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Inland Latinos, Asian-Americans say services not keeping up

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The amount of social services for Inland Latinos and Asian-Americans is not keeping pace with the explosive growth of those communities, experts say.

The Inland area is nearly half Latino. Its Asian population is increasing far more quickly than in the rest of Southern California. Yet many organizations that serve Latinos and Asian-Americans are under-funded and have long and unfulfilled wish lists.

The rapidness of population increases, the Inland area's location in the shadow of Los Angeles and lower-than-average incomes of its residents are among the reasons experts say the area has fewer organizations that serve the Asian and Latino communities than other regions.



Terry Pierson/The Press-Enterprise
Spanish speaker Santiago A. Valdivia uses a Spanish-to-English dictionary to look up words in his English as a Second Language class at TODEC Legal Center in Perris. Studies show the Inland area lacks adequate resources geared to its growing Latino and Asian-American populations.

A 2008 study found that Inland Latinos and Asian-Americans are less involved in civic life -- such as attending public forums and participation in community organizations -- than whites and blacks and that organizations that serve them typically have less clout, visibility and funding.

"More established areas like L.A. and Orange counties have bigger organizations that have been around longer, are more formalized, have more staff and do more activities," said Karthick Ramakrishnan, an associate professor of political science at UC Riverside and the study's lead author.

The Inland area had the biggest growth in Latino residents of any U.S. metropolitan area between 2000 and 2010, according to U.S. census data.

Its Asian population nearly doubled in those 10 years, to more than 6 percent of the population.

"The need is very strong," Ramakrishnan said.

Ramakrishnan said the Inland area's weak regional identity and lack of a true core city make it more difficult to organize communities. There is no concentrated ethnic hub like, for example, East Los Angeles, which for decades has been a center for Latino social services, cultural activities, shopping and socializing.

The lack of Inland organizations means that even relatively small groups like Perris' TODEC Legal Center try to serve a wide variety of needs.

On a shoestring

TODEC, which stands for Training Occupational Development Educating Communities, has only one full-time and three part-time employees, and a budget of \$150,000.

With the help of volunteers, the group offers courses in English and U.S. citizenship preparation. It sponsors forums on home-loan modifications and the rights of immigrants. It lobbies for immigration reform in Sacramento and Washington, D.C., and works with local officials on issues affecting immigrants. It trains clients to be fashion designers and nursery workers.

The center cannot provide direct services to many of the more than 12,000 people who contact the group each year from throughout Riverside County, so it has a list of attorneys, charities and government agencies to refer people to.

With more money, "we'd be able to offer more services and address more needs," said Luz Gallegos, community programs director for the center.

TODEC wants to host computer-technician classes so its immigrant clients can gain skills to obtain more than just low-wage jobs. But its computers are so outdated and slow that such courses would be useless, Gallegos said.

"If you walk into the computer lab, it's sad," she said. "The computers are from the mid-1990s."

Emilio Amaya, executive director of San Bernardino Community Service Center, which offers many of the same services as TODEC to its primarily San Bernardino County immigrant clientele, said most foundations have little or no presence or interest in the Inland area, so the region often gets forgotten. The group sometimes has weeks-long waiting lists for services such as immigration-related legal assistance.

Organizations like the center have limited Inland-based dollars to tap into. A 2009 study by the San Francisco-based James Irvine Foundation, one of the only major private funders of Inland organizations, found that Inland nonprofit groups on average spend far less per capita than organizations in the rest of California.

The study was part of the foundation's push to more closely focus on the Inland area and increase financial contributions. In 2003, Irvine deemed the Inland area and the San Joaquin Valley as "priority regions."

Despite the increased attention, the Inland area still receives proportionately less money from Irvine than the rest of the state. The area has about 11 percent of the state's population but receives about 7 percent of Irvine regional grants, although foundation spokesman Daniel Silverman said some of the Irvine grants for statewide programs -- which make up about half of the foundation's contributions -- concentrate disproportionately on the Inland area.

Joseph Pon, Irvine's vice president for programs, said some of the \$20 million in grants the foundation has made to the Inland area in the past seven years has been to initiatives that disproportionately benefit Latinos and African-Americans. One trains parents in low-income and ethnic-minority neighborhoods how to more effectively advocate for better programs and services in their children's schools, said Pon, who was in San Bernardino last week to meet with Inland grant writers. Another works with arts and cultural organizations to reach out to minority communities and develop programming on Inland ethnic groups' history and culture.



Terry Pierson/The Press-Enterprise
Maria L. Jimenez's English as a Second Language class is packed when it meets at TODEC Legal Center in Perris. Still, the center struggles to fund programs for its clientele.

Diversify leadership

Some Irvine money is funneled through The Community Foundation Serving Riverside and San Bernardino Counties, which is encouraging its grant recipients to diversify their leadership, said Daniel Foster, president and CEO of the foundation. Boards that better reflect the area's population are better able to understand the needs of all the region's residents, he said.

The foundation this year began requiring grant applicants to list the ethnicity, gender, age and skills of board members. The move signals the foundation's concern for diversity and a step toward eventually using board and staff diversity as a factor in deciding grants, Foster said.

As big donors such as Irvine and the Los Angeles-based California Endowment step up their Inland presence, Inland Latinos and Asian-Americans are creating grass-roots organizations.

Gilberto Esquivel recently founded a Riverside chapter of one of the country's oldest Latino organizations, the League of United Latin American Citizens.

Esquivel, a member of the Riverside Human Relations Commission, said the absence of effective groups is a key reason why the Inland area's near-Latino-majority hasn't translated into more political power and influence.

"We have the numbers," he said. "We don't have the structure to make those numbers count."

Esquivel's group is registering voters, taking part in meetings on legislative redistricting and planning a health fair.

The most comprehensive Asian-American nonprofit group in the Inland area is the San Bernardino-based Asian American Resource Center.

Riverside County Asian leaders are working to revive and expand the Riverside Asian American Community Association, which in the early and mid 2000s sponsored health fairs, cultural education for Inland community leaders and other programs.

The group had been all but dormant for most of the past two years, said Filipino-born Paul Michael Atienza, who joined the association's board last year.

The association hopes to eventually provide health, education, translation and other services. But it is now focusing on establishing referrals in multiple languages for Inland Asian residents, to better connect them to government and nonprofit assistance, he said.