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**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
COMMONWEALTH *of* PENNSYLVANIA

*House Democratic Policy Committee Hearing*

Latino Pennsylvania – Contributions and Concerns

Friday, Sept. 15, 2023 | 10 a.m.

Representative Jose Giral

- 10:00 a.m. Welcome and member introductions
- 10:15 a.m. [Reverend Luis Cortés Jr.](#), Founder & CEO  
*Esperanza*  
*Q & A with Legislators*
- 10:45 a.m. [Will González, Esq.](#), Executive Director  
*Ceiba*  
*Q & A with Legislators*
- 11:15 a.m. [Frederick Ramirez](#), Founder, CEO  
*Pan American Behavioral Health Services*  
President, Co-Founder  
*USALA Media (USA-Latin America)*  
*Q & A with Legislators*



## About Esperanza

**Driven by the biblical mandate to serve the “least of these” (Matthew 25:40), Esperanza strengthens Hispanic communities and all who live within them. We carry out this mission through a variety of programs and services that are all designed to empower people via education, housing and economic development, arts and culture, and social change.**

Nueva Esperanza, Inc. (“Esperanza”) was founded in 1986 by the Rev. Luis Cortés, Jr. and the Hispanic Clergy of Philadelphia to address social and economic challenges in the predominantly low-income, Latino neighborhoods of North Philadelphia. In the 35+ years since its founding, Esperanza has grown into one of the nation’s largest Hispanic community development agencies; a \$62 million institution with over 500 employees serving a range of community needs.

Motivated by its mission, Esperanza is committed to forging an “opportunity community” – a place marked by safe streets, quality schools, thriving small businesses, a vibrant cultural sector, affordable housing and more – where all aspire to live in Hunting Park, one of the poorest districts in Philadelphia. Esperanza addresses the conditions that have historically limited progress for Latinos through an ecosystem of institutions and programs that represent the community it serves; afford concrete skills, degree, and other assets that offer “on-ramps” out of poverty and into the mainstream economy; and facilitate transformative moments that provide narratives of hope and success. Here, Hispanic individuals and families, and others who are economically underserved and marginalized can gain greater access to economic mobility and an improved quality of life.

**Esperanza Academy Charter School** serves 1,632 students in grades 5-12. The student body is 100% minority – approximately 97% Hispanic. With a culture of academic rigor, a rich array of 14 electives and majors, and intensive student supports, Esperanza Academy has an over 90% four-year graduation rate, less than a 1% drop-out rate, 81.56% of graduates are accepted into college, and more than 65% of those enroll in college. The school also facilitates Early College and Dual Enrollment programs with Esperanza College of Eastern University, allowing students to obtain college credits while in high school, which can provide cost savings for their education long-term.

**Esperanza Cyber Charter School** serves 1,200 students in grades K-12. Founded in 2012, the Cyber School offers a customized online curriculum and in-person support from our teachers and tutors with a drop-in center and family game nights. Each student follows an individualized learning plan that allows them to complete their schooling online. The Cyber School has more than 22 Academic Specialists from Puerto Rico who position the school to fluently address the educational needs of Latino and English as a Second Language learners. Taking a proactive approach to supporting children and families, the Cyber School has a team of case managers who ensure that the needs of children are met and that families remain connected and engaged in their child’s education, even in a remote learning environment.

**Esperanza College** is a branch campus of Eastern University, and a fully accredited, federally designated 2-year Hispanic Serving Institution (one of only two in Pennsylvania) awarding Associate degrees in one of eleven concentrations: Business Administration, Criminal Justice, Community and Human Services, Early Childhood Education, Media and Technology, Digital Communications, Health Sciences, Medical Assisting, eSports Management, Dental Assisting, and Natural Science. Esperanza College serves ~180-220 students annually, with a graduation rate that averages 50%, compared to the national graduation rate of 33% at comparable two-year institutions.

**Esperanza CareerLink Center** serves approximately 18,000 TANF and WIOA recipients and general job seekers each year with comprehensive family stability, job readiness training, case management, job placement, and job retention services. **Eastern North Philadelphia Workforce Corporation** has piloted unique workforce programs designed to meet the unique needs of our Hispanic populations, including a project focused on eliminating barriers for single working mothers.

**Esperanza’s Housing Counseling** program provides one-on-one counseling and group workshops in homeownership, financial literacy (including budgeting, credit counseling, and money management) foreclosure prevention, fair housing laws, pre- and post-purchase, rental, shelter, down payment assistance, refinancing, and antifraud or anti-predatory lending. Locally we serve 600-1,000 clients through these services each year. In 2008, we were certified by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) as a national housing counseling intermediary, working with affiliates around the country. Through the Mayor’s Office of Community Empowerment and Opportunity, Esperanza also operates a BenePhilly center, providing residents with access to a range of public benefit programs.

