

Opinion Editorial

The Legacy of Latino Caucus for Public Health  
Reflection and Analysis on Its 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary  
By a Founding Member of the Latino Caucus - 1973

American Journal of Public Health Supplement

Latino Caucus 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

By

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September 2023

## INTRODUCTION

Despite the emergence and growth of Latinos in the US in the 1960s and 1970s, there was a paucity of data and attention to their health status and related needs.<sup>1,2</sup> So much so that even into the 1990s there was little hope for change,<sup>3(p.32)</sup> Trevino best characterized the situation in the following way,<sup>2(p.979)</sup>

*At present we do not know how many Hispanics die each year in the country, let alone their health status, use of services, or unmet health care needs.*

Similarly, Latino participation within the American Public Health Association (APHA) appeared to be limited. Although the Association did not collect members' ethnic-racial data at the time, the absence of Latinos was noticeable in sections, committees, boards, etc. Their absence represented a lost opportunity for advocacy on needed Latino health issues. Nevertheless, this all changed with the 1973 annual meeting in San Francisco, California, where the emergent Chicano-Latino Caucus changed the course of Latino involvement within and beyond APHA.

## REFLECTING ON THE 50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY

When I began the process of preparing this editorial, the intent was to provide a brief history of the formation of the Caucus and describe its importance then, as well as now, when Latino's in the US are still experiencing the social and economic inequities that produce poor health outcomes. I was a graduate student at the time of the founding. Therefore, upon reflection and analysis, what became apparent was the profound impact that the Latino Caucus (LC) has had both within APHA and beyond. As such, the celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary is the opportune time to recount this history and acknowledge its legacy.

## FOUNDING OF THE LATINO CAUCUS

It was 1973 and the American Public Health Association was holding its 101st annual meeting in San Francisco, California. At the time, it never occurred to those in attendance that the events of one day, Wednesday, November 7<sup>th</sup>, 1973, would have such a profound and lasting

impact on the history of Latinos within the Association and beyond. History was in the making at this meeting.

It's worth noting that because the meeting was in San Francisco, California, there was a sizable attendance of Chicanos (individuals of Mexican American descent who primarily were born in the US). California was then and continues to be the state with the largest population of Latinos.

Cesar Chavez, legendary Mexican American civil rights and labor leader, and founder of the United Farmworker's Union (UFWU) was scheduled to speak at a session titled, "The Forgotten Minority Worker". But instead of a plenary session he was relegated to a concurrent session in a small conference room. The room had an overflow audience with crowds spilling into the hallway eager to hear him speak and demonstrate support for his cause. This situation was considered by those in attendance a "*falta de respeto*" or show of disrespect for Chavez and those he represented. The ensuing indignation led participants to demonstrate at the APHA Governing Council that was in session. It was this synergy of events that not only led to the establishment of the Chicano-Latino Caucus, but compelled APHA to take pro-active actions in response to the resolution<sup>4</sup> drafted by the Chicanos and other Latinos present. This resolution was endorsed and supported by the Caucus of Black Workers.

The resolution not only called for an APHA apology to Mr. Chavez but went beyond to address the disparate representation and participation of Latino and other minority communities across APHA. The resolution<sup>4(p.195)</sup> argued that:

*APHA has never fully addressed the complex health problems of American non-whites and other poor minority members. ...and has not fulfilled an equitable affirmative action plan in its staffing, particularly in hiring Chicano and Latino workers.*

It also recommended that sections make efforts to obtain parity minority membership and assure minority representatives to serve on Association boards, committees, and offices.

