



DIALOGUE ON DIVERSITY

NEWS ADVISORY

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DIALOGUE ON DIVERSITY HOSTS 2008 PUBLIC POLICY FORUM: HOUSING, IMMIGRATION, EDUCATION: THE HUMAN INFRASTRUCTURE

Dialogue on Diversity, in sessions held March 6th at the Rayburn House Office Building on Capitol Hill, presented the 2008 edition of its Public Policy Forum, with the title *The Heat Comes Early: Civil Discourse in a Contentious Year*. The Forum purpose each year is to convene people of many cultures all working for a reasoned civic consciousness and for economic viability through entrepreneurship. The public policy programs of Dialogue on Diversity, of which this is the first in the 2008 program cycle -- the annual Health Care Symposium follows on May 14th -- are targeted to women entrepreneurs and professionals, members of women's organizations, students and Congressional staff, and interested citizens. This year three basic topic areas dominated the Forum agenda: Housing, Immigration, and Education.

In each of these three policy realms a panel of scholars, private- and public-sector experts, advocates, members of the Congress, and public officials came together to analyze the social, economic, and policy dimensions.

- The day's high point, beginning the midday session, was the presentation of a Lifetime Achievement Award honoring **Raul Yzaguirre**, President Emeritus of the National Council of La Raza and now Professor in Arizona State University at Phoenix. The award was given by **Rep. Hilda Solis** of California, whose citation noted the unique role Mr. Yzaguirre has filled through the decades of his leadership in the NCLR's evolving activities on behalf of the U.S. Latino communities. In accepting the award Mr. Yzaguirre reflected briefly on the historical performance of La Raza, but turned directly to the nub of the matter: the present critical times for the Latino population. The time had come, he suggested, for the long-time U.S. residence of so many of the Latino population to be deemed in itself the substance of their belonging as true and integral parts of our society. At the same time he decried the demonization of the term "amnesty" -- a noble word for a noble policy action, one which has very frequent application in taxation, gun control, statutes of limitation, and a number of other parts of the law, where its benefits are avidly accepted by many of those who condemn a similar concept in the immigration context.
- The Midday session cast the spotlight on a new celebrity on the Washington scene, public schools Chancellor **Michelle Rhee**, who recounted her initial reluctance, then eager acceptance of the task -- which conventional wisdom deemed an impossible one -- of dismantling much of a dysfunctional school system and fashioning a world-class one from the usable parts of the old and from much that will be new. Ms. Rhee's confidence and a near mythic determination give reason to believe she may indeed succeed where a decades-long train of Commissions, Councils, Boards, and even a General, had scarcely made a dent. The capital city awaits the denouement.

