members, two dental assistants, and two front desk workers. She reported that all of the center's patient materials are in Spanish and currently thirteen or fourteen percent of their clients are Latinos. Clinic leaders made it a point to incorporate Latinos into a recent video describing their services. The bilingual staff members are valued for their commitment, effective care and concern for patients, and also for their cost-savings to the government-funded non-profit. The administrator found it interesting, almost inspiring, how her bilingual, bicultural staff care for Latino patients:

[They are] ready to assist their needs right away. We've been blessed to have Dr. Garcia and not have to use an interpreter with her when she is taking care of her patients. She is brilliant. She's got that passion and love. Bilingual staff are assigned to duties just as the others, only-English-speaking staff, but when there is a need to assist that [Latino] patient population, there's never a question, there's never a complaint. That's an extra job for some of them, but they do it lovingly.

The Mexican doctor at the All Care Health Center informed Manuela about state government insurance programs, Hawk-I Health and Iowa Care, for children and families who do not have insurance and who are not eligible for Medicaid. Manuela and her family have benefited from these programs. She was especially grateful for an electric scooter she obtained for her mother who is not able to walk on her own.

A youth agency director remembers when the first ESL classes came to Abraham Lincoln high school in 1998 when he was a student. "I'm starting to see more and more things translated, which is good to see." He expressed a

desire to better serve Latino families. He said his youth club in Council Bluffs is seven percent Latino. "It is not as sports-oriented as other clubs," he said, "but we have a lot of art and games." He would like to do a better job letting the Latino community know it is welcome at the club. "It would be great to let the Latino and Hispanic community know that it is a safe place to come. I am excited to get the word out even further." The pastor of Corpus Christi Catholic Church (composed of both Holy Family and Queen of Apostles Churches) described his growing Latino congregation as impressive.

Walking into it, it feels broader. There are a large number of recent immigrants. My installation as pastor took place on the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The bishop saw the full church and balcony and the contrast between the 'mostly grey-haired' crowd at [services in English at] Holy Family and Queen of Apostles. The Latino community at Queen of Apostles is full of very young families.

Sunday Catholic services in Spanish are offered weekly at Queen of the Apostles Catholic Church, with an estimated participation of 400 individuals. The minister to the Hispanic community is a Des Moines diocesan priest who spent thirty years ministering in Bolivia, South America. He presides at the weekly liturgy except for the first Sunday of the month when the pastor, also a fluent Spanish-speaker presides. At age 78, the Hispanic minister described what he is able to do in the community as "minimal stuff." He leads the weekly worship service, facilitates a Monday night bible study and discussion, visits homes, celebrates weddings, baptisms, meets with parents of children preparing to receive first communion, and supports individuals and families as he is able. "It's not enough. But it's what we have. We can't offer any more. It's not what they would get if they would stay in Mexico."

At the service in Spanish the priest distributes a scripture-related activity sheet. He calculates that there are consistently more than sixty children at Sunday worship



services because “that is how many copies I make and they always disappear.” He wishes more could be done for youth. A big challenge for the church, he believes, is making it an inter-cultural parish. He says it is not easy to know how to do this, but for now, he says “it’s going amazingly well.”

The associate pastor of the Broadway United Methodist Church agreed with the Catholic pastor’s assessment: “Each day the Hispanic presence grows stronger.... Now it is very common to meet Hispanics wherever you go [in Council Bluffs].” As associate pastor for nine years serving the Latinos, he said his congregation of 150 to 200 includes Mexicans, Hondurans, Guatemalans, El Salvadorans, as well as families from the Dominican Republic and Cuba. About seventy Latinos form a stable core group. He ministers at the church, works with the social service ministry of the Centro Latino, leads a service in Spanish in Oakland, Iowa (since 2011) and also works with Hispanics who find themselves at the local prison. Latino interviewees thought at least two evangelical churches also serve the Latino community in Council Bluffs.