**Esperanza Housing and Economic Development** focuses on revitalizing and empowering the neighborhood within the Hunting Park community of Philadelphia. A robust team engages residents at the block level, providing a robust set of organizing activities that foster

civic engagement, including non-partisan get out the vote and Census efforts; COVID-19 vaccine and testing access; food distribution; youth internships; an Esperanza Ambassador network; and more. EHED supports over 200 business owners along three economic corridors through training and technical assistance. EHED is increasingly involved in environmental justice efforts, planting more than 1,000 trees, 150 street trees, and trained 50 Tree Tenders to plant and care for neighborhood trees.

**Real Estate Development:** Esperanza owns residential and commercial facilities that we have rehabilitated for rental, sale, or multi-purpose use, including our 17-acre campus which includes 400,000 square feet of facility space for our headquarters, institutions, and programs. We have developed more than 100 units of affordable housing, including the Roberto Clemente Homes project, which transformed a dilapidated former school building into 38 units of housing, 5,000 square feet of commercial space, and a playground. Esperanza also focuses on attracting critical neighborhood amenities, and has developed a laundromat, drug store, and *La Cosecha Latina* community garden. We have several more projects in the pipeline, including the Amor mixed-use building at 4615-21 N. 5<sup>th</sup> Street, an affordable housing project at 622-32 W. Erie Avenue, and a new elementary school building for Esperanza Academy Charter School.

**Esperanza Arts Center** is a state-of-the-art public venue designed to become the regional hub for Latino arts and culture. Opened in December 2018, the 5,750 square foot *Teatro Esperanza* is the centerpiece of the facility, and regularly hosts Philadelphia's premiere musical, dance, and theater companies—including the Philadelphia Orchestra, Pennsylvania Ballet, Philadanco, Orchestra 2001, Philadelphia Chamber Music Society, and many others—as well as top performers from around the world and cinema presentations of interest to the Hispanic community. Teatro has hosted over 98 performances with an audience of more than 8,500 people, as well as 28 online/streaming presentations reaching more than 4,000 viewers. An art gallery, library, and community spaces will be added.

**Artistas y Músicos Latinoamericanos (AMLA)** seeks to promote the development, dissemination, and understanding of Latin music and culture throughout Philadelphia and the Delaware Valley with an emphasis on at-risk youth. Since 2006, AMLA has annually educated hundreds of children, youth, and adults of all ages, through private and group music lessons. In addition to instrumental learning, AMLA also teaches Latin cultural heritage, music theory, and audio engineering. AMLA has instructed over 1,500 participants through assemblies and artist-in-residence workshops.

**Esperanza Immigration Legal Services (EILS)** was formed in 2009 with the mission to provide low-cost, non-litigation direct legal aid and citizenship education for underserved immigrants and their families. Since its founding, EILS has served over 1,600 low-income immigrants with one-on-one legal services including citizenship applications, DACA, family petitions, and visa adjustments, medical and language waivers, and comprehensive referrals.

**Esperanza Faith & Capacity Initiatives** seeks to empower the Hispanic community around the country through faith initiatives. Over the past 15 years, Esperanza has worked to strengthen nearly 500 Latino faith and community groups nationally through the delivery of training, technical assistance, and management of sub-awards. As a national intermediary, Esperanza has received and successfully managed more than \$48 million in government and corporate grants for a variety of purposes, including mentoring at-risk/incarcerated youth, leadership training, and health promotion.

**Esperanza's community-based STEM programs** bring a variety of formal and informal learning opportunities to neighborhood residents of all ages. In collaboration with the Franklin Institute and other partners, we have organized numerous Science in the Park presentations, Star[gazing] Parties, and "Creation Station" hands-on engineering projects for young people. Esperanza College's annual Minorities in Health Sciences Symposium engages 200-500 high school students each year to learn about post-secondary and career opportunities in the STEM fields. A new STEM Hope Pathways program will enable 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students to take college-level STEM classes and participate in hands-on summer science camps.

**The Esperanza Institute for Latino Health Equity** facilitates equitable community-engaged research, education, and programs to improve health and health equity in Hunting Park. The EILHE recognizes that meaningful collaboration with our community in research and subsequent action is the foundation for improving our community's health. Its mission is to mobilize, empower, and transform our community to take charge of our collective health and well-being through data-driven action and education; to advance a vision for a thriving community where everyone can live healthy, prosperous, fulfilling lives.

**Impacto** was acquired by Esperanza and re-launched in 2020 as a community-based newspaper, the only Spanish-speaking newspaper in the city with door-to-door distribution. With a cadre of independent editorial writers representative of diverse Hispanic countries of origin and a focus on local stories, needs, and interests, Impacto gives our community a voice and vehicle for sharing their stories and resources. Currently, Impacto is distributed to 13,000 households directly via door-to-door delivery in Philadelphia, with an additional 5,500 copies placed in strategic Latino points predominantly over the Delaware Valley, and 1,500 copies in the Lehigh Valley.

