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STATE LEGISLATURES: A PATHWAY TO HISPANIC REPRESENTATION IN CONGRESS

By Kenneth Romero, NHCSL's Executive Director

As the U.S. Hispanic population continues to grow and diversify, so too does the need for more representation at all levels of government. NHCSL's key mission is to make Hispanic state legislators more efficient at representing their constituents, with the understanding that our state capitols provide platforms to advance policies that reflect the needs and priorities of Hispanic families. Serving in state legislatures also provides a vital pathway for Latinos to reach higher elected offices, including Congress.

Hispanic representation in state legislatures has steadily increased over the past few decades, reflecting the demographic changes across the United States. As of early 2024, before the last election, there were more than 450 Hispanic state legislators in the United States, with representation in 37 states and Puerto Rico. This is a far cry from when our Caucus was founded 35 years ago, and Latinos were largely absent from elected office and political power. And having Hispanic elected officials in state legislatures is not just about numbers or representation for the sake of it; it is about ensuring that the voices of our communities are heard. Latinos make up nearly 19% of the U.S. population, but we are still underrepresented in key decision-making bodies. This underrepresentation can lead to policies that overlook or neglect the unique perspectives our families have and the issues they face.

A VITAL STEPPINGSTONE

State legislatures play a crucial role in our political system as a pipeline to higher office. Over the years, a significant number of Members of Congress have emerged from state legislatures, where they gained valuable public policy experience and built strong connections with their constituents. This pathway to Congress is not only a natural progression but also a strategic one

for cultivating a new generation of Latino leaders who understand the complexities of lawmaking and are grounded in the concerns of their communities.



From left: Rep. Lori Chavez-DeRemo (OR), Rep. Adriano Espaillat (NY), NHCSL President Rep. Angela Romero (UT), U.S. Department of Commerce Assistant Secretary Susie Feliz and Rep. Darren Soto (FL). Credit: NHCSL.

In fact, a considerable number of Latinos in the U.S. House of Representatives first gained political experience as state legislators. Rep. Darren Soto (FL), Rep. Adriano Espaillat (NY), Rep. Julian Castro (TX), Rep. Grace Napolitano (CA), Rep. Jimmy Gomez (CA), Rep. Delia Ramirez (IL), and Rep. Andrea Salinas (OR) are all alumni of their state legislatures, and NHCSL's Immediate Past President, Representative-elect Nellie Pou (NJ), and Senator-elect Ruben Gallego (AZ) just made history by becoming the first Latina to represent New Jersey in Congress and the first Latino to represent Arizona in the Senate. This underscores the importance of having more Latinos in state legislatures, since they provide invaluable learning and training opportunities for leaders to then serve in Congress. Importantly, they also allow them to build solid and genuine relationships with their communities,

ensuring that they remain responsive to the needs of their constituents and connected to the day-to-day realities of all Americans across the United States, including communities of color.

As one of the largest and fastest-growing demographic groups, having Hispanics serve in all levels of government is essential to ensuring that the diverse needs of the Hispanic community are represented in the policymaking process. Hispanics contribute to our Nation's workforce, culture, and innovation. Hispanic policymakers can champion policies that address issues such as immigration reform, equitable access to education, and healthcare disparities. Their presence, especially in Congress, also strengthens the democratic process by promoting inclusivity, ensuring that all Americans—regardless of background—have a voice in shaping laws and policies. Ultimately, this diversity of representation leads to a more responsive and effective government.



NHCSL Immediate Past President Congresswoman-elect Nellie Pou (NJ) during the Congressional Hispanic Caucus orientation in November 2024. Credit: Nellie Pou.

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT



Dear *Familia*,

As I wrap the first year of my tenure as your President, I want to express my gratitude and appreciation to every single one

of you for being part of our Caucus. 2024 was a very challenging year, with unprecedented political situations, big legislative challenges at the state and federal levels, and many of us also running for reelection.

Every time you showed up, engaged and collaborated with each other, it made us stronger and helped connect us at a deeper level. It also provided us with tools and alliances to be more effective when representing our constituents. No matter what proactive or reactive bills you choose to back during the next legislative session, keep in mind that you have us, NHCSL, to support you throughout the process, be a sounding board, share what has worked or not in other states, and have your back in all aspects of the legislative process. I encourage you to utilize the resources provided by NHCSL and don't hesitate to ask for help.

