

# **Immigrant Integration and Civic Engagement of Suburban Latinos**

## **A Round Lake Area Case Study**



By

Melissa Abad (UIC Chicago Area Study)

Julio Capeles (UIC Chicago Area Study)

Carolina Duque (Chicago Community Trust Fellow 2010)

May 2011

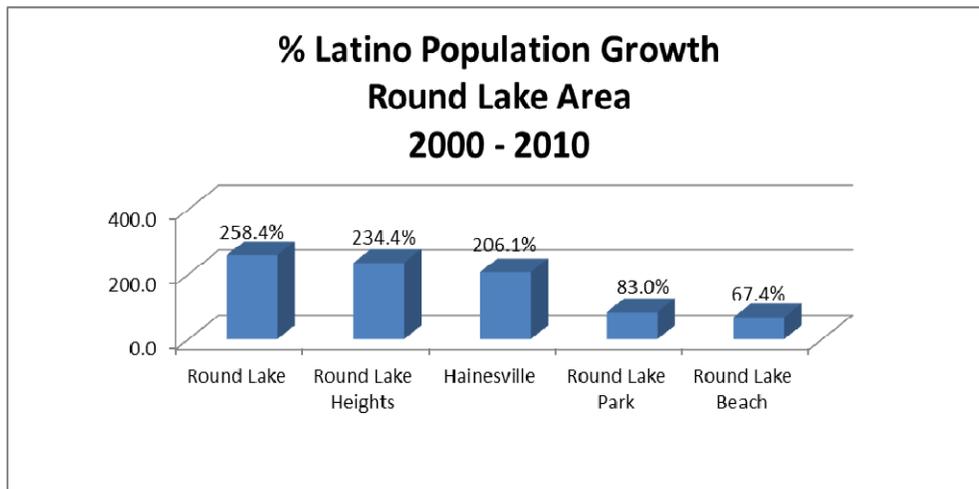
## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report offers a description of the Latino/ immigrant population growth the Round Lake area has experienced over the last ten years. This growth and the challenges the communities face were among the primary factors that inspired the research on immigrant integration and civic engagement, funded by the Chicago Community Trust through a Fellowship awarded to Carolina Duque, Executive Director of Mano a Mano Family Resource Center and conducted in collaboration with the University of Illinois at Chicago's Chicago Area Study. Drawing on interviews with Round Lake area elected officials, Lake County service providers, community focus groups and a Round Lake area community forum, this report describes the common challenges different community members identified and their willingness to participate in creating a stronger community that recognizes and respects diversity and inclusion.