- The housing panel, co-hosted with the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute (CHCI), took up the continuing mortgage crisis and the by now well-known congeries of related problems. With foreclosure rates still climbing, the panel explored the future of the growing host of borrowers in distress, and outlined a range of immediate measures urgently recommended as remedies that promise to stabilize the housing sector, whose health and robustness are key ingredients of national life both economically and socially.
- The lineup of speakers for the housing segment included **Rep. Joe Baca**, **Rep. Maxine Waters**, **Aracely Panameño**, Latino Affairs Director at the Center for Responsible Lending; **Nelson Merced**, Director of National Initiatives and Applied Research for NeighborWorks America; and **Frank Nothaft**, chief economist for Freddie Mac; with **Anna Alvarez Boyd**, chief of CHCI's HOGAR program, and **Alejandra Loudon** as Moderators. Rep. Baca's narrative brought on-the-ground observations of the distress of homeowners in his south California district and elsewhere in the country, setting the stage for subsequent analysis. Rep. Maxine Waters, also representing a California constituency, did not spare a take-no-prisoners exploration of a painful topic, in which the greed and recklessness of powerful people who should know much better was arraigned for much of the ensuing social and economic wreckage. Aracely Panameño gave an unvarnished account of the painful circumstances that are overtaking the people her organization has sought to mentor and protect – a task whose difficulties are exacerbated by the measures enacted in Prince William County, Virginia in the Washington exurbs imposing, in practical effect, a variety of restrictions and disabilities on the Latino population. It was this circumstance that led Ms. Panameño herself to mount a last-minute write-in campaign for a council seat in last November's municipal elections. An unsuccessful campaign, but one showing the flag for the notion of America as a nation of immigrants in a place and time where this can be a dangerous sentiment.
- In the following program segment immigration experts set out to fit the present facts of economic life and civic existence into the historic framework of a society of immigrants, assessing the prospects for legislative changes, and analyzing the likely effects of these changes on recent and future newcomers within our borders. **Brent Wilkes**, National Executive Director, LULAC, persuasively argued that a national discourse on immigration to the U.S. should be governed by a principle of reasonableness, by which is understood a fair assessment of the actual interests of all the stakeholder communities, among them – here the strikingly innovative feature of the argument – the populations in Latin America and elsewhere whose economic and social conditions are giving the impetus to the migrations that end with crossings into the U.S. A realistic and indeed morally right course of action in these circumstances, Mr. Wilkes suggests, may be to aid the educational and economic development in these “sending” districts – an action which would remove some of the pressure, often a very painful force affecting the migrants themselves, to pull up stakes and move to strange climes to survive. Another facet of the immigration phenomenon, emphasized by **John Amaya**, legislative attorney at MALDEF, was the proliferation of restrictive and punitive local laws targeted to the migrants, especially the undocumented but often the documented as well. Many of these are believed to run afoul of long-standing legal principles barring alienage discrimination, a source of authority sounding in the Constitution itself. **Dr. Jeanne Batalova**, director of the “Data Hub” at Washington's Migration Policy Institute, laid before attendees a detailed picture of the directions and qualitative characteristics of historic migration flows around the world, with a special focus on the experience of the United States, one of the principal magnet societies globally. It is this background that has to lie at the base of any productive discussion of the

policy aspects of the present state of these migrations as they affect contemporary American society.

- With only a small percentage of minorities graduating from college, and while many high school graduates are ill-outfitted to take on productive roles in an increasingly complex, technology-oriented society, experts from think tanks and Congress joined to review the critical problems of the American educational system and to sketch a role for the imaginative public policy measures needed to solve them.
- Among distinguished speakers whose expertise was tapped for the education seminar were **Rep. Rubén Hinojosa**, Chair of the House Subcommittee on Higher Education, Lifelong Learning, and Competitiveness, and **Reg Weaver**, President of the National Education Association. Mr. Weaver's spirited presentation stressed that a nationwide host of eager and teachable pupils, teamed with brigades of able teachers, are often stymied because they find only inadequate tools to work with by way of teaching instrumentalities, infrastructure, and the like – a lack of will for the carefully designed funding that could power a world-class educational system. **Sarita E. Brown** leads Excelencia in Education, an organization dedicated to fostering research and exploration of the smartest and most effective practices in higher education for Latino students. **Kathleen Leos**, former Deputy Secretary in the Department of Education, whose specialty lies in the acquisition by young children of a second language, stressed the key importance in this task of presenting the language learning in the context of genuine subject-matter content – a task requiring teaching skills of a high order.
- The Forum's midday session featured a Congressional Roundtable reviewing the 2008 legislative picture in its many parts. The roster of participating House members included, along with Rep. Hilda Solis of California, **Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee** of Texas, and **Rep. Diane E. Watson** of California. Rep. Jackson Lee commented on prospects for legislation on the three key problems brought into focus by the Forum, and, in a pointedly stated addendum, lamented the destructive tendencies often observed in the regime of juvenile encounters with the criminal law throughout the country, where interventions of a harsh, punitive kind do little to prevent offenses but do manage all too often to wreck the lives of young people already on the wrong track – and their families and communities. Rep. Watson raised the troubling question of hostility among minority ethnic communities themselves, describing actions initiated by the Cherokee Nation to exclude the descendants of African American forebears from their midst.

About Dialogue on Diversity

Dialogue on Diversity, a network of women and men of the country's diverse ethnic and cultural communities -- entrepreneurs, professionals, and workers from the non-profit and public service worlds -- offers a yearly cycle of forums, conferences, and symposia, capped by a stellar awards program, all with a focus on sharpening a civic consciousness on essential public policy issues, and on achieving economic viability through skilled entrepreneurship. The Dialogue is a non-profit §501(c)(3) organization. For further information visit www.dialogueondiversity.org