I wish you a successful and productive 2025 legislative session as you continue to work towards making a positive impact in our communities.

Happy Holidays! ¡Felices Fiestas!

Respectfully,

Rep. Angela Romero (UT)
NHCSL President



A BIPARTISAN SOLUTION TO SAVE LIVES IN OUR COMMUNITIES



By Del. Ashanti Martinez (MD), NHCSL Law and Criminal Justice Task Force Vice-Chair

There is no corner of our country that hasn't been touched by gun violence. According to the CDC, 2023 had the third-highest number of gun-related deaths ever recorded, while 2022 had the second highest. Moreover, gun violence poses a disproportionate risk to our communities across the United States.

Every year, nearly 5,000 Latinos lose their lives to gun violence, a rate that far exceeds that of their non-Hispanic counterparts. Alarming, over 36 % of gun-related deaths among Hispanics are deaths by suicides, with a sharp increase of 110 % over the past decade specifically among young Hispanics.

While the gun violence incidents we can collectively remember or evoke are mostly mass shootings, unintentional shootings, especially among children and teenagers, are also a major concern. Currently, there are firearms in around 30 million households nationwide, and at least half of gun owners don't store their guns securely. This puts families, especially children and teenagers, at significant risk because unsecured guns are a leading cause of accidental firearm injuries, with over 360 children under the age of 18 unintentionally shooting themselves or others every year.

A 2019 study published in JAMA Pediatrics showed that in homes where guns are stored securely, the risk of injury is 78 % lower than in homes where neither the gun nor the ammunition is locked up. In households where children live, the risk drops even further when guns are properly stored—by as much as 85 %.

Each year, more than 200,000 firearms are stolen in the U.S., many of which are retrieved from vehicles. Securing firearms properly makes them less prone to being stolen and ending up in illegal markets or used in gun violence incidents like homicide and assault.

SECURE STORAGE SAVES LIVES

In states with laws requiring secure storage, there has been a measurable decline in gun-related suicides and injuries. Teenagers between the ages of 14 and 17 in states with child access prevention laws saw an 8 % reduction in suicide rates and an 11 % decrease in firearm suicides. In fact, youth deaths by suicide with guns in states with the most protective secure storage laws were 1 % lower in 2022 than in 1999, while states without such laws saw a 36 % increment over the same period.

With these facts in mind, our Caucus approved Res. 2024-16 *Secure Weapons Storage*, calling for legislation that requires the secure storage of firearms in homes, particularly when firearms are not in use. Specifically, we propose four key provisions: (1) securing all firearms in a household by storing in a locked safe or container or equipped with a disabling mechanism when not in use; (2) securing firearms left unattended in vehicles to prevent theft; (3) thefts and losses reporting requirements to help curb illegal gun trafficking and prevent firearms from being used in crimes; and, (4) public awareness campaigns to educate gun owners about secure storage practices, with a special emphasis in schools distributing information about safe firearm storage to parents and guardians.

By passing laws in our states that require the secure storage of firearms in homes and vehicles, reporting lost or stolen firearms, and promoting public awareness, we can take a critical step toward reducing gun related injuries, suicides, and crime. And it can be done with bipartisan support. This upcoming state legislative session, take a bold step to protect kids, teenagers and communities in your state and propose safe gun storage legislation. This action can—and will—save lives.



From top left: Rep. Arturo Alonso-Sandoval (OK); U.S. Senator John Hickenlooper with Rep.-Elect Ceceila Espenosa (CO), Sen. Julie Gonzales (CO), and Rep. Javier Mabrey; Melody Gonzales of the White House Hispanic Initiative; Rep. Eva-Dina Delgado (IL), Xcel Energy's Hollie Velazquez-Horvath and Rep. Elizabeth Velasco (CO). Center: NHCSL Legislators in the stairs of the Colorado State Capitol. Credit: NHCSL.

From bottom left: Asm. Juan Carrillo (CA); NHCSL Legislators holding policy session in the Colorado State Capitol; Incoming BBA Secretary Everytown's Jose Davila; Sen. Luz Escamilla (UT) and NHCSL President Rep. Angela Romero (UT). Center: Former NHCSL President Congresswoman-elect Nellie Pou. Credit: NHCSL.



