

La Raza Convention Adds Focus on Health

National advocacy group adds dietary and lifestyle issues to its familiar concerns such as jobs and immigration.

By Teresa Watanabe, Times Staff Writer
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On a crowded Los Angeles Convention Center floor Sunday, Gloria Ramirez winced as a medical technician poked her finger and pressed out blood into a hand-held device to measure sugar levels. The digital machine quickly showed the score: 129, close to borderline levels for diabetes.

The news, she said, wasn't surprising. Her doctor had told her a year ago to lay off tortillas, red meat and her favorite food, Mexican breads, to avoid diabetes. Tough as that's been, Ramirez said, there was one thing that made the sacrifices worthwhile: her family.

"It's hard," said Ramirez, a 61-year-old secretary from San Ysidro, Calif. "But I'm trying to be healthy because I'm starting to have grandkids and I want to see them grow."

Free health checks, a forum on HIV and AIDS, and a morning workshop on leading-edge research into Latino health issues highlighted the second day of the National Council of La Raza's annual conference in Los Angeles. Latinos suffer from disproportionately high rates of diabetes, obesity, AIDS and other diseases, so the Washington, D.C.-based civil rights and advocacy organization is aiming to elevate the issue alongside hot-button concerns such as immigration.

"Immigration seems to dominate the landscape today, but we'd like to be able to draw equal attention to health, jobs, education and economic empowerment," La Raza president Janet Murguia said.

In what experts call the "acculturation paradox," Charles Kamasaki, La Raza senior vice president, said that the health of many Latino immigrants often declines the longer they are in the United States. That's because their diets add more fats, their lifestyles are more sedentary and their access to healthcare is more limited than in their home countries.

In addition, he said, women begin to drink and smoke more and have sex at younger ages once they migrate here.

To help reverse that trend, La Raza and its network of affiliated community organizations have helped train 400 volunteer health educators. Their job: to bring health-related information to those whom Kamasaki said mass-marketing campaigns tend to miss — mostly poor immigrants with limited English and education.

Ramirez, a board member of the nonprofit San Ysidro Health Center near the U.S.-Mexico border, said she viewed health issues as more important community concerns than immigration and even jobs.

"Even without papers, it's not hard to find a job through friends or family," Ramirez said, as her friends sat down for their blood sugar tests at a booth sponsored by AltaMed Health Services Corp. of Commerce. "But if you become sick, you can't work."

The conference also featured a homeownership fair, with rows of booths for financial institutions. Among them was New Economics for Women, where Nelson Hidalgo passed out fliers about Los Angeles city and county down payment assistance programs.

Veronica Sanchez, a Houston-based regional account manager for J.P. Morgan Chase, said many Latin Americans come to the United States from cash-based economies, mistrust banks and are unfamiliar with the idea of borrowing to finance education, cars or homes. Such attitudes have helped keep homeowner rates lower among Latinos than whites, Veronica Seale of J.P. Morgan Chase said.

Some conference-goers, however, already seemed on their way to the goal of owning a home.

At the Wells Fargo booth, where a soccer ball throwing game drew young crowds, 9-year-old Erika Rodriguez said she was faithfully saving her weekly allowance and had already filled three piggy banks with more than \$100.

"I'm going to save it all until I'm an adult and can buy a house," said Erika, sporting Mickey Mouse ears from a nearby Disneyland booth.

Sunday's convention crowd included many families, trolling the aisles for information and free goods — Frisbees and tote bags, water bottles and beer. Ricardo Ricardo, 44, a jewelry repairman, came to attend a workshop on careers because, he said, he wanted to find out how to become a technician. His son Felipe, 12, came "just for the prizes," and promptly landed a soccer ball at the State Farm Insurance booth.

Balloons and dance demonstrations, carnival games and raffles gave the conference hall a festive air. And a "Latinas Brunch," featuring Latina entertainment figures, added a celebratory one.

Christy Haubegger, film producer and founder of Latina Magazine, said that Latinas are now in demand in Hollywood and are reshaping the American beauty ideal of thin, tall and blond. "Suddenly, curves are OK," she said. "There's never been a better time to be Latina than now."