

# **Position statement in support of Latina victim advocates**

*An URGENT CALL to address the national shortage of Latina victim advocates in the U.S.*

---

**Co-authors and Editors:** Laura Zárate, Arte Sana Founding Executive Director, Ivonne Ortiz, Existe Ayuda National Outreach Project Regional Project Liaison, formerly with the North Carolina Coalition Against Domestic Violence, Emily Hall, TN, and the Alianza Latina en contra la Agresión Sexual (ALAS)

## **Summary**

In this country, there is a serious crisis revolving around Latina victim advocates working in the anti-violence movement. This position statement reveals some of the real-life exploitative experiences and observations of Latina advocates from across the nation. It also offers some concrete steps for retaining their services and expertise.

The authors and endorsers of this document urge immediate action to help address the shortage of culturally competent Latina/o victim advocates in victim services. If our goal as victim advocates is truly to eliminate sexual and intimate partner violence, we need more than just good intentions for the Latino/a community. The health and human rights of millions are at stake.

## **Why this position statement is valid**

By 2025 the Latina/o population will grow from 35 million to 61 million. (Source: Pew Hispanic Center, "U.S.-Born Hispanics Increasingly Drive Population Developments." Jan. 2002.)

Hispanic women are a rapidly growing part of the U.S. population, with especially large representation in younger age groups. By 2050, Hispanic females are forecasted to comprise nearly one quarter of U.S. women. (Source: HispanTelligence® Hispanic Women in Profile 2005.)

According to the National Crime Victimization Survey done by the U.S. Department of Justice in 2004, one in six females age 13 and older are victims of rape, attempted rape or sexual assaults. Based on U.S. Census population projections, by the year 2050, an estimated **8,891,667** Latinas will suffer some form of sexual violence.

## **The response from service providers is lagging**

Victim service agencies across the nation have not been able to keep up with the needs of Latino/a communities which suffer from a lack of bilingual and bicultural direct service staff, trainers, and volunteers.

While Latinas have made some inroads in the anti-domestic violence movement, they continue to have less of a presence and less access to leadership roles as sexual assault victim advocates.

The overextension and lack of validation, combined with the not so subtle tokenism in some cases has contributed to a revolving door for Latina victim advocates, many of whom are new to the 'movement.'

Anti-immigrant sentiment, including references to "border terrorists" and the drive towards 'English only' policies has exacerbated an already critical lack of bilingual and bicultural Latina victim advocates, especially in sexual assault program settings.

Through national collaborative work, we have witnessed a steady stream of Latina victim advocates from the state coalition level to direct services leave the field within the last year. Rather than retaining them and adding to the pool of specialized human resources at a time when the needs are great, agencies and coalitions are experiencing the kind of loss that prohibits growth and development. We are losing qualified individuals, the programs and *confianza* (trust) they have established, and the inroads that they had made into the Latina(o) community.

## **Observations from those working in the anti-violence movement**

In 2007 Latina victim advocates are:

- Expected to work without training and/or are denied opportunity to receive training.
- Denied adequate office or computer equipment.
- Hired for low-paying jobs not for leadership positions.
- Expected to provide free interpreter and translation services for all of their agency's programs or the coalition that they work at, without additional compensation.
- Reprimanded or "reminded of diversity issues" when they advocate on behalf of more Spanish language materials and programs.
- Asked to find their own funding if they want to continue doing the work. *(Recently, a nationally-recognized Latina victim advocate worked at a state coalition office for eight months without job security or funds for programming; we can only imagine what conditions are like in smaller and isolated settings.)*
- Designated to shelter services rather than the main office where they could provide necessary services to walk-ins. Since shelters are supposed to be in an undisclosed location, clients can't access the advocate.
- Expected to be silent witnesses to negligent and abusive behavior by other victim advocates and those in authority.
- Inside the shelters - Latinas are given the worst chores and they are not allowed to cook their own meals.
- Latina clients are not allowed to use the only bathroom in the office they have to walk to a public bathroom.
- Latina victims of rape are denied access to bilingual advocates or interpreters for hospital to accompaniment with the rape kit process.
- An executive director told a group of clients that you "leave your culture at home." The advocate challenged her and now she is being micromanaged.

## **Position statement in support of Latina victim advocates**

In order to deconstruct the systemic exclusion of Latino communities in anti-sexual violence efforts, there must be a consolidated national effort to support the retention of Latina victim advocates and the development of culturally competent and linguistically appropriate programs and materials.

Victim advocates, coalition staff and policy makers need to recognize that Latinas and Latinos are not a new segment of the U.S. population, for we are the offspring of both the original residents and colonizers of this continent. We have contributed to the development of this nation, are here to stay, and as a growing segment of underserved survivors of sexual and intimate partner violence, we deserve victim services in whatever language we choose or need to speak.

We need more than just good intentions for the Latino/a Community. The health and human rights of millions are at stake. As Latina victim advocates and allies we urge the following immediate actions to help address the shortage of culturally competent Latina/o victim advocates:

- 1) Include bilingual/bicultural staff, programs and materials as permanent budget areas in your grant applications.
- 2) Honor translation and interpreter services accordingly, rather than just adding them as specialized skills onto jobs descriptions
- 3) Work to also engage diverse Latina/o communities in our work rather than just assist them as victims.
- 4) Take proactive steps to eliminate tokenism of all advocates of color in victim services.

*"I agree 100 percent with this position statement. I have learned from first-hand experience, and what I saw in the detention center in Texas is that our Latinas and other immigrants need to have an advocate. I am seeing this issue with other eyes today and more than ever I feel the need to speak up for those who do not have a voice or are not able to express their needs." – Celeste C. Araujo, Existe Ayuda (help exists) National Outreach Project Partner - recently detained at an INS detention facility in Texas for over a month.*

#### **Partial list of endorsers:**

- Celeste C Araujo - *Existe Ayuda* (help exists) National Outreach Project Partner, IN
- April Buentello, TX
- Jasara Calandrella, Services Empowering Rights of Victims Center For Family Services, NJ
- Patricia Castillo, P.E.A.C.E. Initiative, TX
- Sr. Carol Coston, OP and Sr. Elise Garcia, OP, Santuario Sisterfarm, TX
- Laurel Duncan, Utah Coalition Against Sexual Assault
- Elizabeth Toledo, Angels Recovery & Spirituality, Family Violence Intervention Program Coordinator CETPA, Inc & Co-Chair GA-WOCC
- Merrie Rennard, Gwinnett Sexual Assault Center & Children's Advocacy Center, GA
- Lynne Walter, North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault

#### **State and National Organizations**

- Alianza Latina en contra la Agresión Sexual (ALAS) is a national Latina-led membership network of victim advocates working to address and prevent sexual violence. Through collaborative efforts and cyber activism, ALAS promotes the leadership of Latina victim advocates and develops models, resources and policies to empower communities and eliminate access barriers for survivors. ALAS honors the diversity of the Latin@ culture by respecting the similarities and differences of our languages and histories.
- Arte Sana Board of Directors
- California Coalition Against Sexual Assault
- CARE/Purdue University
- Colorado Coalition Against Sexual Assault
- Florida Council Against Sexual Violence
- Iowa Coalition Against Sexual Assault
- Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault
- North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault
- New Jersey Coalition Against Sexual Assault
- Texas Association Against Sexual Assault
- Utah Coalition Against Sexual Assault
- Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault, Inc
- Wyoming Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault
- Women of Color Network/Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence
- National Latino Alliance for the Elimination of Domestic Violence (Alianza)