

TESTIMONY ON THE TRANSIT NEEDS OF LATINOS

SUBMITTED TO:

**COMMITTEE ON BANKING,
HOUSING, AND URBAN AFFAIRS,
UNITED STATES SENATE**

Submitted by:

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I. INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to appear today on behalf of the National Council of La Raza (NCLR), the largest national Latino research and advocacy organization. NCLR works to improve life opportunities for this nation's more than 35 million Hispanics through our network of nearly 300 local community-based organizations and 33,000 individual associate members. NCLR has worked since its inception in 1968 to reduce poverty and improve the economic security of Latino families.

Despite having the highest rate of labor force participation, Latinos are three times more likely than other Americans to be working full-time, year-round, but still poor. Working poor Latino families nationwide rely heavily on public transportation to get to work, access needed public services, take their children to see doctors, and obtain better employment or housing options. In this sense, transportation issues, though often overlooked by the broader Latino community, are central to the economic security and well-being of Latino workers and their families. In light of this, I appreciate this opportunity to present testimony on the transit needs of Latinos.

II. BACKGROUND

Between 1990 and 2000 the U.S. Latino population grew by 58% and is now 12.5% of the U.S. population. The growth of the nation's Latino community is also reflected in growing economic, labor market, and political influences. The purchasing power of Latinos now stands at over \$580 billion, Latinos – especially immigrants – constitute a substantial share of entrants into new jobs, and new surveys show that Latinos make up a sizable share of new voters.¹

Furthermore, Latinos are now more geographically dispersed than ever before. The high population growth nationwide is explained, in part, by greater than 300% growth in the Hispanic population between 1990 and 2000 in states such as North Carolina, Georgia, and Arkansas.

Hispanics are becoming a more integral part of the fabric of America's cities and states. However, in spite of a growing presence and strong work ethic, Hispanics continue to face social and economic difficulties. During this period of economic recession, the prosperity of the past several years has stagnated and the outlook for Latinos is particularly challenging. For instance, data from the U.S. Census Bureau reveal that 21.4% of the nation's Latino population were poor in 2001, nearly twice the national average of 11.7%. The unemployment rate for Hispanics has remained near 7.5% since January 2002, while the national unemployment rate was 5.6% in September 2002. Furthermore, Latino families composed 25.0% of the total TANF caseload in 2000, up from only 20.8% in 1996. Governmental systems and structures designed to address the challenges facing American workers and their families must consider the needs of the burgeoning Hispanic community.

The nation's safety-net systems, including TANF and Food Stamps, are making modest but significant adjustments that ensure that poor Latino and immigrant families do not continue to slip through the cracks. Other major systems, especially transportation, must also begin to acknowledge the changing demographics in the states and cities, and take steps to ensure that infrastructures are responsive to the new environment.

Several transportation issues are particularly relevant for Latinos. First, public transportation is a key means of gaining access to jobs for Latinos. Hispanics are overwhelmingly concentrated in metropolitan areas (91.3%) with 45.6% of Latinos concentrated in the central city of metropolitan areas. Meanwhile, the poverty rate for Latinos in the central cities was 23.9% – higher than the overall poverty rate for Latinos (21.4%). In addition, not surprisingly, the most recent available data revealed that, in 1992, nearly one in five (18%) transit riders was Latino, a share that has undoubtedly grown in recent years due to the growth of the population and increase in the trend of states denying driver's licenses to immigrants. Not only is public transportation an important means of getting to work for Latinos, it is also needed for families that seek to obtain improved housing, as well as those wishing to access important public services, especially health and nutritional services for their children. Clearly, there are high levels of need for, as well as significant use of, public transportation by Latinos.

Second, in light of the growing share of the nationwide TANF caseload consisting of Latino families, welfare-to-work transportation issues are especially relevant for Latinos. Numerous studies have documented the significant barrier that transportation poses to parents struggling to move from welfare to work.² Recent studies point to the fact that nearly all (94%) TANF recipients rely on public transportation.³ Access to dependable and reliable transportation that brings poor Hispanic women to training and job opportunities is a critical need.

Third, while Latinos are more likely to be found in metropolitan areas, many Latinos, particularly those in "emerging" communities across the nation, are in rural areas where the transportation needs are severe. Only 60% of rural communities have public transportation.⁴ Moreover, research by NCLR has shown that transportation difficulties are a particular barrier for TANF recipients, and other low-income workers, in semirural and rural areas of Puerto Rico, where reliable public transportation is not available after 2 p.m. or even earlier, and the nearest area to board transport is often a long distance from homes.⁵

Fourth, limited opportunity for Latino communities to contribute to the transportation planning process has allowed many projects to disrupt low-income, minority communities, while not benefiting those communities with economic development.

Finally, there are a host of transportation-related issues with respect to maintaining healthy and environmentally safe communities and ensuring appropriate and useful public education in key transportation issues. For example, the California counties of King, Fresno, San Francisco, Riverside, Imperial, San Bernardino, and Los Angeles have hospitalization rates for Latinos that meet or exceed the state rate for hospitalizations for

asthma for all populations. Within these seven counties are four of America's five most ozone-polluted cities. The high number of Latinos with asthma is a direct result of living in environmentally unsafe communities that have consistent poor air quality attributable, in no small part, to transportation policy decisions.⁶

In addition, motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for Hispanics through the age of 25 and the second-leading cause of death for Hispanics between the ages of 25 and 44. This mortality rate is due in part to a lack of proper driver's training and awareness about the use of seat belts.⁷ Proper and adequate involvement by Latinos in public education efforts on major transportation issues could address this issue.