Esperanza continues to build upon this work to forge opportunity in our local community and serve as a model for others to follow.

## Forging an Opportunity Community in the Heart of Latino North Philadelphia

Esperanza is a multi-service 501(c)3 nonprofit corporation that has established a family of institutions, subsidiary non-profit organizations and programs with a common purpose: **Driven by the Biblical mandate to serve and advocate for “the least of these” (the marginalized and underserved, Matthew 25:40), we strengthen Hispanic communities** and all those who live within them.

Motivated by its mission, Esperanza is committed to forging an **“Opportunity Community”** in Hunting Park, an area with one of the highest poverty rates in Philadelphia. An Opportunity Community is a place where people want to live, and anyone can have a good quality of life. An Opportunity Community builds on the assets of the neighborhood to create more access and on-ramps to personal and economic advancement. It is a place where people feel a sense of belonging, empowerment, and ownership; and take on leadership roles.

At Esperanza, attributes of this community include:



We carry out our mission and vision through a family of programs, institutions, and services within the areas of **education, community and economic development, arts and culture, and social change**. Rooted in principles of **faith, integrity, and excellence**, we develop Hispanic-owned and operated institutions with long-term value, sustainability, and permanence that prioritize the needs of Hispanic communities and all those who live within them. We foster strategic partnerships across our departments and with external entities that add value to our work and enhance our institutions. With a focus on asset-building, we facilitate **transformative experiences** across our institutions that create pathways out of poverty, while allowing people to develop greater agency in their lives. As new professionals, small business owners, citizens, and residents emerge from the Opportunity Community, they transform the spaces and systems around them.



**Esperanza**

*Making Hope Possible  
Since 1986*



**Education**

**Community & Economic  
Development**

**Arts**

**Social Change**

# ESPERANZA FOR YOU/ PARA TI

Transforming "el barrio" into an opportunity community

- **Esperanza College of Eastern University - Associate's degrees & English Institute**  
215-324-0746 X 410 [esperanza.eastern.us](http://esperanza.eastern.us)
- **Esperanza Academy Charter Schools (K-12)**  
215-999-0203 Elementary School  
267-270-4044 Middle School  
215-457-3667 High School  
[esperanzaacademycs.org](http://esperanzaacademycs.org)
- **Esperanza Cyber Charter School (K-12)**  
215-967-9703 [esperanzacyber.org](http://esperanzacyber.org)
- **Hispanic Faith Community Engagement**  
215-324-0746 [esperanza.us/national-programs](http://esperanza.us/national-programs)
- **Civic Engagement**  
215-434-0746
- **Artistas y Músicos Latinoamericanos (AMLA)**  
215-324-0746 X246 [amla.org](http://amla.org)
- **Small Business Technical Assistance & Business Corridor Management**  
215-324-0746 X 276
- **Affordable Housing**  
215-324-0746
- **Workforce Development/PA Careerlink North**  
215-967-9711
- **Housing Counseling and Benefits Access (BenePhilly)**  
215-324-0746
- **Esperanza Immigration Legal Services**  
347-719-1402 [esperanza.us/eils](http://esperanza.us/eils)
- **Esperanza Arts Center Performances & Rentals**  
215-324-0746 X313 [esperanzaartscenter.us](http://esperanzaartscenter.us)



Visit us at [esperanza.us](http://esperanza.us) or call 215-324-0746!

!Visítenos o llámenos!

**Fred Ramirez**

**Founder, CEO**  
**Pan American Behavioral Health Services**

**President, Co-Founder**  
**USALA Media (USA-Latin America)**

Now that children from age 5-18 years are back in school there has been a sharp increase in this youth population and their exhibited mental health crisis. This can be attributed to the stress of being back in a structured school environment post the pandemic but it also has been made far worse for inner city children faced on a daily basis with added stressors of home violence, witnessing narcotics being sold in their neighborhoods and the accompanying trauma associated by blatant violence.

Furthermore, the added reality faced by our young people of witnessing or being keenly aware of the violence associated with gun crimes, a sense of rising crime where they live, most likely Having or knowing someone who has an incarcerated family member exacerbates mental health and behavioral health issues.

Most youth spend most of their day in school during the school year yet the staff and resources to provide these behavioral health services go beyond schools' capacities. Most schools simply do not have the expertise nor the staff to adequately address what is fast becoming a crisis for young people.

To make matters worse there is already a saturated mental health care system. There is increased need yet difficulty accessing mental health services, most mental health providers have long waiting list just for an initial appointment.

