

# STATE OF THE LATINO COMMUNITY IN DENVER: *Strengths, Challenges, and Opportunities*

A Report from the Denver Latino Commission



November 15, 2017



**LATINO  
COMMISSION**  
DENVER HUMAN RIGHTS &  
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## Overview

According to U.S. Census estimates, the Latino community accounted for 30.2% of Denver's population in 2016. However, this sizeable segment of the population is quite diverse and presents with varied strengths and challenges. In order to support our mission of overseeing, recommending, and influencing policies affecting the Latino community, the Denver Latino Commission conducted a series of community engagement efforts designed to better understand the strengths, challenges, and opportunities facing the Denver Latino community. Below we describe the methods used to gather this information and summarize results.

### Phase 1. Community Listening Sessions

- 14 listening sessions conducted between September 2015 and May 2016.
- Participants represented a wide range of sectors, including city and state agencies, non-profit organizations, social and health service organizations, arts and culture, business, and education.
- Listening sessions consisted of participants sharing their perceptions of strengths, challenges, and opportunities facing the Latino community with representatives from the Commission.

### Phase 2. Community Survey

- 32 additional individuals and organizations were selected for participation between February 2017 and July 2017.
- Participants also represented a wide range of sectors, including city and state agencies, non-profit organizations, social and health service organizations, arts and culture, business, and education.
- An online community survey collected open-ended responses to prompts about challenges; strengths, successes, and opportunities; suggestions and recommendations; and other information to share with the Mayor and his cabinet.
- Participants also provided ratings of their level of satisfaction across the five areas of the Denver Peak Performance initiative.

### Phase 3. Analysis and Results

- Listening session notes, audio recordings, and community survey open-ended responses were transcribed.
- Staff from the Department of Psychology at the University of Denver coded qualitative data using thematic analysis.
- Themes that emerged are summarized in Tables 1-4. Mean levels of satisfaction across Peak Performance domains are summarized in Figure 1.

## Recommendations

1. Ensure that diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) are central to organizational culture in city government. For example, build on recent training efforts focused on city policies related to disclosure of immigration-related information to federal agencies and embed this approach across all aspects of city government (e.g., hiring, training, communications, agency goals, etc.)
2. For City leadership to publicly acknowledge the strengths of the Latino community (i.e., resilience, family values, etc.) and recognize them as an important ally.
3. Continue championing efforts to increase access to education from preschool through higher education. Even without direct oversight of DPS, the city can serve as an important catalyst for ensuring broad access to education in Denver.
4. Continue creating opportunities for individuals from diverse backgrounds to come together and interact. The city can be an important agent for supporting and improving relations among diverse communities in Denver.
5. Prioritize procedures to optimize diversity in hiring, particularly at the top levels of city government. Ensure that qualified and experienced Latino applicants are considered for positions at all ranks of city government.
6. Publicly acknowledge community fears and provide reassurance. The mayor's actions and comments with respect to sanctuary city status, the establishment of Denver's Public Safety Enforcement Priorities Act, and the Denver Immigrant Legal Defense Fund are good examples of how to address important issues by acknowledging the community, informing the public, and taking concrete steps to address the issue.
7. Communication and messaging of City efforts should be improved, as information does not always reach the community and the intended message is sometimes lost. It will be important for messaging to acknowledge challenges in communication and frustration in the community. Connect with community leaders for support in disseminating information. Find ways to demonstrate alliance between the Latino community and City and State leadership, including the governor, even in cases where direct influence isn't possible.
8. Increase recognition of the heterogeneity of the Latino community. For example, focus on the needs of Latinos across the socioeconomic spectrum as well as immigrant and non-immigrant Latinos.
9. Gentrification continues to be an important challenge in Denver. Continue finding ways to work with the community to identify, in partnership, long-term solutions.
10. According to the U.S. Census, by 2044 the non-Hispanic White alone population will comprise less than 50 percent of the nation's total population, which has been described as the point at which we become a "majority minority" nation. By 2020, it is estimated that more than half of the nation's children are expected to be part of a minority race or ethnic group. Latino youth are the future of this city. We need to ensure that the city is creating opportunities for Latino youth to emerge as leaders and engaged citizens via educational, recreational, cultural, and vocational efforts.
11. The residents of Denver recognize and value the Mayor's efforts related to diversity, equity and inclusion, and his desire to support the Latino community. Denver can be a model city and the Latino community is ready and willing to support the Mayor in achieving this goal.