Council Bluffs historically has had one Latino-focused service organization, the *Centro Latino*. The Centro Latino began as an outreach of the Methodist church, but it later became an independent non-profit agency. In the early years, outreach efforts included after-school programs, assisting community members with applications for health services, and translating or interpreting in a variety of situations. A board member recalled that the Centro Latino focused on the workforce area, doing work-related translations. The Methodist associate pastor remembers staff taking people to doctor’s appointments, providing assistance with utility bills and with other tangible family needs. He sees that Latinos are more independent now so the organization is discussing a change in focus toward capacity-building with families and youth.

## **Spectrum of attitudes**

In addition to perceptions regarding the physical presence of Latinos and examples of how institutions are responding to the growing presence of Latinos, interview transcripts were analyzed to identify attitudes toward Latino immigrants. Attitudes perceived on the part of non-Latino members of the Council Bluffs community regarding the presence of Latino immigrants varied widely, ranging from hostility on one end of an attitude spectrum, to appreciation and a desire for more effective integration on the other end.

Hostility/ Discriminatory	Tolerance
Ambivalence/ Confusion	Interest
Acceptance Welcome	Appreciation
Desire for Integration	Commitment to Integration

A lawyer with a business in Council Bluffs described the negative stereotypes he has heard expressed by fellow attorneys while having lunch together at a Mexican restaurant: “Even while sitting in there, you can hear comments of, you know, that they believe that these are just fronts... to run drugs. That this is just a front; this is just them trying to get a foot in the door, so that they can have some way to launder their drug money.” His impression is that racist attitudes linger on and that “Council Bluffs

is very closed toward any newcomers.” He believes that he needs to explain the difficult reality of potential racial discrimination to clients when they are considering a trial. “The ideal is you never have to consider race in those things, but in Council Bluffs you really do.”

A civic leader described the negative judgments about Latino workers held by some in the dominant community: “... there are, I think others, who I think, have somewhat of a, I don’t know, if it’s a bias or what it is, they just say, you know, they’re not as smart as we are, so therefore they can’t do those robotic jobs, and things like that. Again, I don’t believe that’s true.” He acknowledged that negative attitudes toward immigrants persist in the area. “We still have a lot of rednecks in our state, who say ‘I don’t want them here and I’ll do anything I can to make them not feel welcome.’ Some people would say that I’m one,” he added, but went on to reflect out loud about his changing and current views. “We’re a diverse world. We need to be a diverse country. We need to be a diverse state.”

In the view of this community leader, the integration of Latinos is part of ongoing class and cultural segregation challenges that exist in Council Bluffs.

... Council Bluffs is not unlike any – many communities in that... and it’s not just cultural. It’s also socioeconomic. It’s the whole nine yards of the haves and the have-nots, and the management vs. labor and east side vs. west side, and just things like that that you see in a lot of communities. We have spent a long time trying to create the unity, but it’s hard when you have, you know, Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln, and oh yeah, now you’ve got Lewis Central as the privileged ones because they’ve got the newest school. Thomas Jefferson, that’s the poor people, which is probably not true, but for some reason, there’s that perception. And we had the same thing with rich and poor, young and old, Hispanics, whites, whatever it might be. We have that process of educating people about the fact that diversity is good.

Another civic leader expressed the view that Latinos are assimilating well into the Council Bluffs community. His impression is they gather within their own community and help other Latinos until they get on their own feet. “I haven’t seen any detrimental effects. It’s been a smooth transition.” An educational leader seemed grateful for at least a minimum of what he is convinced is a kind of tolerance. He stated that at least in Council Bluffs there is “never overt hostility.” He views immigrants as bringing drive and initiative into the community, but worries that fear keeps people from building fruitful relationships. He notes fear among immigrants in Council Bluffs “in terms of who’s it safe to talk to, who’s it safe to expose myself to, if you will. You certainly can’t build communication if you can’t build trust, and how do you build trust if you can’t build communication.” He recognized “there’s a lot of drive and initiative there, and you hold immigrants at a distance, you lose that drive. You lose that initiative. You lose that desire for success.” He hopes the wider community can learn to relax, to accept, and to embrace new immigrants.