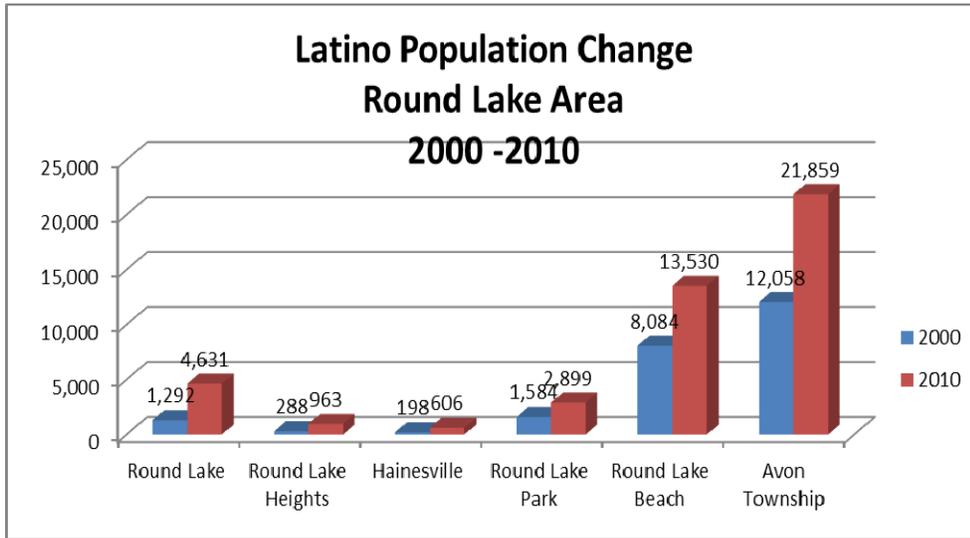
## Introduction

Current Census data shows a trend that has been going on for the last ten years: Latinos are moving to suburban areas in the United States and away from cities or traditional ports of entry. According to the US Census Bureau, in Lake County, IL, the Latino population increased 51% from 2000 to 2010. Latinos now represent 19.9% of the total population compared to 14.4% in 2000. The Round Lake area, located in the western part of Lake County is the area in which this study focused. The Round Lake area includes five municipalities: Round Lake, Round Lake Beach, Round Lake Heights, Round Lake Park and Hainesville.

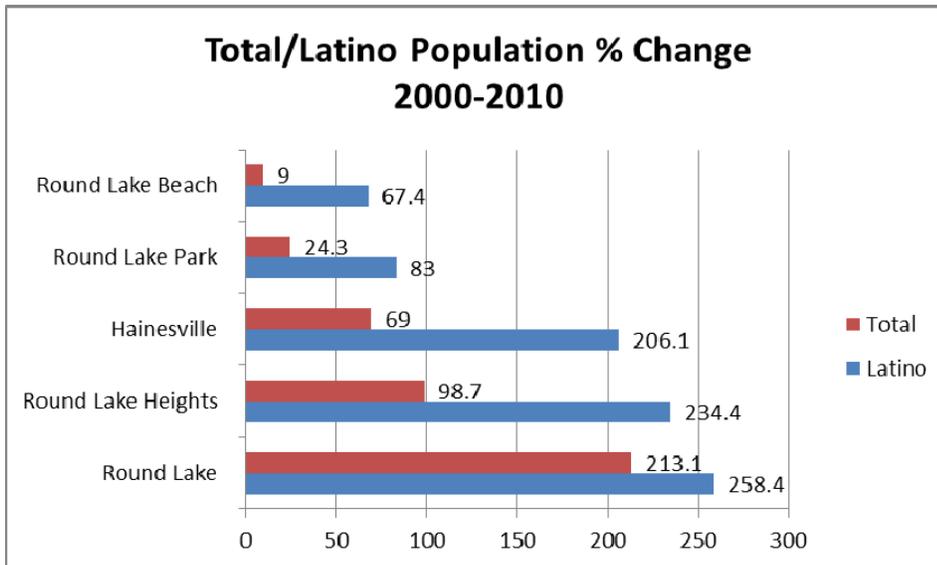
The Round Lake area has experienced an influx of Latino immigrants in the last ten years. According to Census 2010 data, the Latino population in the Round Lake area grew 97.7% from 2000 to 2010, compared to 46.2% of total population growth. Some municipalities experienced an exponential Latino growth like Round Lake with a 258% Latino population increase from 2000 to 2010. Overall, the Round Lake Area received 11,183 new Latino residents in the last ten years. In Round Lake Beach, Latinos now represent 48% of the total population.



(Source: US Census 2010)