The Governing Council unanimously adopted the resolution on November 7<sup>th</sup>, 1973.<sup>5</sup> It voted to extend an apology to Mr. Chavez for "discourtesy" and the "gross disrespect"<sup>5</sup> exhibited; called on the 1974 Annual Planning Committee to devote 20% of the program to Latino

speakers and issues; and, appointed Vincente C. Garza, Caucus spokesperson, to the 1974 Program Planning Committee. It also agreed that the conference registration fees of those Latinos present could be applied to their membership dues in APHA or donated to the UFWU Fund. Again, because ethnic/racial membership data were not collected by the Association at the time, it's not possible to determine the degree of increase in Latino membership. In tandem, the Executive Committee of the Association moved on the actions it was charged by the Governing Council.<sup>6</sup> In addition to a personal apology by the Association President, Lorin E. Kerr, it issued a public apology to Mr. Chavez.<sup>7</sup>

#### LATINO CAUCUS IMPACT ON APHA

An immediate outcome of the Caucus advocacy was the theme of the 1974 annual meeting, *The Health of Non-White and Poor Americans*. It assured the considerable participation of Latinos and other communities of color in plenary and concurrent sessions. Mr. Chavez was invited to address the opening general session, along with Jesse Jackson, but illness kept him from doing so. Instead, Dolores Huerta, co-founder of the UFWU, did so on his behalf<sup>8</sup>.

It was at the 1974 meeting where the Chicano-Latino Caucus name was changed to the Latino Caucus. (See text box: *Why a Chicano-Latino Caucus*).

#### *APHA Calls National Attention to Minority Health*

The Governing Council's action, followed by the Executive Board's proactive response, both motivated by the Chicano-Latino Caucus, elevated the needs of Latinos, other communities of color and the poor, to national attention. On behalf of the Association, William McBeth, then Executive Director, published an Editorial<sup>9(pg.1)</sup> in the Journal highlighting the theme of the 1974 annual meeting, and went beyond to state:

*Through the medium of this national spotlight, hopefully, attention will be focused on the health problems of such groups and they will begin to receive their rightful and long overdue national commitment.*

### *Addressing the Latino Health Data Void*

As previously referenced<sup>1,2</sup>, during the 60's, 70's and onto the 80's, there was a scarcity of health data on Latino populations. As such, the Caucus advocated for the 1976 APHA Policy Statement #7621 entitled, *The Lack of Data on the Health Status of the Spanish Heritage Community in the US*.<sup>10</sup> It ultimately led to the groundbreaking Hispanic Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (HHANES), conducted from 1982 to 1984 by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS). For the first time, original data were collected on the three major US Latino groups – Mexican American, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans. Caucus advocacy and APHA policy leverage contributed to the realization of the historic HHANES.

A significant number of Caucus members went on to serve on the various panels, working groups and committees convened to advise the study. Later, Steven Uranga-McKane, Caucus President (1984-1985), advocated to assure Latino participation in the data analytic working group that was chaired by Henry Montes, Caucus member.

It's noteworthy that Fernando Trevino, who later became the first Latino or person of color to serve as APHA Executive Director, was the lead NCHS staff on the HHANES. He was also a Caucus member.

In keeping with the goal of increasing and improving the availability of minority health data, the Caucus advocated for the development and publication of the landmark 1986 HHS *Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Black and Minority Health*.<sup>11</sup> This was the first time the US government undertook a comprehensive review of the health status of ethnic/racial populations – Asians and Pacific Islanders, African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans - elevating the issue to a national stage. Several Caucus members were engaged in the development and ultimate dissemination processes.

### THE BOOT CAMP FOR LEADERSHIP

At the time of its founding, I was a graduate student at Columbia University and had been encouraged by my mentor Helen Rodriguez Trias to attend the annual meeting. According to

her, it was where I would have an important and formative public health experience. Helen was right. “Speaking truth to power”, was a profound lesson learned at that meeting.

But additionally, I experienced the Caucus as a locus and incubator of future Latino leadership within public health. It was a safe and nurturing place where we “learned the ropes” of working within a mammoth association. In those early days some of the members were experienced professionals who served as role models and mentors. But that did not stop the young and less seasoned members from challenging and questioning them on all matters. But that was part of the Latino Caucus learning and growing process.

Concurrent to this, students were also learning public health from the scholars and leaders who presented at annual meetings. These were the same individuals whose work and research we were reading in our classes. As chaotic as a meeting of thousands can be, it was also a fertile learning ground.