**Table 1. Strengths of the Latino Community and Successes in Denver**

Theme	Examples
<b>Individual, Family, Community</b>	
Resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong individuals who have the courage to rise above challenges.</li> <li>• Resourceful, resilient, hard-working community ready to take action.</li> </ul>
Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engaged and motivated community willing and able to be engaged further in democratic process.</li> <li>• Deep commitment to young people learning, developing and achieving.</li> </ul>
Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family values and focus on improving conditions for next generation.</li> <li>• Strong and stable family units, extended family support, and a focus on interdependence.</li> <li>• Commitment to social justice, equity, and supporting broader community.</li> <li>• Sense of duty and commitment to give back to Denver.</li> </ul>
Influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased voting power and contributions to the economy.</li> <li>• Integral part of the city that contributes value.</li> </ul>
<b>Organizations and Government</b>	
Diversity, equity and inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased emphasis on diversity, equity and inclusion as a value of agencies, organizations, and the city.</li> <li>• Efforts to train organizations and individuals to support diversity, equity and inclusion.</li> </ul>
Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaboration between two or more stakeholders (community organizations, city, state, federal government) to fill important gaps.</li> <li>• Increased efforts to engage Latino community via social media and community outreach.</li> </ul>
Targeted resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Special programs and targeted resources making an impact on specific needs.</li> <li>• City resources (e.g., public buildings) used flexibly to assist organizations in serving community needs.</li> <li>• Establishment of Latino-serving institutions and resources.</li> <li>• Organizations and services tailored to address the needs of the Latino community (e.g., mentoring, citizenship workshops)</li> </ul>
Long-term perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear focus on improving Denver in terms of housing, public safety, and having a vision for the future.</li> <li>• The city is looking for innovative ways to address challenges that will improve effectiveness.</li> <li>• More organizations focusing on prevention of problems and/or addressing systemic factors that impact the community.</li> </ul>

**Table 2. Challenges Faced by the Latino Community in Denver**

Theme	Examples
<b>Individual, Family, Community</b>	
Fear	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear of deportation and anxiety over immigration policies.</li> <li>• Heightened fear due to anti-immigrant climate.</li> <li>• Fear of government and its agencies (e.g., police, ICE).</li> </ul>
Discrimination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Daily experiences of prejudice and discrimination.</li> <li>• Heightened vigilance and stress related to experiences with racism.</li> </ul>
Inequities in education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unequal access to quality education.</li> <li>• Disparities in educational outcomes for Latino youth.</li> <li>• Access to higher education.</li> <li>• Limited opportunities for motivated students to thrive.</li> <li>• Educational challenges impact long-term progress for Latino community.</li> </ul>
Representation and leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Few Latinos in visible positions of power in Denver despite size of the Latino community.</li> <li>• Allocation of resources impacted by lack of representation.</li> </ul>
Community influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Influence of Latino community not proportional to its size.</li> <li>• Community feels marginalized and frustrated that their voice does not have the impact it could.</li> </ul>
Socioeconomic challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic hardships related to gentrification, rising costs, and low salaries.</li> <li>• Cost of living creating additional stress that undermines progress.</li> </ul>
Changing Landscape	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of affordable housing, rising cost of living, and gentrification contribute to fragmented and displaced Latino community that feels disempowered.</li> <li>• Gentrification and rapid expansion makes it harder for struggling families to succeed.</li> </ul>

**Table 2. Challenges Faced by the Latino Community in Denver (Continued)**

Theme	Examples
<b>Organizations and Government</b>	
Lack of recognition of diversity of Latinos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of consideration of needs of immigrant versus U.S.-born Latinos.</li> <li>• Unequal focus on Latinos across socioeconomic status.</li> <li>• Lack of consideration of diversity in nationality and immigration history.</li> </ul>
Engagement and Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agencies and organizations are siloed and work against one another by not collaborating.</li> <li>• Poor ability to engage community results in challenges with assessing and responding to needs.</li> </ul>
City-Community Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community does not always see the city (and its various organizations) as an ally and a resource, but sometimes sees it as a potential adversary.</li> <li>• There are concerns that resources are not allocated equitably across different constituent groups in the city.</li> <li>• There are concerns about police relations with the community (and with the city more broadly) that impact sense of community and view of the city.</li> </ul>
Barriers to accessing resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language, finances, and lack of insurance create barriers to accessing available services.</li> <li>• Few Spanish-speaking providers.</li> <li>• History of incarceration limits employment and housing options.</li> <li>• Bureaucratic barriers to childcare licenses limit childcare options.</li> <li>• Bureaucratic challenges to serving the needs of undocumented families.</li> <li>• System creates barriers and layers of oversight that limit the ability to provide access and meet needs efficiently and effectively.</li> <li>• Existing services are not provided in a way that ensures their success (e.g., locating services in places that deter access).</li> <li>• There is a lack of knowledge about what is available, which limits access.</li> </ul>
High need and limited resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some pressing needs do not receive the necessary attention and resources (e.g., runaway youth, juvenile justice, sexual assault, diverse families serving as foster homes).</li> <li>• High levels of need and many barriers to access mean that those with highest level of need don't receive access to limited resources.</li> <li>• Staff turnover related to high cost of living, low salary, and high needs create burnout and contributes to unmet needs.</li> </ul>