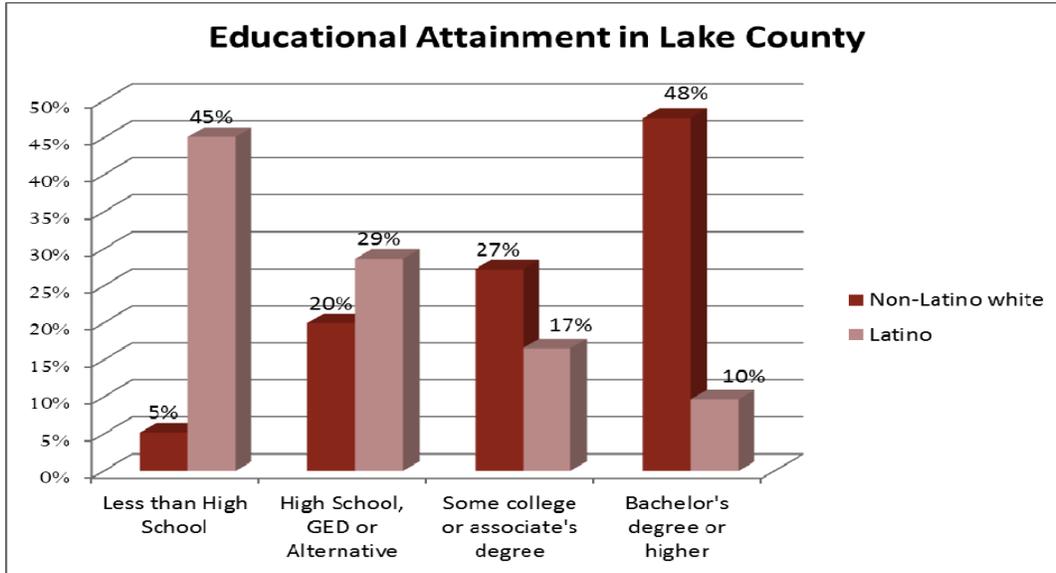
(Source: US Census 2010)



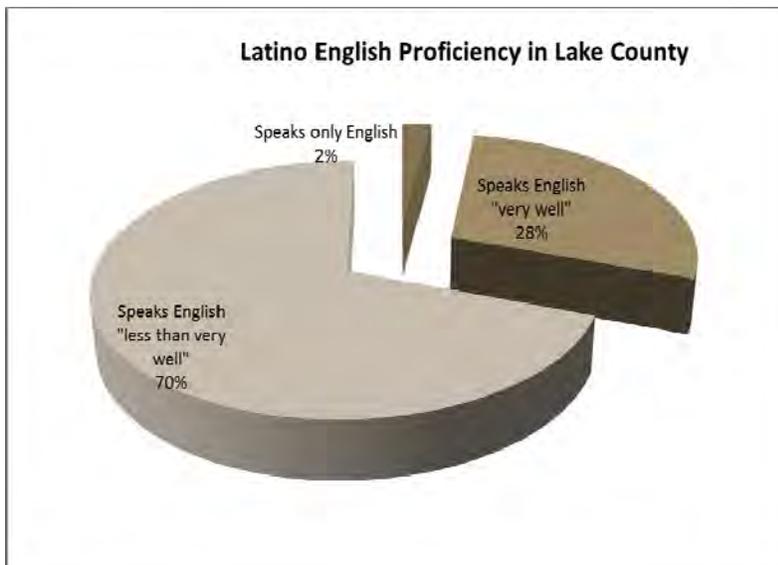
(Source: US Census 2010)

Latino population growth poses many challenges to receiving communities, particularly suburban communities that have been slow in adapting to the demographic change. According to American Community Survey data in Lake County only 10% of Latinos have a Bachelor's degree compared to 48% of non-Latino whites. Even more concerning is that 45% of Latinos

have less than a High School diploma compared to 5% of non-Latino whites. 70% of Latinos in Lake County speak English “less than very well”.



(Source: ACS 2006-2008 estimates)



(Source: ACS 2006-2008 estimates)

These demographic changes, the low education and limited English skills of Latino immigrants in the area and the limited participation Latino immigrants have in formal and informal venues in community affairs in the Round Lake area and Lake County are the factors that motivated this study.

### **The Research Project**

This research was funded by the Chicago Community Trust through a fellowship awarded to Carolina Duque, Executive Director of Mano a Mano Family Resource Center. Mano a Mano is a non-profit social service agency located in Round Lake Park. The agency has been serving low income immigrant and underserved families in Lake County since the year 2000. Mano a Mano serves over 4,000 clients every year through its different programs that include English as a Second language, GED, Computer classes, citizenship application services and preparation classes, Information and Referral, Employment Connection, Health Education, Kindergarten Readiness and Childcare.

