

The Local/Global Connection: Partnering to Address the Sexual and Reproductive Health Needs of Latinos in North Carolina

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Ipas is a nonprofit organization that works around the world, with a focus on developing countries, to increase women's ability to exercise their sexual and reproductive rights and to reduce the number of abortion-related deaths and injuries. Ipas' multidisciplinary approach, refined over nearly 40 years of global experience, encompasses mutually reinforcing work in the areas of policy, research, and service delivery.

Several years ago, Ipas saw the opportunity—and the need—to “bring home” its global experience by addressing neglected sexual and reproductive health needs of North Carolina's fast-growing Latino population. In partnership with El Pueblo, a statewide nonprofit advocacy and public policy organization dedicated to strengthening the Latino community (available at: <http://www.elpueblo.org>), Ipas is now transferring lessons from its global work to benefit the local community in North Carolina. While confirming Ipas' understanding that women everywhere face significant obstacles in obtaining appropriate, accessible, and affordable information and services related to sexual and reproductive health, this local experience has yielded enriching insights for Ipas' international efforts.

Reproductive Health Challenges Facing North Carolina Latinos

The Latino population in North Carolina is currently estimated to make up more than 7% of the state's total population. The number of Latinos in North Carolina increased by almost 400% in the past decade, making the state's Latino population one of the fastest growing in the nation [1-3]. In North Carolina, Latinos, especially those who have recently immigrated, are more likely than non-Latinos to live in poverty and to lack health insurance coverage [1]. Latinos face additional challenges in accessing health care, such as a lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate services and difficulty navigating an unfamiliar health care system. Recently, with more-restrictive immigration laws (including one barring persons without social security numbers from obtaining a driver's license) and an increased risk of deportation, many immigrants without legal documentation are more

afraid to drive and to use social and health services, even when their children who are US citizens are entitled to them.

Additional obstacles compound the ability of Latino youths to obtain comprehensive reproductive health information and services. Latino youths, as with most young people, have few youth-focused, affordable, and appropriate reproductive health services available to them and little if any access to comprehensive sexual education. These gaps in information and care are particularly important because the Latino population in North Carolina is relatively young; the median age is 24 years, and approximately 36% are 18 years old or younger. North Carolina has the 14th highest teenage pregnancy rate among US states and, in 2000, led the nation in the teenage birth rate among Latinas [4, 5]. In addition, the teen pregnancy rate among North Carolina Latinas is almost 4 times that among their white counterparts and twice that among their African American peers. North Carolina Latinos also have high rates of HIV infection and sexually transmitted diseases, which are only slightly less than those reported for African Americans [6].

In 2005, Ipas began to apply knowledge gained from its global efforts to address needs related to sexual and reproductive health among North Carolina's Latino population. For example, Ipas recognized the importance of partnering with a local organization that had strong relationships with and understanding of the population served. El Pueblo was the ideal partner, having worked since 1996 to further the interests and well-being of the Latino community in North Carolina. The organization's broad spectrum of activities includes leadership development, proactive and direct advocacy, education, and promotion of cross-cultural understanding in partnerships at the local, state, and national levels. Ipas' interest in addressing Latinos' sexual and reproductive health needs supported El Pueblo's longstanding focus on a wide range of health issues affecting this population.

Ipas and El Pueblo jointly designed a program focusing on Latinos residing in or near the North Carolina cities of Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill that incorporates the results of a 5-county needs assessment [7]. The program's

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principal objectives involve increasing Latinos' knowledge of reproductive health issues, improving their access to related services, and increasing their capacity to advocate for reproductive health and rights. Initially, Ipas and El Pueblo focused on training adult lay health advisors (*promotoras*) as reproductive health educators and activists. Interested community members participated in a 10-session training program on reproductive health, developed and implemented in collaboration with the North Carolina Healthy Start Foundation and the Wake County Human Services HIV/STD Community Program, that increased participants' knowledge on topics such as anatomy, contraceptive use, prevention of unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, gender sensitivity, how to talk with children about sex, and reproductive rights as human rights. To date, 4 groups of *promotoras* totaling 30 individuals have completed the training program and gone on to educate other community members in many settings, including informal group and one-on-one interactions, community-based discussions about reproductive health issues, and health-related and cultural events. The core group of *promotoras* continues to grow as experienced participants enlist other community members and take the lead in training them.

Evaluation of the *promotoras* program and the feedback obtained throughout its implementation identified a need to focus efforts specifically on Latino youth, who, as noted above, face particular reproductive health challenges. In 2009, Ipas and El Pueblo launched *Derechos Sin Fronteras* (Rights Without Borders) to provide a core group of young Latinas and Latinos with the knowledge, experience, and advocacy skills to confidently address these critical issues and spark positive change within their communities (Figure 1). With support from a team of students from the University of North Carolina Gillings School of Global Public Health, Ipas and El Pueblo identified specific barriers to Latino

youths' access to reproductive health information and services. These obstacles include cultural taboos, knowledge gaps reflective of North Carolina public schools' abstinence-only sex-education curriculum, and more-practical matters, such as a lack of transportation and resources.

By using curricula adapted from the *promotoras* program and material and lessons from Ipas' work in Mexico and Central America, Ipas and El Pueblo have, during the project's first 18 months, trained approximately 40 Latinos and Latinas aged 10-19 years as peer educators and reproductive health activists. Similar to their older counterparts, these youth leaders have applied their new knowledge and skills in multiple ways and venues, resulting in significantly increased communication about reproductive health issues among Latino families involved with the program.

Looking Ahead

Ipas and El Pueblo are encouraged by the results of their collaboration with the North Carolina Latino community and look to continue supporting community members in enhancing their reproductive health and rights. Both agencies have a cadre of young people educated about, trained in, and committed to sexual and reproductive health and rights, and they anticipate reaching many more people in the Latino community, especially young women and men, with age-, linguistically, and culturally appropriate information. Ipas and El Pueblo were especially excited to host, along with other partners, the inaugural Latin@ Youth Forum on Reproductive Health in Chapel Hill in October 2010. The event provided a safe space for youths to learn about reproductive health issues and to develop related advocacy strategies.

In addition, with the 2009 passage of the Healthy Youth Act, Ipas and El Pueblo are hopeful that all North Carolina youths, including those of Latino descent, will have easier access to accurate and comprehensive reproductive health information at school. An important emphasis of the *Derechos Sin Fronteras* program going forward will be to encourage Latino youths' advocacy and other efforts to ensure that this policy is effectively implemented in all North Carolina schools.

Ipas' collaborative work to address the reproductive health needs of North Carolina's growing Latino community has benefitted from and reinforced global lessons. Key among these lessons is the recognition that strong partnerships with community groups are essential to building trust among community members, including community leaders, parents, and other organizations. Ipas' local experience has also revealed that it is important to first focus on basic information, which demystifies and creates dialogue about sensitive issues such as gender and sexual orientation, and that considerable time is often necessary for these activities.

Finally, the work that Ipas and El Pueblo have done with North Carolina Latinos has strengthened the agencies' belief in the importance of supporting the development of young people's skills as advocates for reproductive health

Figure 1.
Logo Selected by Youth Participants in the
Derechos Sin Fronteras Program



and rights. As in so many settings and cultures, adolescents have the greatest needs for reproductive health knowledge. Enhancing the ability of North Carolina adolescents to advocate for these needs is a critical first step in developing

the capacity for significant, long-term reproductive health advocacy among the state's Latino organizations and, more broadly, in increasing the visibility of the Latino population among decision makers. NCMJ

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