

INTRODUCTION

Latino Health in North Carolina

In this issue of the *North Carolina Medical Journal* we bring attention to one of the most pressing healthcare problems confronting our state, the health of and healthcare available to our rapidly growing Latino population. The principal issue analysis for this topic derives from the year-long work of the Task Force on Latino Health convened by the North Carolina Institute of Medicine and whose report was released in March of this year. The Task Force findings and recommendations are summarized by those who took the lead in organizing and conducting the work of the Task Force. We were fortunate that the First Lady of North Carolina, Mary Easley, gave generously of her time to this effort and served as Honorary Chair of the Task Force. Under the leadership of Co-Chairs Carmen Hooker Odom, Secretary of the NC Department of Health and Human Services, and Felix Sabates, Chairman and CEO of FSS Holdings in Charlotte, the Task Force explored in depth the many issues surrounding the health of North Carolina's Latino population, whose rate of growth has been more rapid than in other states.

Following the issue analysis prepared by Pam Silberman et al., we have included six separate commentaries on topics ranging from the experience of gaining access to care for Latinos, to the challenges of assuring access to multilingual healthcare providers, to services for mental health and related problems, to the problems associated with lack of Workers' Compensation coverage for farmworkers and the high health risks of agricultural work itself, and to the looming problems of our state's efforts to comply with the provisions of Title VI of the federal Civil Rights Act with respect to access to services for persons who may not be able to communicate in English.

This is a large and complex array of issues bundled together for purposes of discussion. Our ability as a state to deal with these issues, some of which are presently only suggestive of problems yet to emerge as our Latino population ages in place, may determine North Carolina's future potential for social and economic development. We hope that by bringing these issues to wider public attention through this publication we can enliven the debate as to what can and should be done to confront these issues in the near term.

One of the principles enunciated by this distinguished Task Force of leading citizens of our state is that "Latinos residing in North Carolina are making a substantial contribution to the economic, social, and cultural enrichment of the state. Regardless of immigration status, the health and well-being of this population should be considered of vital importance to the present and future of North Carolina." Herein lies the challenge we all face, and the realization of the goals this principle implies will require much of us in the years ahead.

We invite the comments and opinions of our readers on these topics as we continue to address these issues in the health and human services fields.

—Gordon H. DeFries, PhD
Editor-in-Chief and Publisher