The goals of the fellowship project were to learn from community members about their perceptions on immigrant integration, what has been the impact of the Latino population growth in the area and to learn from service providers what they saw as the challenges and opportunities of this demographic change; to help Latinos in the Round Lake area and Lake County understand the importance of community engagement and facilitate a more active participation in community affairs and finally, to promote a better understanding among non-immigrants, as well as service providers and non-Latino leaders, of the Latino culture; to facilitate a dialog that would ultimately promote the integration of Latinos in the area.

To conduct this study Mano a Mano partnered with the University of Illinois at Chicago's (UIC) Chicago Area Study (CAS). This is a multi-method research study exploring intergroup relations in four Lake County communities that have experienced exponential growth in their immigrant population, including Round Lake. CAS partners with community partners to find ways to use their findings to provide resources for the communities in which they work.

## **Methods**

To gather information we conducted individual interviews with Chicago area community leaders, Lake County elected officials and service providers, Round Lake Area immigrant residents, conducted three community focus groups at Mano a Mano, and presented our findings as well as gathered additional data at an area-wide community forum.

During the first quarter of 2010 we met with Latino leaders serving the community in the Chicago metro area including the suburbs. It was important to interview them to discuss their strategies for success. Between April and June 2010, we focused on the Round Lake Area and interviewed some of the mayors, village trustees, school officials, chiefs of police, and other stakeholders and service providers.

We asked these leaders to describe their community, their organization and to name the 3 main challenges that Latinos face. We also asked them about the growth of Latinos in their communities, the challenges this growth has presented and what could be done to address these challenges. We asked respondents to tell us about the activities they are doing to help Latinos overcome challenges and how the community at large facilitates their integration.

Finally, respondents were asked if in their view, Latinos participate in informal or formal forums, what prevents them from doing so if they are not participating, and what can be done to promote civic participation. We specifically asked respondents from and around the Round Lake area what the role of the public elected officials was in matters related to immigrant integration. To conclude, we asked these leaders to share their vision for the Latino community in the next 10 years.

During the summer of 2010 (June-July 2010) we conducted a total of 25 interviews with Latino residents in the Round Lake Area. We asked these respondents very similar questions to the ones asked to Latino leaders and service providers during the first set of interviews. We also asked questions related to parental involvement in schools and in the community. In addition, we asked about what services are needed for Latino immigrants in the Round Lake area. We believed their stories were important not only because they are community residents, but because we wanted to give them a voice to see whether their responses differed from other community stakeholders.

It is important to note that these interviews cannot be generalized to the whole Latino population in the Round Lake area, but do provide insight into the lives and struggles of a segment of the population. Many of the interviews focused around parents' involvement in schools and in the communities. Most of the immigrants that were interviewed are not involved in the schools or in the community. There are many reasons for this lack of involvement that will be discussed below.

We found that the responses from community residents, community officials, and service providers were similar and there were themes that united them. They revealed patterns

around the importance of educating clients, creating community leaders, and the importance of providing programming for youth that were discussed not only among community leaders, but elected officials and immigrant residents.

On September 18 and 25, 2010 we conducted two community focus groups with a total of 31 community members attending. We then conducted a 3<sup>rd</sup> session on October 30, 2010 with participants who came to the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> session. 18 people attended this session.

## **Recurring Themes**

### Education

All of those interviewed recognized the importance of education and how this would help immigrants participate more fully in US society. The definitions each provided for education differed. Some focused on formal types of education. For example, many of the social service providers mentioned that job skills and school degrees were important tools that would help immigrants become economically mobile or at least maintain their economic security. This last idea was important, as some recognized, because without economic security, immigrants would find it hard to participate civically.

Latino immigrants felt that their lack of educational credentials was a barrier for their involvement in the community. Most of the respondents have a low level of education or lack a high school diploma. Some of the respondents are clients of Mano a Mano and are taking GED or ESL classes. Those not taking classes mentioned that they are willing to take classes, but their work schedules, difficulty with access to transportation, child care responsibilities and the long waiting lists for the courses discourage them to take them.