Commenting on what strengths Latinos bring to the community, he highlighted their sense of adaptability and adventure, their strong sense of family and extended family, and their eagerness to learn and succeed.

Most of the Hispanic kids I know of are fairly eager learners. They just want to. They want to absorb it. They want to suck it up. And most of the parents I know want success for their kids. They may not be quite sure what that process is in their new community, but they want success for their kids and they preach success, and they expect success. So, you know, these are all pretty prime characteristics. These are definite strengths that they bring to a community, to a school system.

The Hispanic Catholic minister admires the resilience, goodness, and mutual respect he sees in members of the Latino immigrant community he has grown to know.

All have stories... some horrendous, of what they've gone through, the desert, settling here... tremendous challenges and they've stood up to it you know. And they've weathered it really well. They've hung in there. Another thing is, basically, they're good people. There's really good, rock-solid goodness in them. They have their faults, but they're not major. Latinos are reluctant to offend you. This is such a good characteristic. It is good for our country to have that. They treat themselves and one another better than we do.

He sees some positive changes taking place as the majority community interacts more with Latinos and observes their respect and care for their shared church.

I think since I've come here, attitudes have begun to change, okay. I think that they're not, the Hispanic people are not [seen as] their enemies, you know, that they are human beings like they are. We have been very careful here, not to make a mess. If we have a meeting, we clean up. ... in church, we clean up after mass, you know. We see that the bathrooms are clean, that the lights are out and so forth. And I think that they see that, and we use the

kitchen you know, we don't leave it a mess. Those are details that are very important to these people.

A civic leader also has observed some slow change in the state and community. "Iowa's changing, but very slowly. Council Bluffs is a little bit like that, we're changing, but very slowly. Everybody is afraid of change in their own way, but I think once you embrace it, you're ahead." One interviewee simply said about Latinos: "I want them to feel welcome."

### **Interactions between communities**

In addition to perceptions and attitudes, this assessment of the Council Bluffs experience of Latino immigrants also sought to identify behaviors that exemplify interactions taking place between Latinos and non-Latinos. Very few spaces were identified where Latinos and non-Latinos interact meaningfully. Four kinds of interaction were perceived: Latinos receiving services from the dominant community, Latinos providing service to the dominant community, Latinos and others interacting side by side, and attempts at more mutually beneficial exchanges.

As observed earlier, Latinos are on the receiving end of professional services provided by government, school systems, business, recreation, and religious institutions in Council Bluffs, with rare exceptions. Some examples exist where Latinos provide services to members of the non-Latino community, whether it is the example of the Latino child being trained to be a tutor in his grade school, a Latina counselor serving all students, or Latinos providing food, beauty salon services, or automotive repair services. One Latina beauty shop owner said forty to fifty percent of her clients are White Americans. She is surprised herself that they feel comfortable, "even when we have [Mexican] music blaring." She also described how a neighboring (non-Latino) hair salon surprised her by repeatedly referring customers when it cannot handle all of its business.

At the Catholic church, Whites from the parish come over to the church hall and buy food from Latino parishioners at the 'kermeses' or food sales the Latino parishioners often have in the summer to raise money for the annual Guadalupe celebration. On the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe at Our Lady Queen of the Apostles, non-Latinos also attend the bilingual mass. Interviewees noted that so many people came to the mass, they did not fit in the church *"no cabían en la iglesia."* Still, the main services remain very separate. The weekly church bulletin did not have bilingual content or mention Hispanic ministries. Latinos described a freedom to live wherever they wished in Council Bluffs. *"Tenemos la libertad de vivir donde queremos vivir o donde podemos vivir."* They noted that Latinos can be found living in all areas of the city. *"Lo curioso de Council Bluffs es que los Latinos no se concentran en una sola zona. Los Latinos están en toda la ciudad."* Another noted that historically, "Latinos were more concentrated in the south end of town, six blocks either side of 24th Street, an east-west street." A Latino business owner said there are three areas of greater concentration of Latinos in town: near Broadway, in back of ConAgra, and near Lake Manawa. Carter Lake also has a trailer park where an estimated one-third of the residents are Latinos.

