A Force Overlooked: Achieving Full Representation of Hispanics in the Department of Defense Workforce

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National Council of La Raza

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A Force Overlooked:
Achieving Full Representation of Hispanics in the Department of Defense

Hispanics Severely Underrepresented in Military
REPORT FINDS Underrepresentation is Impeding Educational, Economic Opportunities of Young Latinos

A report released in 1999 by the National Council of La Raza (NCLR), the nation's largest Hispanic civil rights organization, finds that, despite their growing share of the U.S. population, Hispanics are the only minority group underrepresented in the Department of Defense (DoD) workforce, both civilian and military. Moreover, the report, A Force Overlooked: Achieving Full Representation of Hispanics in the Department of Defense Workforce, also shows that Hispanics are disproportionately concentrated in the lowest pay grades, with the fewest responsibilities and opportunities.

"This report confirms what has been a continuing source of frustration to the Hispanic community: our historic underrepresentation – save for times of war – in the U.S. military," stated Raul Yzaguirre, NCLR President. "It is especially troubling to me as an Air Force veteran that Hispanic young people are being deprived of one of the traditional avenues of upward mobility – in terms of enhanced educational opportunities and top-notch job skill development – in this society. Moreover, at a time when the Armed Forces are having severe difficulties recruiting and retaining personnel, there is no question that America's defense suffers as well from the exclusion of the skills and talents of Latinos."

Among the report's findings:
• Hispanics remain the only underrepresented minority group in the civilian DoD workforce relative to their representation in the civilian workforce. In 1996 Hispanics accounted for only 6.3% of the DoD civilian workforce, while 10.5% of the U.S. civilian labor force was Hispanic.

• Hispanics continue to be underrepresented in virtually all of the Active and Reserve Components. In 1996, 6.9% of the membership of the active forces was Hispanic; yet the percentage of 18-44-year-old Latinos in the civilian labor force was 11.2%.

• Among Hispanics currently in the military, data show that they are disproportionately concentrated in the lowest pay grades, with the lowest level of responsibilities and fewest opportunities. In 1996, more than 41% of enlisted Hispanics were at the E-1 through E-3 (lowest) pay grades, compared to 26% of enlisted Blacks and 30% of enlisted Whites. These pay grades account for almost one-third (30%) of total enlisted military personnel. In examining the membership in the top enlisted ranks (E-6 through E-9), 19% were Latinos, while 30% were Black and 25% White.

"While there has been some modest improvement recently, especially in the Navy and the Marines, our analysis shows that, if current trends continue, the representation of Hispanics in the military will continue to fall farther behind, relative to both their population growth and to other racial/ethnic groups," continued Yzaguirre.
The report also identifies some of the factors to which this underrepresentation can be attributed, including: national demographic shifts (there is a mismatch between where most Latinos live and where most federal jobs are located); low Hispanic educational attainment (Hispanics have the lowest educational attainment levels of any major group in the country, which affects their entry into the DoD workforce); citizenship requirements for civil service employment (about one-third of Hispanics are not U.S. citizens); and the shrinking federal workforce.

"But what is disturbing is that while these factors help in part to explain the current degree of underrepresentation, they do not fully account for the existing disparities. The fact remains that DoD has been able to overcome similar factors related to other groups, most notably in the case of African Americans and Asian Americans," noted Yzaguirre. "Furthermore, the Marines and the Navy have shown that concerted efforts to recruit, retain, and promote Hispanics have been effective – the other branches should seek to follow their lead."

The report concludes with recommendations to increase representation, including:

- Identify and acknowledge employment problems related to diversity. One of the functions of collecting and analyzing racial/ethnic employment data is to address gaps when necessary.
- Demonstrate visible leadership and serious commitment at the highest levels. The increase of Hispanics in the DoD workforce must become a national priority.
- Revise outreach and recruitment strategies to increase the presence of Latino personnel. The DoD must be creative and aggressive in its efforts to address Latino underrepresentation within its workforce. For example, it should consider identifying and expanding to other components strategies used by the Marine Corps and Navy to successfully recruit Latinos.
- Ensure that DoD managers and supervisors utilize accurate information about the current representation of racial/ethnic groups and are committed to achieving the statutory goal of full representation.
- Involve Hispanic organizations in the development of a rigorous process to resolve the underrepresentation of Latinos in DoD.

"Anyone who is familiar with American military history knows that Latinos are overrepresented among those who have given their lives in battle for this country. And as we commemorate the 50th anniversary of the desegregation of the military, the least we can do as a nation is give this community a chance to fully benefit from military service during peacetime," concluded Yzaguirre.