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HEADLINE: **Hispanics here to stay ;**
LI should address the underlying issues their presence has highlighted

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BODY:

Officials in Suffolk County have recently targeted neighborhoods with large concentrations of Hispanic immigrants for code enforcement actions that result in evicting tenants from their homes. The officials say they are only protecting the safety and welfare of the (former) residents, citing overcrowded buildings and code violations.

Everyone knows this is only part of the story. The bigger picture is that American suburbs are faced with a new immigrant minority, and the established residents are feeling unsettled.

This is not a temporary situation. The nation's Hispanic population has more than doubled since 1980, exceeding 35 million by 2000. Hispanics are now the United States' largest minority, and more than 40 percent of them are immigrants.

Less publicized is that nearly half of Hispanics counted in metropolitan areas in the 2000 Census lived outside the central cities. Long Islanders have noticed the change. The Hispanic population has jumped from barely 100,000 in 1980 to nearly 350,000 today.

Residents' reactions are mixed. Many "native" Long Islanders themselves come from immigrant stock, and politicians have long expressed sympathy for the Ellis Island generations of newcomers. But it is

easier to identify with historical traditions than to cope with current realities. Suffolk County Executive Steve Levy put it bluntly: "When you hear someone who has 20 people living next to them urinating on their front lawn, it makes you want to help them."

Perhaps only a suburban politician would focus on the grass, but in most respects the real issues posed by immigrant minorities are the same in cities and suburbs around the country.

These issues cannot be solved by responding to the loudest complaints or by throwing a few immigrant families out of a bad housing situation. The new groups are here to stay. Most have a right to be here - fully two-thirds of Hispanics on Long Island are U.S.-born or naturalized citizens - and local government does not have the capacity to identify and deport those who are not here legally.

The more effective choice is to embrace the Hispanic population and to mobilize its energy and skills in dealing with the underlying issues of schools, housing and jobs that the Island's Hispanic presence brings to our attention.

This would mean a reversal of suburbia's instinctive response, especially in the political arena. The usual pattern is for established interests to resist influence from new groups. Elected officials prefer as long as possible to take small steps, like appointing group members to advisory committees.

Levy established a Hispanic Advisory Board, but he did not discuss with them the decision to carry out a campaign of code enforcement in Hispanic neighborhoods. Ten members resigned in protest, and Levy removed the remaining seven, who had expressed concern that his liaison to the board had been attending meetings of a local anti-immigration group.

These events make it clear that real political participation by Hispanics is in its infancy here, as it is in much of the country. For breakthroughs to occur, active group members need to become inside advisers to elected officials and to run for office in their own right. The most important step to take now is to accelerate that process, beginning with the choices made by Democrats and Republicans about positions within their respective parties.

The other requirement for progress is to resist the impulse to blame immigrants for Long Island's growing pains. The newcomers bring old problems to the surface more than they create new ones.

The cost of public education is one example. Some complaints about the burden on the schools are simply a new version of familiar attitudes of taxpayers whose children are already beyond school age, now showing up with a nativist flavor as the ethnic composition of schools changes.

A more important factor is that Hispanic children on Long Island, as in most suburbs, are concentrated in a few school districts with other long-standing problems. Just 40 of the region's more than 500 elementary schools enroll a third of the Hispanic students.

The average Hispanic elementary student is in a school where 42 percent of classmates are eligible for the free or reduced-price lunch program because of limited family income. These schools also are more racially diverse, enrolling more African-Americans than non-Hispanic whites. And though they often are

in districts with the highest tax rates, these aren't top-performing schools. Immigrant children bring challenges of social background and language into the classroom, but these are small compared with the issues of poverty, diversity, underachievement and tight resources that their schools already faced.

Another concern is the labor market. Some people fear the new groups will take away their jobs in the service sector and in low-wage manufacturing. It's a recurring theme in American history - every new group, arriving with few skills but willing to do hard work for little money, seems to threaten the position of those who have most recently struggled into the lowest positions on the job ladder.

Some suburbanites also are offended by the way some immigrants look for work, congregating on street corners hoping to earn a day's wages. This is acceptable when it happens around lettuce or strawberry fields in the countryside, but it conflicts with the usual image of suburbia. It's easy to say that the objection is to the day laborers' undocumented status, but if they were citizens - perhaps crowds of visibly minority men and women, Puerto Ricans or African-Americans, lining the streets waiting for work - the offense would be the same.

Of course, other people are happy to have so many willing employees at little cost to landscape their homes, clean their pools, watch over their children, scrub the floors and staff the many businesses that can survive in a competitive marketplace only by skimping on wages and working conditions. This is exactly what attracts new residents, especially immigrant minorities, documented and undocumented, to the region. Suburbia is where the jobs are, and increasingly it is where the low-wage jobs are.

A third issue is housing. The suburban housing stock in most of the country was not created with poor immigrants in mind. Single-family homes were marketed to homeowners, and multifamily units were predominantly small apartments.

The consequences on Long Island are not surprising. Entrepreneurs with enough money for an apartment deposit rent out sleeping space - and people pay for rights to a bed for the day or night shift, often three or four beds in a room. Garages and basements become bedrooms. Immigrant families with better incomes may share a larger apartment or a house with another family, or find an unregistered "in-law apartment" in a suburban neighborhood.

These are not new strategies. For decades many working-class homeowners have supplemented their incomes and helped pay their mortgage and property taxes by fixing up the basement, adding a bathroom and kitchenette. Local officials mostly pretended not to notice, though through the years there has been recurrent discussion of how to legalize and regulate this version of low-income housing. It is widely understood that there isn't enough affordable housing in many suburban areas for residents' children when they get out of school, or for older parents, or for a divorced daughter with kids. "Overcrowding" and violating the zoning are time-honored private-market alternatives, and they will persist until local officials seriously tackle the problem of providing low-income housing.

Hispanic immigrants, despite their growing numbers, are still considered outsiders on Long Island. They are present but not fully participating in the dream of suburbia. And this is the challenge: for other Long Islanders to accept them as part of the community. Only when we recognize that these are shared

problems, affecting newcomers and longtime residents alike, will we begin to find solutions that will make a difference.

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