Some Latinos described spontaneous positive interactions in their neighborhoods. Luisa said her neighbors have been friendly to her family for the fourteen years they have lived in Council Bluffs. *"Siempre están atentos, 'hi', 'bye.'* They report to her about activities when her family is traveling and offer help with the dog. Jorge described a warm welcome he received from a neighbor when he recently moved into a new neighborhood. The neighbor advised him to be careful of specific neighbors who would not be so welcoming.

Although superficial encounters continue to increase, the Protestant religious leader could think of very little meaningful interaction between communities. He described a reticence on the part of Latinos to speak with the 'Anglos,' often because of language and often because "we think the Anglos won't speak with us."

*No hay muchos lados de interacción. Si vas a una tienda, me imagino. Puedes convivir pero no platicas con ellos. Practicamente nos cohibimos a platicar con los anglos, muchos por el idioma y muchos porque te sientes cohibido o sientes que no te van a dirigir la palabra o muchas veces los mismos anglos te hacen el feo.*

A school system administrator said he also recognizes "a hesitancy and a fear within immigrants." Rosa, speaking at the Community Conversation, said she thought Latinos could do more to communicate acceptance to non-Latinos who try to reach out in friendship. *"Hay Americanos bien lindos y se quieren acercar, pero no saben como porque no los aceptamos."*

The Council Bluffs Community School system leaders have recognized the need to be proactive about bringing diverse students together for meaningful interaction. An administrator described a leadership and social norming initiative in the high schools designed to bring together students of different backgrounds for leadership development. He heard it was going well. When asked about the quality of the interaction between Latinos and non-Latinos at his school, a high school junior soccer player at one high school responded *"bien,"* that it is fine. He said little natural interaction really happens. Groups stick to themselves for the most part. *"Los Latinos se juntan con los Latinos y los gueros se juntan con los gueros."* The exception he pointed to was his soccer team. Players mixed on the soccer team *"todos los amigos de fútbol nos juntamos allí y allí hay unos gueros también."*

When asked about ideas of projects that might promote positive interaction between communities, research participants offered the following ideas:

- Engage Latinos in carrying a banner in the parade and selling food in the annual Council Bluffs Pride celebration
- Host a culture or diversity fair in town
- Involve Latinos in local and regional agriculture initiatives and farmers' markets
- Educate people about the advantages of a diverse workforce
- Bring people together, inform them, ask for their input, for example with surveys and town hall meetings
- Share histories of how various immigrant groups came to Council Bluffs
- One research participant admitted, I "don't know how to go about doing that... to engage, connect, involve...."

Other ideas focused on ways to improve life for Latinos:

- Make available GED classes in Spanish
- Develop scholarship programs like the Omaha Barrientos scholarships
- Have a meeting for the Latino community to present and learn about existing resources and welcoming spaces
- Clarify parenting practices and laws that parents need to understand to avoid problems with police
- Develop part-time jobs for youth to help the community and gain skills
- Connect professional Latinos in Omaha with those in Council Bluffs
- Develop a group for "Latinos in Council Bluffs to unite, to be heard, to motivate us to learn and defend ourselves more."





### III. Latino Experience and Desire for a Voice

Is it true that Latino immigrants have 'won a place' in the Council Bluffs society?

How open is it, how secure, how resourced? If the level of interaction between Latinos and the wider community is a measure, the place Latinos have won in Council Bluffs is limited and tenuous. This section of the report seeks to illuminate this point further by focusing on Latino views, experiences, initiatives, and aspirations, gathered mainly during "Community Conversations" that were open to all and advertised through posters and at church services. These conversations were held at Queen of the Apostles Catholic Church in November 2012 and January 2013 and attended by sixty-one Latino community members.