## English Language Barriers

Many service providers and public officials touched on the topic of language as a barrier between immigrants and the larger communities. However, solutions proposed differed. Social service providers recognized that English as a Second Language programs are important for the immigrant community, but they also recognize that immigrant adults face barriers in attending the classes, including lack of time and childcare issues. However, many believe that closing the language gap between public services and immigrants would be the first step to help overcome other barriers that immigrants face in their communities. The barriers are economic and occupational: learning English would help with interactions between employees and employers and might facilitate promotions. From the public official perspective, immigrants who learn and speak English are taking steps to show they want to belong in the U.S.

Latino immigrants also see that language is an important element in their lack of involvement with school or the community. Many of the respondents express that this becomes a barrier to communicate with schools and public officials. It is important to mention that some of the Latino immigrants that were interviewed also speak English, but the majority speaks only Spanish. Also, the majority of them show interest in learning English.

## Youth

Linked to education is the important role youth have in the community. Many identified youth as assets, though also recognized that they are vulnerable. Part of the vulnerability results from the gap of experiences between immigrant parents and their children. Not only

are they vulnerable, but service providers and parents both expressed a desire to increase after school activity options for youth that would encourage leadership development or allow them to participate in cultural programming.

During the focus groups, there was also conversation around the need to give youth positive outlets. Parents expressed their desire to have access to more extracurricular activities for youth, including sports, culturally appropriate arts activities, after school programs, leadership development and community service opportunities. Parents were concerned about the limited youth related programming available as well as the services to help their children through school and get them prepared for college.

### Leadership Development

Finally, leadership training was identified as important by most of those interviewed. Many of the organizations have leadership training programs or workshops and an important component of this is the political education. Several stated that many immigrants do not know the distinct political and social (for example, health care management, schooling for their children) processes that are important to their experiences and to their adjustment to their new communities.

It is important to note that many of the Latino or immigrant community leaders interviewed outside of Lake County either have college educations or came into the US with experience in community organizing and/ or more than a primary schooling. It seems that this gap needs to be addressed in the Lake County area. Though not explicit, having a space or a network of people who share concerns is important to fostering leadership. Latino community

leaders in other Lake County municipalities discussed that they came together through their connection with an organization, institution, or kin network.

### Fear

Another topic that came up during the interviews is the atmosphere of fear that immigrants experience in their communities. This was mentioned by social service providers in different communities in Lake County. The fear is associated with immigration policy and public perception in the distinct communities. At the root of this, as understood from some of the interviews, is the idea that there aren't many community leaders from the community. One reason given is that immigrants are fearful to speak out. Part of the explanation, as some providers suggest in their interviews, is the lack of Latinos with high levels of schooling.

It is not only that immigrants experience fear in their communities, but also fear of gangs and gang related issues. Public officials and Lake County residents alike have mentioned a link between crime and gangs or gangs and the growth of the Latino community in the area. Round Lake Area residents and public officials as well as residents in other Lake County communities that have experienced growth in the Latino population have mentioned that gangs are a concern. Immigrant parents interviewed were also concerned about this. They linked this to lack of positive activities for children.

The fear immigrant residents expressed is also linked to their level of involvement. Many of the Latino immigrants expressed their reluctance to get involved because they do not trust government institutions. They are concerned because they view government as prejudiced against immigrants' needs. This is not necessarily the case with policies in the Round

Lake area, but is the case in different communities of Lake County and in others states like Arizona. As a result, they choose not to get involved.

### Resistance

The fear that public officials and older residents expressed along with the language barriers discussed above seem to be forms of resistance to change. For example, some of the public officials in the Round Lake area have expressed a resistance to providing materials in any language other than English. The belief is that the immigrants threaten the community's identity. Maintaining services and information in English seems to be an effort to maintain community's identity, strengthening the barriers between new immigrants and the established residents of the community.

### Access to information

Lack of information is a theme that is recurrent among the respondents. Many of them expressed that they are not notified of community meetings. Also, they do not know how to get involved in the community because of lack of understanding of the culture and process to get involved.