**Table 3. Opportunities and Recommendations**

Theme	Examples
Sanctuary city and immigrant rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Denver should become a sanctuary city.</li> <li>• The city should protect and expand immigrant rights.</li> <li>• Denver can demonstrate its support to the Latino community by taking a strong stance and helping the undocumented community feel safe.</li> </ul>
Inclusion and representation at all levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased representation of Latinos in leadership and decision-making positions.</li> <li>• Increase diversity of city government workforce.</li> <li>• Develop diversity, equity and inclusion strategies with trackable goals for City agencies.</li> </ul>
Youth access to education and jobs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasis on reducing education disparities.</li> <li>• Increased efforts to support youth attending trade schools and college.</li> <li>• The city should work with companies in the city to create opportunities for networking and career development.</li> <li>• Investing in Latino youth to enter into city and county jobs.</li> </ul>
Public education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide high-quality education to all youth. This includes culturally-sensitive teachers and administrators.</li> <li>• The City of Denver has to find ways to work with Denver Public Schools to support the needs of youth.</li> <li>• Increased access to public higher education (e.g., free tuition for residents)</li> </ul>
Affordable housing and gentrification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Address lack of affordable housing, gentrification, and skyrocketing home prices and rent that are driving Latinos out of Denver, and bring Latino community to the table to come up with solutions.</li> <li>• Latinos lose their connection to their city and community when they are driven out of their neighborhoods. It would be important to publicly acknowledge that gentrification threatens cultural history and diversity of our neighborhoods, and bring Latino perspective into the conversation on how to work through these challenges and protect the city’s cultural legacy.</li> <li>• The city should protect public spaces within Latino communities.</li> <li>• The city needs to take an active role in ensuring that developers do not exploit communities.</li> </ul>
Mental health resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The city should increase efforts to provide education about mental health and resources.</li> <li>• Increase access to low-cost services in schools and community settings.</li> <li>• Create opportunities to support Latinos entering mental health professions.</li> </ul>
Representation and Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invest in and support Latino leaders. Increase representation of Latinos in government and policy.</li> <li>• Collaboration between city and non-profits to support leadership development.</li> <li>• Voter registration and civic engagement efforts to create trust in the system.</li> <li>• Representation of Latinos in decision-making positions.</li> </ul>

