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“Si, yo Hablo Español”: Empowering Spanish-Speakers with Culturally and Linguistically Accessible Services

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Growing up in Miami Florida as a Latina, I never really considered myself a “minority” because of the high population of Latinos and Spanish-speakers living there. Every sign you read and every space you enter is bilingual; that is the norm. So, when I moved to Richmond, I experienced culture shock as I noticed the lack of language diversity and representation of the Spanish language throughout mainstream and public spaces. I thought, “is this what the rest of this country is really like?” and was fueled by a strong desire to reconnect with my culture and find the Latino community in this new place. It is on this journey that I found [Latinos in Virginia Empowerment Center](#). This agency, for which I have been working over the past year, serves Spanish-speaking victims of violence in Virginia, and does so through a powerful effort of cultural and linguistic empathy. By this, I mean that they genuinely understand the people they serve from both a cultural and linguistic perspective. The systems in place that serve victims of violence, like many systemic processes spanning a variety of issues, were designed for English-speakers, by English-speakers, and center the experience on US-born “citizens.” As a response, Latinos in Virginia Empowerment Center was created by Latinos, for Latinos, with an emphasis on providing language justice, or an experience that is not centered around English as the dominant language, to those who are limited English proficient, non-English speaking, and most commonly, immigrants. The community-based model that this agency uses is not only appropriate, but intentional in the design of its services for the Latino population, as demonstrated by a strong attention to detail. Even its most trivial seeming characteristics, such as the office’s intentional location in North Chesterfield, an area highly populated by Latinos, are a testament to this.

When Latinos in Virginia Empowerment Center launched its 24/7, Statewide, Bilingual Hotline for Spanish-speaking victims of violence in January 2021, our team was filled with pride and excitement. Even I, already understanding the deficit of culturally and linguistically appropriate services for Spanish speaking victims in Virginia, was surprised to learn that this hotline would be the first of its kind in the state, and I knew that this much-needed resource would be of value to so many victims; it would even save lives. When the news broke about the launch, however, I was discouraged to find that not everyone shared my feelings of excitement. Comment sections on articles published about our hotline were filled with hate speech and criticism, questioning why this service was needed at all. One anonymous comment read, “What’s the worst way to help a non-English speaker? Provide them services, etc. in their native language. How do you keep a non-English speaker from ever meeting their potential? Keep them content by spoon feeding them ‘life’ in the language they’re comfortable with.” Hiding behind their screen, this person concluded with, “I firmly believe the quickest, most effective method is via ‘sink or swim’...So stop it with the life jackets!” The white supremacist ideals upheld by this misguided commentary have no place in creating an equitable Richmond. On the contrary, **an equitable Richmond is a city that recognizes the needs of the Spanish speaking population and commits to meeting those needs by providing adequate Spanish language services.** There is clearly a need for services for Spanish-speaking victims of violence because in 2020, Latinos in Virginia’s hotline received a total of 427 office hours of calls, but has received 750 calls in the first 5 months of 2021 alone. In response to the above mentioned comment, victims of violence do need “life jackets;” they are literally asking for them by calling these hotlines. But these life jackets cannot be the same ones that we give to English speakers. According to the 2019 U.S. Census, roughly seven percent of Richmond’s population is Hispanic/Latino.

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While that number may seem small, it represents about 15,900 people. We can assume the number is even higher because there is typically low participation among underserved populations and non-English speakers. **If we want to create an equitable environment for the Latino population in Richmond, service providers must act with empathy and imbed a bilingual, bicultural, and trauma-informed approach within their organizations.**

On the language accessibility piece, the first concrete step an organization can take is developing a language access plan, or a document that spells out how to provide services to individuals who are non-English speaking or have limited English proficiency.

Act with Empathy

Imagine for a moment that your life is so tumultuous that you and your children are forced to flee your own home. Not only are you experiencing domestic violence, but your children are being exposed to it in your house, and your living conditions are not meeting the needs of you or your family. Once you leave and find a new home, while you may feel temporary relief, you feel isolated in a place filled with people who cannot understand you because they do not speak your language, and you know that your problems at home can still come back to haunt you. You're living in fear of your abuser following you and your children, and trying to come back into your lives, so you're extremely cautious about everything you do. And beyond all of this, you are trying to help your children become acclimated to a new environment. Finally, something bad does happen, and you need to call the police to come and intervene. But you cannot just call 911 — what is the appropriate emergency number here? And maybe you know just enough of the local language to ask for directions, but you also know you would not be able to communicate clearly with a police officer over the phone.