From top: Host Committee Co-Chair Rep. Manny Rutinel (CO) and NHCSL President Rep. Angela Romero (UT) during Welcome Reception; NHCSL Treasurer Rep. Angel Matos (PR), President-Elect Rep. Juan Candelaria (CT), President Rep. Angela Romero (UT), U.S. Sen. John Hickenlooper (CO), Vice President for Policy Sen. Cristina Castro (IL), Secretary Rep. Lillian Ortiz-Self (WA), and Executive Director Kenneth Romero; Sen. Wlmsvey Campos (OR); American Cancer Society's Cyndie Navarro-Davila. Center: Rep. Angela Romero (UT) during Annual Meeting; Incoming BBA Vice-Chair and 2024 Partner of the Year Awardee Javier González of Google; NHCSL's 2024 Annual Meeting. Credit: NHCSL.



From top: Res. 2024-03 Sponsors Sen. Wlmsvey Campos (OR), Rep. Lillian Ortiz-Self (WA), Rep. Alma Hernández (AZ) and Rep. Louis Ruiz (KS); Maryland Delegates Deni Taveras, Ashanti Martinez, Joseline Peña-Melnik and Gabriel Acevero; Members of the Puerto Rico Legislature in the Welcome Reception; Rep. Patty Contreras (AZ), Sen. Brian Fernandez (AZ), Angela Octave, Rep. Manny Rutinel, and NHCSL's Kenneth Romero; Rep. Angela Romero (UT) with Rep.-Elect Gabriel Sanchez (GA), Rep.-Elect Mary Ann Santos (GA), Rep.-Elect Rosalba Dominguez (UT), Rep.-Elect Homar Gomez (MA), Rep.-Elect Priscilla Prado (WV) and Rep.-Elect Diana Gonzales Worthen (AR). Credit: NHCSL.

NHCSL HELD 22ND ANNUAL SUMMIT IN DENVER

With approximately 200 participants, NHCSL held its 22nd Annual Summit in Denver, the city where it was founded 35 years ago by State Rep. Larry Trujillo (CO). Hispanic state legislators from all over the country got together to attend policy sessions and discuss the Caucus' resolutions that defined some of the year's key priorities, with a look ahead into the 2025 state legislative sessions.

The convening kicked off at the Colorado State Capitol, with a conversation about secured store laws for firearms, featuring Everytown for Gun Safety and moderated by Rep. Javier Mabrey (CO), followed by a tour of the iconic capitol building.

The healthcare-focused sessions centered around opportunities for early screening of Type 1 diabetes as well as solutions to increase access to treatment for obesity at the state level.

After keynote remarks from U.S. Sen. John Hickenlooper (CO), NHCSL held conversations about challenges and opportunities in education equity for Hispanic communities, the role of A.I. in civic tools, the increasing threats to communities from wildfires and the critical role of legislation in mitigation and management, and the mandates at the state level of the continued operation of outdated copper wire landlines (POTS) alongside the transition to broadband networks, to ensure an equitable and efficient shift, protecting consumers and preserving emergency services.

Additionally, female legislators and partners were invited to a wellness breakfast that addressed women's empowerment with the American Cancer Society.

During the Summit, state legislators also held their Annual Meeting and voted on resolutions to be adopted as the Caucus'

policy positions on several issues around healthcare, education, gun control, and other topics relevant to Hispanic communities nationwide.

To close the convening, legislators, partners and donors gathered for the *Noche de Celebración* Gala and honored Sen. Cristina Castro (IL) as the 2024 Legislator of the Year, Javier Gonzalez from Google as Partner of the Year for his role in helping our legislators navigate the challenges around A.I., and NHCSL's Immediate Past President, Congresswoman-elect Senator Nellie Pou (NJ), who recently became the first Latina to be elected to represent her state in Congress, with the Trailblazer Award.



NHCSL's leadership with the outgoing BBA Board, the incoming BBA board, and the BBA's Full Members. Credit: NHCSL.

NHCSL ANNOUNCES NEW LEADERSHIP FOR ITS BOARD OF BUSINESS ADVISORS

At NHCSL's 22nd Annual Summit, the organization's Board of Business Advisors (BBA) elected new leadership for the 2024-2026 term.