For those who do know of the meetings and are eager to attend, the barriers for involvement are the schedule of the meetings at schools and the distance they have to travel to attend them. Most of the respondents work long hours and feel that the meeting schedule is not compatible with their work schedule. Many of them also lack access to transportation to

get them to the meetings. This is either because another family member is using the car in the home, or because there is no public transportation in the community. A few of the Latino immigrants that were interviewed expressed a sense of isolation and lack of developed networks.

### **Community Focus groups**

In the fall of 2010 we held three focus groups. During these sessions we found that the patterns stated above not only held, but parents expressed interest in addressing some of those issues by creating two advisory groups for Mano a Mano.



During the first two sessions, parents discussed their desire to be involved in the community, their interest in learning more about community issues, and their need to have an opportunity to discuss ways in which they felt discriminated against. There was a large concern over status of schools in regards to bullying and quality of education, particularly in regards to the quality of teachers and the number of students in each class. Parents showed their eagerness to get involved in community organizations whether a PTO, or other type of community organization

and asked for ways to have access to leadership development opportunities. They also discussed a desire to have block meetings, expressed a desire to learn more about community programming, as well as a desire to participate in committees and community groups.

As new immigrants, some parents shared their interest in learning more about how to adjust to their new community, including civic education. By civic education they were not only referring to programming for new citizens or new immigrants, but also for new residents. Focus group participants asked for more information in regards to ordinances, public space, driving, social rules, etc. Parents talked about community safety and their desire to create neighborhood watch and their willingness to work more closely with the police. Lastly, parents discussed community health, gang prevention, violence, crime, policing, and drugs, as issues they wanted to address.

Shared family and cultural activities including folkloric dancing and parades as well as activities for moms were also discussed. Parents expressed special interest to have access to adult basic education opportunities as well as leadership development.



Among the resources that parents identified as already available in the community were Mano a Mano, local churches, PTO, school district, local talent and parents which could

volunteer to lead these initiatives. Public spaces identified to conduct any of the proposed activities included Mano a Mano, Round Lake Beach Cultural and Civic Center, the Round Lake Area Sports Center, and the Round Lake Area library. They also mentioned the need for more access to immigration-related legal assistance.

Parents were committed to helping to promote any events or activities, as well as help raising funds. They expressed eagerness to be part of committees during the planning process for getting ideas off the ground, as well as desire to meet again to continue brainstorming. They also expressed eagerness to connect with other community members to recruit local talent and volunteers.



As a result of these forums, we decided to have a third session in which we brought participants from the two distinct sessions. After sharing all the ideas discussed in each of the first two sessions, the group decided to create two groups. The second hour of our two hour gathering, the parents split themselves up and drafted initiatives they wanted to commit to:

### Youth

Participants will meet in houses and bring kids and their friends. Each mom will form a group. Kids will attend presentations about different topics, including applying for scholarships, higher education, how to find jobs etc. Kids will be asked what they want to hear about. Each group will identify young leaders and there will be quarterly meetings with all the groups to report results.

### Parents

The group will do a community needs assessment to learn the topics that parents want to hear about. These topics, based on group discussion, will include gangs, civic engagement, and adult basic education and higher education opportunities. At the first meeting, parents will choose a group they want to belong to and each group will start organizing and will look for resources including facilities, volunteers, snacks, etc. The group will also start providing leadership training for parents.

### **Community Forum**

On February 26, 2011 a Community Forum took place at the Round Lake Beach Cultural and Civic Center. The goals of this community forum were:

1. To promote dialog and better understanding between immigrant and non-immigrant community members
2. To produce relevant data to shape public policy
3. To strengthen relationships among key stakeholders

Over 120 people attended including public elected officials (our State Senator, State Representative, township supervisor, most mayors of the Round Lake area, two County Board members, some village trustees, and school board members); service providers including representatives from local social service agencies and higher education institutions; three chiefs of police; several business leaders and over 30 Round Lake area Latino residents.

At the event, we presented the results of the research and shared census data. Then people were asked to go to an assigned table and discuss their vision for the community and choose the main issue preventing the community from achieving this vision. As a group, they were asked to come up with three policy recommendations around the main issue they chose. 10 tables were formed.