This steep rise for mental health services for youth in schools has led school staff to contact professional mental health providers for advice on better identifying symptoms of mental health and behavioral problems before they escalate into trauma and depression.

Clearly with the above mentioned facts there is a self-evident need for more robust mental health services that are school based.

If we start offering services where children and youth spend most of the time, in schools, we can better mitigate the ill effects of certain realities of life in neighborhoods where there is a

preponderance of narcotics activities, and crime related to it as well as general anxiety related to other stressors affecting our young people.

These cold realities of what children and youth live day to day in certain neighborhoods makes the Trauma Informed Care School Act essential.

It is certainly essential in the most socially impacted zip codes in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, namely zip codes 19133 and 19140.

However, for the legislative act to be truly impactful in its intended spirit of the legislation we must take a closer look at certain key components of the draft act.

Development- The present draft legislation seems to task the Pennsylvania Department of Education with developing guidelines for the provision of the trauma informed care in schools from kindergarten through the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Maybe it should be wise for it to be a co-departmental responsibility by including the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services, especially its mental health division.

As the current governance of schools in challenged school districts present themselves, school employees, teachers, counselors (not to be confused with professional therapists) and school administrators feel overburdened and academically stretched in their primary responsibility of achieving higher grades and academic success for the student body. School boards are also presently tasked with overseeing these school districts and charter schools.

Although training staff to become an integral part of the delivery of behavioral health care is not wasteful, it perhaps would be more prudent and certainly more efficient to partner in a pro-active manner with professional providers of mental health services.

The delivery of professional behavioral health services should be augmented by having sub-contracts between a given school and an existing provider. If the service is an added responsibility of the school principal and existing school staff, there is a fear such services will not carry the priority they should. The given school will simply provide one office in the school building for a professional therapist to use several days a week. Young people that have been identified by a teacher as exhibiting worrisome behavior, and corroborated by the school counselor will be referred to the professional therapists who will engage the youth and if necessary make arrangements outside of the school for a child/youth psychiatric evaluation.

It should be noted that many mental health providers have special units that deal exclusively with families and as such are in a unique position to also offer those services via the recommendation of a therapists.

The present draft legislation should detail what we mean by the need to increase resilience and coping skills of students (again, skills that a therapist should have).



We should also outline specifically how we will implement the young persons' connections to community organizations as well as addressing barriers to supporting students.

Since most mental health providers have training units in existence these are the professional Training staff with the responsibility of providing the curriculum and training for school employees on the subject of detecting behaviors, as well as creating, sustaining and promoting a safe learning environment.

In essence, we need to place professional therapists within the school in order to work as a team with the present school counselors and case workers.

They should not be part of the present school system but rather apart.

In this manner we are bringing the totality of services that are found in the professional field to the work with the needs of our young people.

### Funding

No new money has to be identified for this endeavor. The trauma informed Care School Act will not seem to benefit from the recommendations of the Behavioral Health Commission since that body focused on mental health recommendations for adults and not children and youth thus earmarking the 100 million on the adult population.

However, in the case of Philadelphia, the state yearly contributes a sizeable portion of funding to the quasi-government Community Behavioral Health. We need to simply allow providers to send claims for covered services in schools to Community Behavioral Health (CBH).

The intent of these observations are meant only as a starting point in order to continue discussions and details on a very important issue pertaining to the need for early interventions in the mental health of our children and youth.

### **Planned opening remarks before the committee on Sept. 15, 2023:**

Greetings, distinguished members of the House Democratic Policy Committee.

Welcome to our neighborhood and thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts with you on an issue that impacts the lives of most of us even if we are not aware of it.

My name is Frederick Ramirez, and I am the President of Pan American Mental Health services, as well as the Founder of USALA Media- which stands for USA-Latin America., a Bilingual and Multi-Cultural production and podcasts company housed right here in Eastern North Philadelphia.

Pan American Mental Health Services has been providing outpatient behavioral health services in Pennsylvania for thirty years and currently serve 3,000 people in Philadelphia County alone.

In Philadelphia we focus our attention on the greatest socio-economically and behavioral health needy neighborhoods, namely zip codes 19133 and 19140.

We also have facilities in Berks and Bucks Counties.

Our services are offered in multiple languages such as Vietnamese, Arabic , Russian , Spanish, and of course, English!

During these years our psychologists, psychiatrists, clinical social workers and all mental health professionals have steadily worked with our population to ease feelings and moods associated with behavioral health.

We have however noticed a marked increase across the board of manifestations of negative behavior but most disturbing with our young people.

The status of mental health in our Commonwealth today is worse then the public believes.

It affects both ends of our population spectrum from our senior citizens to our children and youth.

We can however, proactively address this issue before it reaches societal crisis levels which is the reason.

I welcome this opportunity.