



Community Profile: Utah

Comunidades Unidas

Though not typically thought of as an immigrant gateway, between 1990 and 2000 the foreign-born population Utah increased 171 percent, with the majority of that increase composed of immigrants from Latin America. Drawn by employment opportunities in the construction, tourism, farming and mining industries, as well as by affiliations to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the presence of immigrants from Mexico and Central and South America has grown in urban and rural communities throughout Utah.

This demographic shift is pushing state agencies, nonprofits, and private-sector firms to understand and reach out to Hispanic community members in new ways. Within Utah's Department of Community and Culture, a unified state Office of Ethnic Affairs was created in 2005 from previously fractured ethnic office 'silos' to ensure that the state government was responding more efficiently to the needs of Utah's growing ethnic communities. This office conducts public policy analysis and research on different issues affecting Utah's ethnic communities, and it consults with state agencies to ensure that ethnic populations have access to state programs and services.

"One of the most pressing issues facing Utah's Hispanic community is the need for improvements in health care and health behaviors," said Luz Robles, the director of the Office of Ethnic Affairs. Results from a 2002 Survey by the Utah Department of Health showed a host of health disparities between Utah's Hispanic population and the population at-large, and reported that nearly 25 percent of Utah's Hispanic adults indicated being in fair or poor health compared to 10 percent of all Utahns. For recent immigrants, risks for poor health outcomes are compounded for a number of reasons, including linguistic, cultural and geographic isolation, low incomes, a lack of insurance, and low education levels.

Chief among the programs in place to help address health disparities in the Hispanic population is the Comunidades Unidas program. Established in 2002, Comunidades Unidas is a growing nonprofit health education program that operates throughout Utah to help ensure that community health resources are accessible as well as culturally and linguistically appropriate. Comunidades

Unidas uses a peer-to-peer model of community outreach, enlisting members of the Hispanic community to volunteer as peer educators. Literally going door to door in some areas, educators are able to inform community members in Spanish on a host of health issues ranging from HIV/AIDS prevention to prenatal care to diabetes management. When necessary, educators help connect people to health services. In addition, educators train health-care providers to recognize a number of cultural issues so that they can better treat their patients. "Taboos within Latino cultures mean that patients don't share information that in other communities would be common sense," said Sabrina Morales, executive director of Comunidades Unidas. "And cultural beliefs and practices—like the 'evil eye' and the use of *curanderos* (folk healers), which sometimes leads people to believe they are immune to certain diseases—are typically overlooked by health care providers."

Comunidades Unidas conducts community forums to help identify high-priority health issues in the communities it serves. In many areas, adult dental care has emerged as the top issue, and in more isolated and remote places, mental health and domestic violence rank high on the list of issues to address. Morales noted that by learning from community members what their needs are and then transmitting that information to service providers, Comunidades Unidas helps achieve a higher level of cultural competency in program and service provision. For example, in places like Moab and St. George, where work is seasonal, many families are reliant on food banks in the off-season. But because food banks were not stocking familiar foods such as tortillas, family diet and nutrition were compromised. Outreach workers succeeded in working with the food bank to stock more appropriate foods.

Comunidades Unidas employs a multifaceted approach to engaging the community in lowering the barriers to health care access for Utah's Hispanic families. Its newest program is a multicultural youth coalition that trains teens on advocacy and leadership skills, and many of the program participants have spoken in front of their legislators on health and education-related issues. "A lot of the people who are making a difference are coming from within our communities," said Morales, "and we are working to empower them."