Latino leadership group issues a call to action

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Luis De La Fuente has never been active in his community, but he wants to change that. David Martinez dreams of starting a bike club for kids. And Aurora Rodriguez wants to be a leader like her hero, Cesar Chavez.

All three San Diegans have simple goals for helping people. But organizers of a newly formed Latino leadership group hope to transform them into activists.

The nonprofit Mid-City Community Action Network applied for a grant to start the leadership group two years ago as a way to get those whose voices aren't often heard more involved in community issues. Latinos y Latinas en Accion was formed after Mid-City CAN held a series of meetings in residents' homes to talk with people interested in getting involved.

The members of the leadership group meet each Monday to learn, in Spanish, how to better express themselves and how to prioritize community needs. They also analyze the roles community institutions play in their lives.

At the group's most recent meeting, 20 people, mostly women, reviewed a homework assignment from the previous week. The group's leader, Aixa Quiros, had handed out a list of phone numbers for a variety of government agencies and suggested that members use them to report problems in their community.

One woman called the city when her trash didn't get picked up on the scheduled day. Another called the county about a dog on the loose. And a third had to make a call when a sewage pipe broke on her street and no one was doing anything about it.

They talked about their frustrations with trying to find someone they could communicate with and someone who would respond.

"There are going to be barriers, and there are going to be a lot," Quiros told them.

She also told them she understands their frustrations. She said it makes her mad when people don't listen to her and don't understand her. But she told those in attendance they must continue trying to find people who can help them change their communities.

The group then broke into small groups and analyzed community institutions such as schools, churches and the CalWORKS welfare program for needy families. Quiros asked them to consider the ways in which an organization can be "a bridge to opportunity" or "an obstacle."
Relying on CalWORKS is a stigma, members of the small group said. And it’s designed so that if recipients don’t know, for example, that the program helps people pay to attend school, they won’t be able to better themselves, they said.

But for many people, especially single mothers, there aren’t a lot of other options, Rodriguez said.

"They need money to eat," she said. "It's an emergency."

After they spent 15 minutes analyzing the program, they performed a short skit showing how their interactions with CalWORKS employees could be more productive. They could, for example, show a greater understanding of what kinds of payments CalWORKS allows.

This is the second group to go through the Latinos y Latinas en Accion training program.

When the first group came together last year, Quiros encouraged the members to think about what they wanted the organization’s mission and vision to be.

They created an action plan and addressed obstacles that kept other Latinos from attending the meetings. They needed to provide child care and a light meal, the group's members decided.

This year, as the new group gets under way with funding from The Waitt Family Foundation, many members of the first group return to the weekly meetings to provide input. One woman, Patricia Sotelo, works with the children in the child care program provided for new members.

Through Latinos y Latinas en Accion, Sotelo said, she has learned to identify particular problems they think need to be solved.

The first group, for example, felt that there needed to be a group of Latinos who networked monthly in Spanish. A monthly networking meeting, sponsored by Mid-City CAN and held during working hours, was not reaching many Latinos.

In June 2003, Latinos y Latinas en Accion began monthly networking meetings in Spanish. The "Red Comunitaria," or community net, is held on the third Thursday of the month, from 5:30 to 7 p.m., at 4440 Wightman Ave.

The new Latinos y Latinas group already is talking about printing a community resource guide in Spanish.

One of the new members, North Park resident De La Fuente, who installs fire sprinklers by day and teaches self-esteem classes at night, wants to do more to empower his people.
"This is my first time to be involved with the community," he said.

He wants Latinos to know their rights and he wants them to set goals for themselves. "They have the opportunity to be better than they are now," he said.

Already the group is accomplishing much, Quiros said.

"We are really learning how we become stronger as people," she said.

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Caption: 2 PICS
1. Aurora Rodriguez of Nestor spoke to a small group yesterday during a meeting of Latinos y Latinas en Accion, which encourages members to get involved in their communities. 2. Aixa Quiros (center) of Latinos y Latinas en Accion led a discussion recently with Laila DeSantiago of City Heights (left), Aurora Rodriguez of Nestor (right) and Luis De La Fuente of North Park (right foreground). The group meets every Monday. 1,2. John R. McCutchen / Union-Tribune

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