#### **Motivation for immigrating**

Latinos stressed that their fundamental motivation for leaving their countries of origin was to forge a future for their children with a better quality of life. "We are here and we are well." *"Nosotros no dejamos nuestros países de origen porque no los queremos. Estamos aquí y estamos bien pero más que todo lo estamos haciendo pensando*

*en el futuro de nuestros hijos, para que tengan una mejor calidad de vida."*

Manuela tried to describe what it is like to be an immigrant. She says it is as if you arrive with a blindfold on. Then, after time, you adjust to the way people live here. *"Llegas vendada de los ojos. Hasta que pasa el tiempo, te vas acoplando a la forma de vivir..."*

#### **Skills Latinos bring and struggles encountered**

Many spoke about the struggle of dealing with deep frustrations facing barriers of language and immigration status and, in some cases, feeling incapable of finding jobs that allowed them to utilize their knowledge and skills because of these barriers.

*Venimos a trabajar y a veces no hacemos lo que es nuestra profesión porque falta documento y facilidades de poder conseguirlos. Aquí hay muchos que son maestros, ingenieros, arquitectos, doctores, y no pueden hacer su especialidad pues con la que cuentan. Yo tengo un amigo que es veterinario y trabaja en una empacadora de carne. Tengo dos*

### *hermanos ingenieros. Uno trabaja instalando carpeta.*

Latinos valued their own ability to adapt and learn a variety of skills. Jorge said that in his job on a ranch he does many things. "Even plumbing is not difficult for me. I do some of everything, even being the chef in the restaurant." Jorge explained he has worked in construction, as a painter, as a cook in restaurants in the U.S. and in Mexico, and as a shoe repairman. He described his resourcefulness, saying, "they called me the person of a thousand skills." *"Me decían 'el mil usos.'"* He brings experience and confidence to his work and enjoys learning new things. When he is introduced to new machines on the ranch, he quickly learns to operate them well.

Participants expressed the judgment that a just immigration system does not exist in the United States. *"No existe un sistema de migración justo."* Jorge said he is mystified about why the government doesn't see the benefits of passing immigration reform with a path to citizenship. He said he would be "willing to pay the \$1,000 even up to \$5,000 and that would bring in a lot of money for the government." He said the first thing he would do after obtaining his 'papers' would be to buy a house for his family. He thought there would be many benefits for the country.

Beyond frustration, other Latinos described painful experiences of being mistreated. During table presentations at the November Community Conversation one woman said "We do not feel comfortable in Council Bluffs." Another said she and many other Latinos feel "impotent" especially "not being able to "defend ourselves from those who insult us." What makes life difficult, participants explained, are experiences of racism and discrimination, not being able to obtain immigration authorization, the lack of bilingual personnel, and the bad reputation Latinos are sometimes given just for being Latinos. Another participant pointed to the abuse experienced by Latinos at work. He speculated that at the root of this problem is the lack of knowledge of labor rights, the fear people have of losing their jobs,

as well as the lack of confidence with the language and lack of 'documents.' During a separate interview, this participant said that life here has been difficult. "I have had many injuries here. People are mistreated here." *"Si mire. Yo tuve muchas heridas aquí. Te maltratan aquí."* He also thought that being from different countries of origin (e.g. Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala) makes it difficult for workers to know each other well and to help each other in the workplace.

One Latina professional interviewed described not being recognized, valued, or paid extra for her bilingual skills, her cultural competency, and the extra work she does dealing with personnel issues, such as taking care "of team relations issues, taking care of applicants, and helping with risk management." She seemed proud that all employee materials in her workplace are in Spanish and English. She described helping Spanish-language dominant employees to understand their benefits: "I'll sit with them if they have difficulty and I'll read the questions." She also described feeling the need for a college degree even though others in her area do not have degrees. "I would not be allowed to work in that office if I didn't have a degree. That's my perception, that's my thought. I just don't believe that that's my luxury" [to be promoted without a degree as others have been].

