



Remarks as Prepared

Hello and thank you all so much for being here today. There are so many people here supporting us without whom none of this, none of the advocacy we do and impact we have on Latinos in Illinois, would be possible – donors, funders, partners, and friends – thank you.

Thank you to all of our sponsors – they are listed in your programs. I want to give a special shout out to the Game Changer sponsors: Purple Group and PNC. Scott Swanson and Laritza Lopez, your personal and financial investment in the Forum is so appreciated.

Mil gracias to our keynote speaker, Sindy Benavides for coming all the way from Washington, DC, and Mark Rivera for once again, being our MC this afternoon.

To our Champion of Change honorees, you are an inspiration. Thank you.

Thank you to Governor Pritzker, Mayor Johnson, Senator Durbin, and Senator Duckworth, who as honorary host committee members lent their names and support for today's event. And thank you, Governor Pritzker for your kind words and well wishes in the video.

Believe me when I say: this, today, is a dream come true for me. Nearly sixteen years ago, when I assumed leadership of the Forum, we were a team of three people, but today, we are growing to a team of 20. We have also grown in capacity, and dare I say, in might and impact. I am amazed and so proud of that.

To our founders and our original board of directors, some of who are here today, Joy Arguete, John Betancur, Linda Coronado, Sol Flores, Filemon Cerda, Congressman "Chuy" Garcia, Maricela Garcia, Raul Raymundo, Guacolda Reyes, Paul Roldan, and me, could you have imagined that we would be here today? I name names, b/c we often forget our history, and I wanted to take a moment to acknowledge those that were a part of the Forum at the very beginning, who dared to want more for our communities and our families and who took action to make that vision a reality.

Over these past few years, we have been hyper focused on growing and building a stable organization that is prepared for the next level of impact. We have strengthened our board and nurtured talent within the Forum, and worked to attract new talent to complete what today is an amazing group of dedicated and committed leaders who are accomplishing great things. The result is a Latino Policy Forum that is a prominent and trusted voice on the systemic inequities standing in the way of Latino progress and the policy solutions that will move Illinois forward for all of us and our shared future.

Current and former Board and staff will you please stand up? Thank you for your commitment, dedication, and service. Look at what we have built!

Because of the leadership and expertise within our education, immigration and housing programs, and leaders in our Multicultural Leadership Academy, we have moved progress forward for Latinos.

Here are some highlights from just this past year.



- Illinois passed SB1, established a new Department of Early Childhood, which among many things, enshrined the rights of all children, birth-to-five in Illinois to access public early education programs and services. Illinois is the first state in the nation to take this step to protect the rights of all children, including undocumented students in early childhood.
- The Illinois General Assembly united to send a message to the White House and the entire country that immigrants are vital to our state's communities and economic growth after the Latino Policy Forum was instrumental in the passage of the Work Permits for All resolution. Illinois became the only convening body in the country to pass such a resolution.
- Our community is more aware of doubled-up homelessness, the most prevalent form of homelessness among Latinos, because of a public awareness campaign led by the Forum. We are elevating the stories of our communities, helping to illuminate this often-invisible issue in Latino families and communities.
- The Forum continues to strengthen Black and Latino unity through 264 diverse leaders trained in the Multicultural Leadership Academy. This year, 22 Black and Latino leaders completed the program. That network of MLA alumni today lead community projects that bring us closer to an Illinois that is more inclusive and equitable for all.
- The Illinois Latino Agenda now comprises 34 Latino leaders, representing the interests of our community and comes together as a unified voice to weigh in on the issues that impact us the most.
- And the last highlight I want to mention: This year we worked on important analyses on the Latino college landscape, the impact of bilingual education on our students (spoiler: being an English Learner is a superpower), the Latino wealth gap, and the Latino electorate in Illinois. This data and our analysis empowers our policy advocacy, and it empowers our community.

These are some highlights. Go to the QR code in your program to see a fuller list of the forum's accomplishments this past year and the impact we have had in Illinois.

Together, we have built real pathways to a more equitable future for Latinos in our great state. I am, as you likely know, stepping down from my position at the helm of the Forum from a true position of strength and power. I am excited to hand over the reins of this beloved, impactful institution to the next generation of leaders. (Besides, I am tired of being the oldest person in the room).

Early in my career, when I worked in Springfield, I was the only person in the room who looked like me, but today, Latinos are everywhere! The number of Latinos leading at advocacy and service organizations, foundations and businesses has grown. I am so pleased to see our community, including Forum staff, in key roles at mainstream advocacy organizations, ensuring that our people have a say.

Importantly, we are no longer just on the outside looking in, pushing government to hear us, we are also now **in** the halls of government, in those key decision-making roles. We have moved beyond tokenism to have significant roles in Congress, in the Illinois General Assembly, in the Governor's office, City Hall, and the mayor's office. I'd like to add, that many of those Latino leaders in government today, were once a



part of the Forum. Sixteen years ago, no, really more like 40 years ago, when I was a young staffer living and working in Springfield, this was my dream, and today it is my dream come true.

I do not want to lose sight of the fact that while we have come a long way, we still have a long way to go. The Forum will continue to advocate and be a force for good, but we will need you. So, I am asking you today, to join us, to invest in our vision that uplifting Latinos in Illinois, uplifts everyone, and ensure that the Latino Policy Forum will be here for many more years.

Many of you know that my last name “puente” means bridge, but fewer of you know that my personal mission statement has been to “build bridges, between and within the Latino community, and larger society.” Well, I have been blessed to live that mission.

And... I have been quite intense in pursuit of that mission, sometimes tough... and I’m told that I can be even be intimidating. But, I was driven by an overwhelming sense of responsibility to my community. I will never forget when my father shared his experience of being a child in Texas, and seeing signs that said, “No Mexicans and no dogs allowed.” That painful story and so many others like it, fueled me. And when I was the only person in the room that looked like me, I had to build a tough exterior because I needed to have the courage to say and do the things that needed to be done. And let me tell you, it was exhausting. But, I am learning (shout out to my therapist) that I can let that go now, because I am no longer the only person pushing, I... we... are not alone, so I can let that sense of obligation go and instead approach this work from a place of joy and love. There has never been a more urgent time on our planet, in our nation, or in our city to approach our pursuit of equity and justice from a place of love. I believe that love can transform the divisions of hate, fear, injustice and inequality. I believe that the power of love can bring us together when we cannot see a collective way forward.

In closing, to quote Dr. King... “We are all linked in the great chain of humanity. Acting from this space can create the Beloved community. Creating that beloved community, this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives.” In whatever my next chapter will bring, I pledge to work to continue to create the Beloved Community. My call to action is to ask each of you to do the same. Peace Love, and radical blessings.