#### THE LATINO LEADERSHIP PARADOX: 1980's and 1990's in APHA

Paradoxically, while Latinos were growing in influence within APHA during the 1980's and 1990's, the condition of the US Latino community was declining. The decade of the 1980s was touted in the media and beyond to be the “Decade of the Hispanic”. It was forecast as the breakthrough era when Latinos would achieve parity on several fronts due in part to their growing numbers. This did not transpire then, nor since. In fact, during the 1980's Latinos lost ground on several fronts: education, employment, income, and health status.<sup>12</sup> During this same interval, Latinos within APHA were growing in numbers and taking on significant leadership roles. This growing presence allowed opportunities to leverage the resources of APHA to address the growing inequity.

The 1980's saw the election of the first two Latino Caucus members to the Executive Board Henry Montes (1983) and Helen Rodriguez-Trias (1985), and appointments to numerous committees and boards. The historic events that “broke the glass ceiling” occurred in the 1990s when three Caucus members served simultaneously on the Executive Board: Steven Uranga McKane, later elected the first Latino to serve as chair; Marilyn Aguirre-Molina; and Helen Rodriguez Trias, the first Latina/o President of APHA. This was the same period when

Fernando Trevino was hired as Executive Director of APHA, the first Latino or person of color to serve in that capacity.

To this day, many who ascended to leadership within APHA, and beyond, can trace their roots to active involvement in the Caucus. Two were former Caucus presidents, Aida Giachello (1989) and Diana Bonta (1993), who have gone on to distinguish themselves by making enormous contributions to the field of public health. More recently some have gone on to serve as Association Presidents, Carmen Nevarez (2000) and José Ramón Fernández-Peña (2021).

### CAUCUS LEGACY WITHIN APHA

#### *APHA Helen Rodriguez Trias Social Justice Award*

This Award has its roots in the Latino Caucus. Carlos Molina, Caucus President (1985-1989), established the Helen Rodriguez Trias Award Breakfast in recognition of her enormous contributions and commitment to health equity and social justice. Its intent was to honor and recognize Latinos for their contributions to the community. One of the first recipients of the award was Dolores Huerta, co-founder of the United Farm Workers. The award has since become institutionalized as an Association-wide Award.

#### *Addressing the Under-Documentation of Latinos*

Another significant Caucus initiative was the APHA publication of the seminal book, *Latino Health in the US: A Growing Challenge (1994)*.<sup>13</sup> While Marilyn Aguirre-Molina and Carlos Molina were the co-editors, the majority of contributors were members of the Caucus, who by then had become established researchers, academics, and policy experts. To this date it remains the seminal text. It also represents the Association's responsiveness to the need for Latino literature and publications. It has since been followed by other Aguirre-Molina and Molina books on the subject, but that breakthrough book became a noteworthy academic resource that many young Latino students celebrated because it was the first time an entire volume on Latino health, by Latinos, was available to them.

### *Informing the APHA Policy Agenda*

Since its inception, the Caucus has played an important role in the APHA policy development process. It has sponsored or co-sponsored over 40 APHA policies affecting the well-being of Latinos. In 2016 alone, 5 Caucus sponsored resolutions became Association policy – all with significant implications for the well-being of Latinos.

### CLOSING

In retrospect, and in consideration of how the Caucus has evolved over the last 50 years, it would be another *“falta de respeto”* to the memory of Cesar Chavez if we were to overlook or forget the lasting impact he had on Latinos within APHA. Chavez’s values and life work served to inspire and motivated those present in 1973 to act. If it were not for the outrage, sense of injustice, and courage demonstrated by those present, it’s unlikely that the gains made by Latinos within the Association and beyond would have transpired.

### *The Next 50 Years*

*“If you want to remember me, organize!” – Cesar Chavez (date unknown)*

The advocacy, and some would suggest audacity, of the Chicano-Latino Caucus in 1973, broke through barriers and opened windows of opportunity that permitted those that followed to challenge the existing neglect and indifference to Latinos and other communities of color. Today, more than ever a formidable Caucus is needed to assure that the anti-immigrant policies and the racist backsliding that has occurred is challenged, confronted, and defeated, always remembering the words of Chavez, *“Si se puede”!*



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