Melissa Bishop-Murphy, Senior Director, National Government Relations & Multicultural Affairs for Pfizer, was elected as the Board's Chair; while Javier González, Head of Local Government Affairs & Public Policy for California and Interim Head of U.S. Southwest State/Local Public Policy & External Affairs at Google, will serve as Vice Chair.

Roberto J. Monserrate, Amgen's Director of State Government Affairs will stay on the

board as Vice President for Policy, while Terri Broussard Williams, Head of State and Local Government Relations at Edward Jones, will serve as Vice President for Membership.

Jose Davila, Senior Director of State Government Affairs at Everytown for Gun Safety, has been elected Secretary. Additionally, Teri Nikole Baca, Assistant Vice President of Legislative Affairs at AT&T, joins the Board as a Strategic Advisor.

The new leadership team succeeds outgoing Chair Jamie Oldani, Senior Director of State Government Affairs at Eli Lilly, and former board members Laura

Berrocá, Vice President of Policy and External Affairs at Charter; Paul Ordal, Vice President of Government Relations and Public Policy at Masimo; and Kwame Canty, Managing Director of External Affairs at EEI.

NHCSL's BBA is comprised of members representing the business, non-profit and unions community. It provides guidance and assistance to the Executive Committee and the Executive Director. It also provides counsel on relevant policy issues, conference planning, fundraising opportunities as well as other issues and projects of importance to our Caucus.



NHCSL STAFF

Kenneth Romero-Cruz
Executive Director

Guillermo L. Mena
Director of Legislation, Policy & Advocacy

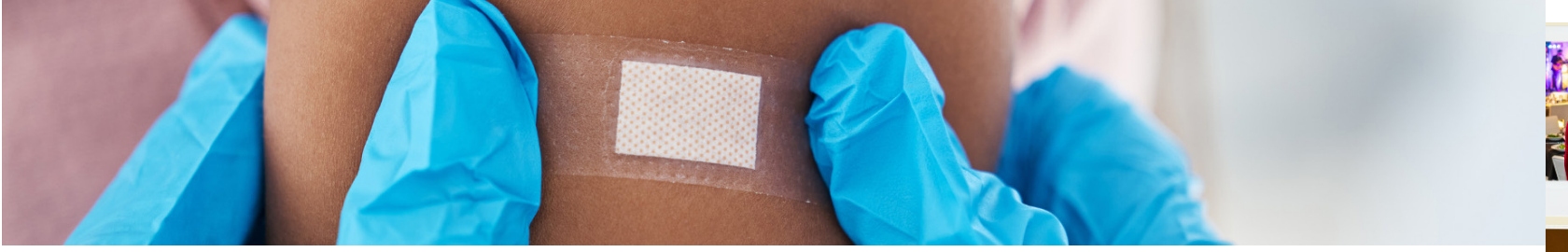
Carolina García
Director of Meetings & Member Services

Gabriela Benazar Acosta
Director of Communications

Patricia Meza Román
Administrative and Logistics Coordinator

Gretchen Class-Díaz
Development Lead

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JANUARY IS CERVICAL CANCER AWARENESS MONTH: HERE'S WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW



By Asm. Jessica Gonzalez-Rojas (NY), NHCSL East Region Chair

Cervical cancer —once the leading cause of cancer deaths among women in the United States— is caused in 90% of cases by certain types of Human Papillomavirus (HPV), the most common sexually-transmitted infection. In most cases, HPV is harmless and goes away on its own, but there are 12 high-risk HPVs that can lead to different types of cancer, and HPV 16 and HPV 18 are responsible for most HPV-related cancers. While there is no cure for HPV, Gardasil, an FDA-approved vaccine can help protect against several high-risk types.

Since 1980, cervical cancer rates and related deaths have decreased significantly. However, this stride in our country's public health has not been experienced equally across all communities. Latinas are still 36% more likely to be diagnosed with cervical cancer and 30% more likely to die from it compared to non-Hispanic white women, according to the American Cancer Society and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Furthermore, a 2019 report from the National Institutes of Health highlighted that more than half of women diagnosed with cervical cancer each year are not up to date on their screenings, making cancer much more difficult to treat.

