

El Futuro and Governor's Office Co-Hosted Influential Roundtable with Health and Human Services Office of Civil Rights Director Melanie Fontes Rainer on Health and Language Access in North Carolina

This historic roundtable marked an important next step in achieving healthcare access for all North Carolinians.

Durham, NC— On Saturday, April 13th, 2024, El Futuro, a renowned mental health outpatient facility in Durham, co-hosted a groundbreaking discussion on health and language access in North Carolina with the Office of Governor Roy Cooper and HHS Office for Civil Rights (OCR) Director, Melanie Fontes Rainer. This pivotal event, held at El Futuro's Chapel Hill Rd location, brought together North Carolina's healthcare and immigrant advocacy leaders to tackle pressing issues regarding language access that affect both state and local communities.

The roundtable commenced with introductions by esteemed participants, including Dr. Luke Smith, Executive Director of El Futuro; Cristina España, Deputy Director in the Governor's Office, Yazmin Garcia Rico, Director of Latinx and Hispanic Policy and Strategy at the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, Rosa Gonzalez Guarda, Assistant Dean and Associate Professor at Duke University; Mary Jones, Manager of Client Care and Engagement at El Futuro; Lucy Vidal, Clinical Director at El Futuro; Dr. Viviana Martinez Bianchi, physician, professor, and co-director of LATIN-19; and several representatives from the Immigrant Solidarity Network. A full list of participants can be found below.

"Hello, buenos dias, bonjour, ueh lang, namaste, jumbo, waa gwaan and gbedoname," were the comments of Dr. Smith as he began the meeting with a welcome from many of the languages assembled at the table, English, Spanish, French, Bunong, Sanskrit, Swahili, Patwa, and Ewé. He continued, "Health issues don't just affect individuals but impact everyone in our community. When we don't offer fair health access to everyone, it affects us all. And health access begins with each person's language so we must work together to get this right."

The event offered a focused dialogue on the obstacles and opportunities around language accessibility in healthcare services. Participants were able to share their stories, questions, and concerns about local issues affecting Latino communities in North Carolina. Director Fontes Rainer listened to experiences of leaders who came from across the state, shared valuable insights from her national experience and stressed the importance of localized efforts in creating effective healthcare delivery systems that respect cultural diversity.

Director Fontes Rainer remarked, "Today's meeting was so important because it brought the federal government together with local communities, organizations, and advocates doing crucial work on the ground. This ensures that whether it's accessing a doctor or the court system, everyone has access to these services in their own culture and language, which is a priority for the Biden-Harris Administration. From this conversation, we have identified many potential work streams and partnership opportunities to support and elevate this community's efforts, using them as a model for the country."

The discussions centered on several key points:

- **Challenges Faced By Specific Demographics:**

Participants identified several critical challenges faced by specific demographics within North Carolina, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to address these unique barriers for populations including elderly immigrants, indigenous populations, refugee and asylum-seekers, undocumented individuals, youth from non-English-speaking families, and disabled non-English speakers.

- **Expanding Translator Services Across North Carolina:**

Participants identified a critical need for expanded translator services across North Carolina, emphasizing the state's linguistic diversity with 334 languages spoken. The conversation highlighted the particular shortage of services for less commonly spoken languages, which poses significant barriers to healthcare access for many communities. There was a consensus on the urgency to establish more comprehensive language support systems within healthcare settings to ensure that all patients can receive care in their preferred language.

- **Integrating Cultural Competency Training:**

The roundtable discussed strategies for integrating cultural competency training for healthcare providers. The aim is to enhance providers' ability to engage with patients from diverse cultural backgrounds respectfully and effectively. This training would cover aspects such as understanding cultural nuances, avoiding assumptions, and respecting traditional health beliefs that influence healthcare decisions.

- **Addressing Outdated Rules and Regulations:**

A significant portion of the discussion was dedicated to the need for revising outdated rules and regulations that no longer serve the current demographics or the healthcare needs of the population. Participants called for policy reviews and updates to eliminate bureaucratic hurdles that hinder the provision of equitable healthcare services.

- **Collaborative Initiatives for Improved Service Delivery:**

The participants explored potential collaborative initiatives between state healthcare facilities and federal agencies aimed at enhancing service delivery to North Carolina's diverse populations. These initiatives would focus on the deployment of interpreters and the integration of language services across the healthcare system, ensuring that language access is a fundamental part of healthcare provision.

- **Enhancing Accessibility of Health Information:**

There was a focused discussion on the need for making health information more accessible. This involves not only translating written materials into multiple languages but also ensuring that digital health platforms are linguistically inclusive and user-friendly. Emphasis was placed on using technology to bridge the language gap, such as developing multilingual websites, apps, and virtual assistance tools.

- **State Funding and Resources for Language Services:**

A key concern raised was the lack of adequate funding and resources dedicated to language services within the healthcare system in North Carolina. Participants urged for increased state and federal funding to support the hiring of qualified interpreters, training of bilingual healthcare providers, and the development of technology solutions that enhance language access.

El Futuro's Executive Director Luke Smith commented, "This roundtable discussion was an invaluable experience for everyone at El Futuro and our supporters throughout the community. For far too long, the voices of our communities have been overlooked by those in positions of power. We strongly urge more policymakers to join us, to pull up a seat at our table, and to listen to the stories that need to be heard and addressed."

This roundtable not only highlighted several challenges, but also paved the way for actionable strategies that can serve as models for other states. El Futuro and its partners are committed to continuing these conversations to drive improvements in

healthcare accessibility for North Carolina's linguistically and culturally diverse populations.

For further information, please contact:

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ABOUT EL FUTURO

El Futuro is North Carolina's premier provider of bilingual and culturally-responsive mental health services. Recognized as a trusted resource for 20 years, El Futuro offers therapy, psychiatry, substance use treatment, and case management in a nurturing environment designed to foster healing and hope. Annually, the organization serves over 2,500 Latino youth and adults at its outpatient clinics in Durham and Siler City, and extends its reach to over 53 counties through telehealth services. El Futuro's award-winning team comprises over 25 psychiatrists, therapists, social workers, and case managers, all supported by dedicated program and administrative staff. Together, they are committed to upholding El Futuro's mission to improve the mental health and well-being of the communities they serve.

ABOUT THE OFFICE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS

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PARTICIPANTS

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Saira Estrada	City of Charlotte
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Jodie Stanley	City of Greensboro/Co-founder of Municipality Language Access Network
Yazmin Garcia Rico	Director of Latinx and Hispanic Policy and Strategy, NCDHHS
Francisco Guzman	Minority Outreach Coordinator, NCDHHS
Carolina Siliceo Perez	Latinx Project Manager, NCDHHS
Smita Sarkar	Greensboro Police Department
Viviana Martinez Bianchi	Latin-19
Rosa Gonzalez Guarda	Latin-19
Margarita Ramirez	Centro Unidos McDowell
Mary Jones	El Futuro
Lucy Vida	El Futuro
Luke Smith	El Futuro
Melina Ksor	Duke MDA
Cornelio Campos	Artist
Pablo Friedman	Durham Public Schools
Andrew Young	Montagnard/Southeast Asian Community Disparities Research Network
Milagros Amaro	Title VI Compliance Officer, Guilford County Health Department
Sharon Morrison	Public Health Education UNC Greensboro
Mauricio Solano	El Centro Hispano
Erik Valera	Governor's Advisory Council Hispanic and Latino Affairs
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