### **Latino initiative**

When the conversations turned to ways that Latinos have demonstrated leadership to improve the situation for the Latino community, one example mentioned was the success in obtaining a Catholic service in Spanish in town. The Spanish worship service began at the Queen of Apostles Catholic Church in November of 2009 in response to organizing efforts of Latino Catholics who collected hundreds of signatures in workplaces and presented them to the Bishop of the Des Moines Catholic Diocese. Upon receiving word that a Spanish-speaking minister would be assigned to Council Bluffs and a worship service in Spanish would be initiated, volunteers posted flyers in

the Mexican stores and spread the word broadly in the community. According to parishioner interviewees, the congregation has grown from thirty or forty the first year to a regular attendance of four hundred at the 2:00 p.m. service in Spanish. At this Sunday Spanish worship service, researchers observed leadership participation from males and females of various ages: Latinos led the congregation in song and played instruments in the choir, read scripture readings, led prayers, presented announcements, and distributed communion.

Latino Catholics built on this positive experience and organized kermeses (cultural food sales) to raise money so that cultural celebrations during the feast of Guadalupe could include traditional dancers, a mariachi band to play *las mañanitas* (a traditional morning serenade), hall decorations, and plentiful food. A committee of Latinos from the parish has met over the years to plan these events. Individual Latino advocates have also served the community over the years. One adult educator and advocate was mentioned by both Latinos and non-Latinos for her initiatives and effective service to the Latino community of Council Bluffs. *"Ella mueve cosas, que se hagan muchas cosas para los Latinos. Ella me enseñó mis clases de ciudadanía. Por ella yo pasé mi examen de ciudadanía."* A Council Bluffs agency director said, "She was on our board. She diligently worked to help us. We need her help or someone else to embrace more of the culture and have better representation."

Individual Latino entrepreneurs have taken the initiative in promoting and leading their businesses in the Council Bluffs community, employing others, and contributing to Latino groups such as athletic clubs or school events. In 2013, Latino students and staff supporters at Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson high schools in Council Bluffs formed Latino clubs to promote Latino culture and academic advancement.

## **Desire for a voice – Civic participation**

Latinos expressed a desire for a voice and role in the broader Council Bluffs community.

*Yo soy de El Salvador y trabajo en Tyson y estoy aquí porque me interesa saber de la comunidad latina. ... saber de qué sí existimos en este estado aunque es pequeño... pero tenemos un poco de voz ...para que nos demos cuenta de que sí existimos en esta ciudad.*

One woman explained she is interested to see all Latinos be heard, no matter what place, region, or country they come from or where they are now. "We all contribute and we all should be heard no matter where we are found."

*"Me interesa que seamos escuchados todos, de la región que vengamos, del lugar que vengamos, del país de origen. Todos los hispanos. Todos contribuimos y pues que seamos escuchados donde sea que nos encontremos."*

Latino participants recognized that they need to put in effort to obtain the tools to help their own community, including the development of English language skills, knowledge of their rights, and encouragement of their children to stay in school and become bilingual professionals. *"No tenemos las herramientas. No ponemos nuestra parte: voy a aprender el idioma, de mis derechos."*

Conversation participants recognized that no Latino-led organization exists in Council Bluffs promoting Latino civic engagement. Latinos see the need to organize a group to help them unite, to help them learn about and defend their rights, to support each other in learning English, and to give their community a stronger voice. *[Necesitamos] "formar un grupo de ayuda para los Latinos en Council Bluffs para tratar de unirnos y ser escuchados; motivarnos a estudiar inglés y para defendernos más... saber de política, de nuestros derechos."* No Latino-led organization exists in Council Bluffs with the purpose of helping Latino community members develop their capacity to identify issues they wish to change and develop the leadership and power to make those changes.

## Recommendations for Promotion of Latino Integration and Civic Participation in Council Bluffs, Iowa

Support the development of a Council Bluffs Latino community organization.