The disproportionate impact of cervical cancer on Latinas is linked to factors such as limited access to resources —money, transportation, and time— that prevent many women from seeking care, lack of health insurance, shortages of healthcare providers in underserved areas, immigration status, and cultural or language barriers that complicate access to necessary care.

Despite all this, there are two tangible actions we can take to further improve cervical cancer rates, and even possibly eradicate it: improving access to screenings and awareness around them, and HPV vaccines requirements and access to those vaccines for all individuals, including those who are uninsured and underinsured.

IMPROVING AWARENESS AND ACCESS TO SCREENING

For generations, the most important screening tool for cervical cancer was the pap test, or pap smear. This test retrieves cells from the cervix with a swab to detect any cancerous or precancerous abnormalities. It was, and still is, an effective

tool for those who got screened during their annual OBGYN check-ups.

However, in the past few years, the testing guidance has been updated to reflect two different possibilities: primary HPV testing, or co-testing. The former phases out Pap tests in favor of screening that detects HPV, and the latter adds these tests instead of relying solely on Pap. The current testing frequency and guidelines from the CDC reflect these two possibilities and take into consideration access to care and availability. The frequency of getting tested depends on each person's age, medical history, and previous tests results, but in general, the CDC recommends:

District of Columbia have HPV vaccine requirements for secondary school.

A study assessing stakeholders' recommendations around these policies in Puerto Rico suggested that even though vaccine requirements have been successful at increasing vaccination rates, the current politicization of discourse around the COVID-19 vaccine has altered the way in which the public sees these policies (...) potentially hindering the implementation of current, and the adoption and implementation of future, vaccine requirements." To curtail misinformation and improve access, the stakeholders recommended the importance of raising

Between 21–29 years old: screening should begin at 21, and providers can recommend a Pap test every 3 years.

Between 30–65 years old: people should discuss with their provider which testing option is right for them:

- An HPV test only (primary HPV testing): If results are normal, provider may tell their patient they can wait five years until next screening test.
- An HPV test along with a Pap test (co-testing): If both results are normal, provider may tell their patient they can wait five years until next screening test.
- A Pap test only: If results are normal, provider may tell their patient they can wait three years until next screening test.

After 65 years-old: providers may tell their patients they can opt out of further screenings if they have had at least three Pap tests or two HPV tests in the past 10 years, and the test results were normal or negative, and they have not had a cervical precancer in the past; or if they had their cervix removed as part of a total hysterectomy for non-cancerous conditions, such as fibroids.

THE ANTI-CANCER VACCINE TO END CERVICAL CANCER

The HPV vaccine has shown an almost 100% efficacy in preventing the HPV types responsible for cervical cancer. People can get it until age 45, but it's at its most effective when applied at 11–12 years, per the CDC.

Almost two decades ago, NHCSL adopted Res. 2006-05 *End Cervical Cancer in Our Lifetime*. This visionary policy proposal supported the development by all states and U.S. territories of legislation to "require that all young women, prior to entry into middle school, be educated regarding HPV and vaccinated against cervical cancer and the most common types of HPV." It also supported, before the existence of the Affordable Care Act, legislation requiring broad access to then-newly emerging preventive technologies, like the HPV vaccine, for low-income and Medicaid-eligible young adult women.

Since then, only Hawaii, Delaware, Rhode Island, Virginia, Puerto Rico and the

awareness and providing education about the HPV vaccine prior to the requirement, incorporating real stories, and making the problem relevant by using local data.

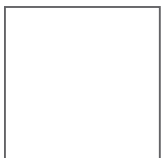
The study also highlighted the importance of considering local culture, unique government bureaucracies and the promotion of multisectoral collaborations when resources are limited. The findings also highlight "the need to understand the contextual distinctions of the communities where vaccination requirements may be adopted and implemented to anticipate barriers and leverage existing resources. Consideration of the politico-cultural context may be important as political beliefs have become entrenched with vaccine policy."

This assessment of Puerto Rico's policies can inform us when we address this at a state level to make our policies more culturally competent and relevant for our communities. In the upcoming 2025 legislative session, let's take a bold step and advance legislation to end cervical cancer in our lifetime.

BE PART OF NHCSL'S *FAMILIA!*

Visit nhcsl.org/support/membership
and Renew Your Membership for 2025!

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1444 I Street NW, Suite 900
Washington, DC 20005

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