**Table 3. Opportunities and Recommendations (Continued)**

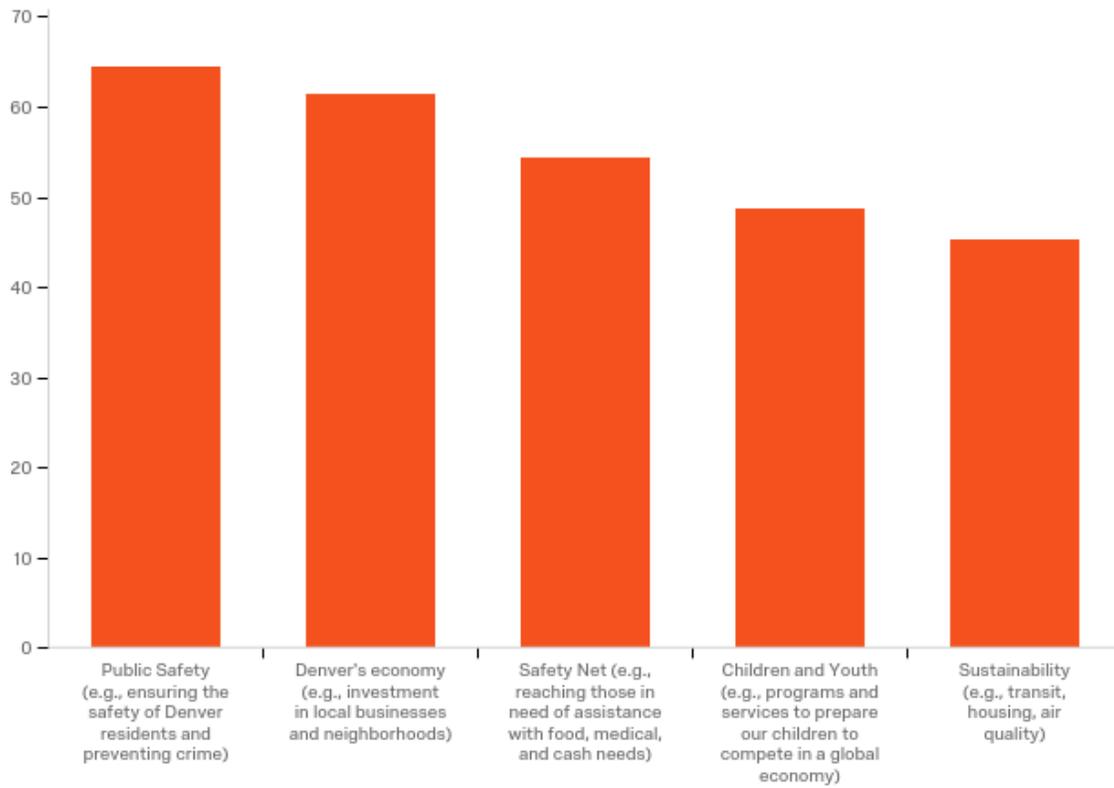
Theme	Examples
Cultural competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Go beyond translating documents into Spanish when engaging Latino community. Show authentic commitment to building long-term relationships with local Latino community leaders, organizations, neighborhood organizations, media outlets, etc.</li> <li>• Ask officials to use Spanish pronunciation when referring to the many streets and sites within Denver that have Spanish names.</li> <li>• Latinos need to feel that their culture and their important contributions are valued.</li> <li>• Offer and require diversity, equity and inclusion training for all City employees to build an inclusive city.</li> </ul>
Invest in the future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue improvement projects that are designed to encourage progress and support community needs.</li> <li>• Invest in education and human services (e.g., programs, more Spanish-speakers) to ensure that the city is equipped to meet current and future needs.</li> <li>• Target needs in a more holistic and comprehensive way, to address causes of problems and to provide long-term solutions to social problems.</li> <li>• Support creativity and flexibility so that barriers can be reduced and bureaucratic challenges can be minimized.</li> </ul>
Communication and Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved communication, outreach, and education. Denver is doing many things well, but ongoing and clear communication is needed to overcome negative perceptions. A public and articulated commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion should be made by the Mayor.</li> <li>• Increase communication about the city’s efforts and achievements under the umbrella of diversity, equity and inclusion. The City of Denver should be presented and recognized as a leader in DEI efforts.</li> <li>• Increase focus on community engagement and community relations across the board.</li> <li>• Work with students, families, and communities to support civic engagement and deepen sense of community and belonging.</li> </ul>

**Table 4. Messages for the Mayor and Cabinet**

Theme	Examples
Keep up the good work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Mayor has been supportive of the Latino community.</li> <li>• The Mayor did an excellent job discussing sanctuary city status and related issues such as DACA, Denver’s Public Safety Enforcement Priorities Act, and the Denver Immigrant Legal Defense Fund.</li> <li>• Organizations are making a difference.</li> <li>• Respect for the city for its efforts to ensure that the community feels safe.</li> <li>• The Mayor and Cabinet have shown efforts to navigate challenges faced by a multicultural city. We encourage them to continue emphasizing diversity, equity and inclusion.</li> </ul>
Future of Latino community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Latino community is growing in political, economic, social, cultural and artistic capital.</li> <li>• Latino youth account for a large proportion of growth and they represent the future of this city. We need to invest in Latino youth.</li> <li>• With demographic shifts, Latinos need to be represented at all levels.</li> </ul>
Diverse Latino community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Latino community is diverse in terms of socioeconomic status, immigration history, nationality, and values. This diversity means that there are varied strengths and needs.</li> <li>• We have tremendous professional expertise, skills and abilities to contribute to this city.</li> </ul>
Denver as a role model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Denver is poised to emerge as a leader in Colorado and in the nation across a range of important issues.</li> <li>• We can be a model city showing the rest of the nation how we can value all people by publicly committing to diversity, equity and inclusion. We have strong accomplishments to share that support this purpose.</li> </ul>

**Figure 1.**

Mean Satisfaction with Denver Peak Performance Areas (range 0-100)



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