- Facilitate access to instruction for GED in Spanish. *“Lo que quiero es educarme y ojalá se pueda hacer que se saque la GED aquí en este estado en español.”*
- Evaluate English-learning offerings and expand where needed and support the preservation of heritage languages (Spanish in this case).
- Explore collaborations to promote adult education and career development (e.g. literacy, citizenship, GED, career counseling, technical training) among educational institutions and businesses that employ large numbers of Latinos.
- Recognize and support growth of positive immigrant integration efforts through Iowa Workforce Development, Iowa Western Community College, and other institutions.
- Identify top needs for bilingual personnel and processes in public offices (e.g. schools, Department of Motor Vehicles, services such as business licenses).
- Support the development of Latino-led organization and effective leadership in Council Bluffs.
- Support Latino clubs in the high schools and development of middle school, high school, and young adult groups in the churches. Encourage and facilitate involvement in the community.
- Build on cultural competency and bilingual skills of youth and young adults; devote resources to career counseling; provide support to help them envision and follow through on careers to help their community.
- Identify and mentor Latino students from Council Bluffs currently in college or recently graduated. Facilitate service-learning, internships, employment to benefit the integration and civic participation of the Council Bluffs Latino community.
- Create internships and decent jobs in public offices and businesses where high school and college-age Latinos can begin to help meet community needs, develop professional interests, learn skills, receive mentoring and recognition of their own value.
- Prioritize hiring of Latino professionals in schools to build on the power of social learning and role-modeling. Research why it is difficult to recruit and keep minority teachers and other professionals and what could impact this positively.
- Identify the talent and skills Latino immigrants bring from their home countries and previous employment. Survey how many owned land, initiated and ran businesses, farmed or ranched, practiced local arts, or utilized special skills in their work. Strategize how the Council Bluffs community might create avenues for immigrants to contribute more of these skills and abilities.
- Recognize and reward current bilingual employees for the value they add in facilitating integration of Spanish-dominant employees or customers. Promote discussion among employers regarding the benefits of hiring bilingual and bicultural personnel and ways to measure and reward their work-place contributions.



- Evaluate and acknowledge city exclusionary practices, policies, and attitudes both institutional and interpersonal. Identify goals for cultural vitality and economic vitality and steps that can be taken to achieve those goals. Seek guidance from groups such as <http://citiesofmigration.ca/good-ideas-in-integration/> Explore UNESCO's "Universal declaration on cultural diversity" for language helpful to develop vision."
- Facilitate Latino involvement in Council Bluffs Community Pride Week. One Latino interviewee envisioned Latinos marching with a banner with a message of unity in the Celebrate CB Parade.
- Explore ways to promote immigrant microbusiness training, development, and access to loans.
- Consider the benefits of promoting a Latino business district as well as street vendor permits.
- Evaluate affordable housing availability. Facilitate immigrant home-buying.
- Facilitate savings and lending services using the Mexican CID or Consular Identification Card provided by Mexican Consulate offices. In Spanish this is the Matrícula Consular de Alta Seguridad (MCAS) or commonly called 'la matricula consular.'
- Involve Latinos in the mayoral campaign and other local political campaigns. Help the newly elected mayor develop clear community messaging: Immigration brings vitality to all. Educate. Train staff in deliberative thinking. Ground staff in demographic and sociological data and research. Practice until a positive perspective becomes channelized and automatic to counter negative thoughts which are culturally supported, habitual, and affect policy choices even if they are unworkable and unproductive. (Crandall, Eshleman, & O'Brien, 2002)
- Promote patriotism, but not a blind patriotism that is resistant to change. Promote a 'constructed patriotism' which sees the country as constantly improving itself with the resources of all. (Spry & Hornsey, 2007)
- Adopt an attitude that it is okay for people to be uncomfortable, to feel the loss of the 'coziness' of past homogeneity, but embraces the idea that immigration does not have to be accompanied by racism and discrimination. Immigration brings cultural vitality and is the viable path for communities in the modern world. (See Portes & Vickstrom, 2011)

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