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State of Latinos in the Law Symposium looks to lower barriers

By Sarah Mansur
Law Bulletin staff writer

The first State of Latinos in the Law Symposium on Friday brought together hundreds of high school, college and law school students, as well as practicing attorneys, to discuss barriers to the legal profession that Hispanic students face and potential solutions to overcoming those barriers.

"This symposium is an opportunity for those high school students, those college students, even the ones who are in law schools, to see people who made it already and gotten to a point in their life where they are able to contribute and reach back and pull people up," said Juan Morado Jr., the president of the Hispanic Lawyers Association of Illinois.

The symposium was organized by the association, the Hispanic National Bar Association Region IX, Illinois Latino Judges Association, Puerto Rican Bar Association of Illinois and Chief Judge Ruben Castillo of the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois.

"I think that we are in a really unique time as a Latino community, demographically and populationwise. We are growing significantly and what we are seeing is a lot more Latinos breaking into the middle class and different economic stations within society," said Morado, who is of counsel at Benesch Friedlander Coplan & Aronoff LLC.

As part of the symposium, researchers at Northwestern University and the American Bar Association drafted a white paper titled, "Latinxs in the Legal Profession: A Statistical Portrait, White Paper Prepared for the State of Latinos in Law Conference."

The report states that although Latinos make up 17 percent of the U.S. population, they are 11 percent of college graduates, 12 percent of recent law school graduates and only 5 percent of practicing lawyers.

It also reports that Latinos make up 5 percent of large law firm associates but only 2 percent of large law firm partners.

Castillo said one purpose of the symposium is to communicate the need for greater diversity in the profession.

“Our legal profession has to be diverse at every level. We just want to focus on that,” said Castillo. “We definitely want to communicate with the next generations — grade school, high school, college law school — the entire, what we call, the pipeline ... I think the more diversity we bring to the justice system the better off we are going to be.”

The symposium also featured attorneys, legal scholars, corporate counselors and judges as well as Chief U.S. District Judge Dora L. Irizarry for the Eastern District of New York and Chief U.S. District Judge Gustavo A. Gelpi for the District of Puerto Rico.

Morado said the symposium was a chance to look at the work that still needs to be done.

“Today is about examining the issues — what is prohibiting us from increasing the numbers that we would like to see and then developing strategies about how to address them,” he said.

He said one way to increase the number of Hispanic law students and attorneys is the association’s J.D. mentor program, which is a formal mentor program designed to pair up law students and practicing attorneys.

Morado said the program has worked to incorporate college students and high school students in the past few years.

Castillo said he hopes other court systems in different places replicate the conference.

“We want to see this conference replicated wherever,” he said. “There is a road map now.”

He said this symposium is the start of a conversation.

“We have to do it person by person. If we change somebody’s thinking in grade school, we could then change their thinking in high school and keep kids out of trouble in high school,” he said.

“If we save one kid at a time that’s all we need. If we talk to one kid, he might turn out to be the next chief judge. That’s all it takes.”

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