## **Recommendations**

### Education

Participants recommended holding community forums to address the different issues affecting the community and to increase parent education and awareness. One of the groups recommended conducting a needs assessment to understand the level of parent education for effective communication. For adult basic education classes, voluntarism should be encouraged through parents, seniors and unemployed, to address the issue of class size and waiting lists. Citizenship needs to be promoted in its broader sense, encouraging people to participate and engage civically.

Participants identified a need to increase participation of immigrant parents in PTO as well as a need to conduct more outreach from each side of the community. Schools also need to pay attention to Latino kids and encourage education. One group proposed a symposium for leaders to set long term goals for the School District 116 and to create an education taskforce with cross community/cross sector representation as well as individual and institutional representation, and to create opportunities for transculturation.

Service providers need to have more opportunities for networking, sharing of best practices and information. It is vital to involve existing resources including churches, local organizations and schools. Among the barriers identified are: space available in the community where information can be shared, transportation and child care barriers that prevent participation in services and programming.

### Youth Development

One of the groups chose youth as a priority area and recommended to create a Community Liaison (CL) that would use verbal face to face communication to reach out to youth. It is

necessary to create tools for this CL and to work on a needs assessment to better understand the needs to young people and how best to serve them.

### Communication

Several groups identified communication as a priority issue. One of the groups proposed to increase opportunities to learn English within Round Lake area, and increase opportunities for residents to learn Spanish; create space for dialogue in public or private forums and increase bilingual events, activities, and meetings. Participants proposed to use various methods to communicate including radio, PTO's, and guest speakers. As a strategy to improve communications, one of the groups proposed the hosting of small gatherings as well as the implementation of youth activities as a way to build trust. This can be accomplished through the use of social media and by creating bilingual materials. Another group proposed a small group relationship building framework campaign that could encompass informal dinners and small leadership dialogues; have schools and other institutions to host a "getting to know you" day and implement a Spanish language know-your-rights campaign. Accurate and efficient translations as well as the need to encourage bilingual proficiency, and building upon first language opportunities was also proposed.

### Healthcare

In the area of health one of the groups identified the need for community health education as a priority. Participants discussed the need for additional resources at schools, authorities to be open and community to be involved as well as the need to break cultural barriers when

understanding access to public services and parent involvement and education. This group proposed the creation of support groups that included extracurricular activities for kids including sports, mental health for women, men, teens as well as counseling. Better nutrition at school and home were also identified as priorities.

### **Community Forum feedback**

After the forum we sent out an electronic survey asking participants to give us their feedback. 84.2% of respondents were very satisfied with the event and 92% are very likely to recommend this event to a friend or colleague if we decided to host another community forum in the near future. Here are some of the comments we received:

*"I was inspired to see so many community leaders from diverse organizations working together with our families. The intentional connection working with English and Spanish speaking individuals to address shared goals was so valuable".*

*"The program was very good, the participation was great and I am pretty sure the results of this event were great. I hope this was just the beginning of a great movement to get our area improved in many ways!".*

*"The organization was excellent and I was very impressed with the enthusiasm of the attendees. It was a good opportunity to exchange information between the Latino and Anglo communities".*

Participants were also asked to share with us how they see this process moving forward. Here is what some of them said:

*“Perhaps another convening resulting in policy recommendations and working groups. I Would love to see a leadership development project focused on Latinos”.*

*“This gathering was unique because it represented such a broad cross section of RLB. Nonetheless, it would be interesting to hold a similar forum at the county level. How to do this while yet incorporating the voices of immigrant individuals would be the challenge.”*

*“I think we need to be vigilant in our efforts to make this move forward. Don't let too much time pass before scheduling another event.”*

## **Conclusions**

The findings from the interviews, the focus groups, and the community forum reveal important patterns that can be used for future programming and community dialogues. The distinct community stakeholders are eager to participate in more activities that facilitate dialogue between service professionals, community officials and community residents. Though this data was collected with particular attention to the Round Lake Area immigrant residents, what is revealed is that everyone who participated in the study is eager to continue contributing to this effort of building a more vibrant and inclusive community.