You do not even know where to begin. You are panicked. You are stressed. You probably do not even pick up the phone out of fear that it will not work, or that you will mistakenly be sent back to the place you recently fled out of desperation. You need to protect your children from this, too. But imagine you do pick up the phone, and the response you hear on the other end of the line is, “I’m sorry, I don’t speak English,” and they hang up on you. You are left feeling even more helpless than when you began. This is how monolingual and limited English proficient Spanish speaking immigrants who are victims of violence feel in Virginia. All this upon uprooting their lives in their former homes to find better opportunities here. No matter how new and different, Richmond is now their home, and they should be able to access the same services and treatment as anyone else.

Incorporate a Bilingual, Bicultural, and Trauma-Informed Approach

After empathy comes action, and these actions should incorporate both language accessibility and cultural sensitivity to fulfill your commitment to serving Spanish speakers. On the language accessibility piece, the first concrete step an organization can take is developing a language access plan, or a document that spells out how to provide services to individuals who are non-English speaking or have limited English proficiency. In this plan, agencies can explicitly commit to making changes like translating their vital documents such as release forms and informational brochures to be available in Spanish, organizing events that have facilitators who speak Spanish, and working well with interpreters. The cultural sensitivity piece is a bit more challenging. Even with a language access plan in place, Spanish-speaking victims of violence will still face obstacles. A brochure that is translated from English to Spanish using Google translate will probably leave your target audience just as confused as they were to begin with. In this case, agencies need to work not only with professional translators, but also people from the Latino community itself to understand the appropriate language they should be using to reach their target audience. If you tell a potential

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client that your agency can provide them with “Manejo de Casos” (Case Management), they may have no idea what you are talking about; break it down for them so that they know you can provide them with the services they need to overcome their situations.

Apart from agency materials, the cultural piece needs to be considered when thinking about over-the-phone services. A Spanish-speaking victim may call a domestic violence hotline that uses an over the phone interpreter as per its language access plan, and let’s say it takes one minute for the caller to be put on hold while the hotline connects them to the appropriate interpreter. If you are in an emergency, a potentially life-threatening situation and you need help as soon as possible, one minute can feel like an eternity. And imagine how much courage it took the victim to call in the first place, with fear that their migratory status could be threatened. Many callers may even hang up while they are waiting. For the callers that don’t hang up, they will probably still end up speaking to a remote interpreter who is unable to offer a personal connection. This is why having advocates on staff who are both bilingual and bicultural is so important. Callers want someone on the other end of the line who is not only going to understand the language they are speaking, but who is able to respond with cultural sensitivity and relate to where they are coming from, both literally and figuratively. Employing this staff can also help agencies avoid perpetuating a misunderstood idea of what “Latino culture” is that is based on generalizations and assumptions, which can be damaging to your services. The entirety of the staff at Latinos in Virginia Empowerment Center is bilingual and bicultural, so when a Spanish-speaker calls our hotline, they are always able to speak to a real person who speaks their language, is trained in trauma-informed care, and can relate to what they are going through as a Latin American immigrant.

A genuine connection between staff and client served, rooted in both language spoken and cultural sensitivity, is the empathetic approach, and one that should be a model for all nonprofits, schools, and government services in Richmond. While Latinos in Virginia Empowerment Center is one agency that is committed to serving Spanish-speaking victims of violence, thousands of other Spanish-speaking individuals’ needs are being unmet. Creating an equitable Richmond for all would require more organizations to empower immigrant and Spanish speaking individuals through the provision of linguistically and culturally accessible services for all. In this way, bilingual services can become a norm.

Gabriela Telepman

Gabriela joined Latinos in Virginia Empowerment Center in spring 2020 upon graduating from the University of Richmond with a dual-degree in Business Administration and Latin American Studies. As Community Relations Coordinator, she works to form meaningful partnerships with other organizations and service providers throughout Virginia to strengthen the collective response to the needs of Spanish-speaking victims of violence. Gabriela is originally from Miami, Florida.