III. LATINO PRIORITIES

The condition and performance of our nation's transportation infrastructure has real implications for all families. Whether to reduce pollution, ease the gridlock for rush-hour traffic, or enhance the economic vitality of our communities, transit must be well planned and implemented. To ensure that the nation's Latino families benefit equally from transportation policies, Hispanic communities must have meaningful access to all processes that impact transit.

The following priorities highlight the key transportation policy issue areas for Latinos:

- **Improve the flow of information on important transportation policy issues and questions to Latinos.** Important information on transportation matters must be conveyed and delivered in an appropriate format for those with language barriers. The most recent data from the Census Bureau estimate that 46.6% of the nearly 27 million people who speak Spanish at home speak English less than very well. The importance of the effect of language barriers on access to transportation cannot be underestimated since transportation is essential to participation in modern society. Fortunately, the Department of Transportation has taken an important step toward overcoming language barriers by publishing guidance on special language service to those with limited English proficiency (LEP). This document outlines several important ways of providing language services, such as translation and interpretation services, and pictorial signage rather than traditional text to alert of driving conditions. While the LEP guidance is integral to beginning to ensure meaningful access to transportation programs and activities, additional assistance should be provided to ensure that transit authorities reach out to communities with concentrations of Spanish-speakers and provide them with free language services.
- **Increase Latino participation in transportation policy decision-making; improve representation on Metropolitan Planning Organizations.** Public involvement in transportation planning is key to ensuring that Latino communities benefit equally from transit projects. Investments in transportation resources for such areas should become the priority since low-income Latinos tend to have a higher dependence on public transit. One significant example of the need for Latino involvement in transit design can be found in the debate surrounding Austin, Texas' proposal for a light-rail

system during the 1990s. It is our understanding that the public voted down the light-rail initiative partly because the system did not fairly address the transportation needs of the city's low-income Latinos. The majority of the proposed system would have provided access to more affluent areas in western Austin with limited access to the predominantly Hispanic area of Central East Austin. Although light-rail would have provided few benefits to Central East Austin, it would have had significant economic, environmental, and social impacts there due to the proposed location of a storage and maintenance facility in the area. This facility would have increased noise and air pollution, and likely led to reduced property value. In addition, the proposed light-rail station, while purported to revitalize Central East Austin, would have had a negative impact on existing businesses due to displacement and increased competition.⁸ In the case of light-rail in Austin, the Hispanic community was reactive and, as a result, the proposed light-rail system failed.

The inclusion of Latinos in the planning and design of transportation projects can lead to better plans for all communities and successful execution of such proposals. The increasing political and economic influence of the Latino community is better utilized when those communities are allowed to be proactive in the transportation planning process.

- **Ensure that transportation projects do not have disparate impacts on Latino communities.** Historically, low-income and minority communities have relied on public transportation systems that are often neglected by transit systems once established. While relying on these outdated forms of transportation, new projects and infrastructure improvements, such as rail and highway construction, have frequently bypassed low-income communities and, instead, resulted in environmental hazards and the displacement of homes, businesses, and communities. In addition, the jobs created by such projects have often not benefited residents of such communities, or resulted in the hiring of local construction firms that employ Latino workers. NCLR commends the Federal Transit Administration for encouraging local transit systems to consider the introduction of a variety of improvements to bus service which will improve the quality of this lower-cost transportation alternative that minorities in many urban communities are far more likely to rely upon than other forms of mass transit. Any improvements in services should focus on improving cleanliness and safety, reducing overcrowding, increasing access to jobs and important centers of community life, and addressing language or physical barriers to access.

- **Take steps to engage and involve Hispanic-serving community-based organizations.** Community-based organizations are key agents providing important social services to Latino families across the nation. These organizations understand and respond to the needs of their local Hispanic constituents. The groups are ideally situated to provide guidance on best practices for economic development and job creation, as well as serve as a gateway to Latino communities for important transportation services, public involvement, outreach, and public education.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

The priorities that the National Council of La Raza has outlined are consistent with the historical goal that publicly-funded transit systems benefit all communities equitably. In order to address these issues, NCLR urges the members of the Senate Banking Committee to:

- **Expand and strengthen the Job Access and Reverse Commute program.** This program was created to assist poor women on TANF to find and keep jobs. It is woefully underfunded, and the need for the program is even greater today than when it was created. More families on TANF are beginning to reach their time limits, and getting to jobs is increasingly urgent for them. Funding levels ought to be doubled to \$300 million annually, and the program ought to be further refined to ensure that community-based organizations, including many within NCLR's network, that serve needy Hispanic families can access these important resources. The share of the funding open to a competitive process needs to be expanded considerably. Furthermore, technical assistance to community-based organizations should be increased to improve the quality of transportation services provided by such nontraditional providers.
- **Invest in public transportation.** Lawmakers should retain a uniform ratio of federal-state investment in new capital capacity in public transit and highways, and take steps to encourage, perhaps through the use of incentives, increased funding in public transportation. Also, proposed new capital capacity projects, for example the New Starts program, must not take local or federal funds away from existing public transportation services or negatively impact existing resources and communities. In addition, special consideration for targeted investment is needed where transportation needs are severe, particularly in rural areas with new "emerging" Latino and immigrant communities as well as especially needy areas along the U.S.-Mexico border.
- **Strengthen guidance and implementation regarding language policy.** While the Department of Transportation's LEP guidance is a first step toward ensuring equal access and greater flow of appropriate and useful information to Latinos who are limited-English-proficient, states need additional support to bridge language barriers. Resources should be channeled to states to assist them in creating effective language assistance programs, as described in the department's guidance. In addition, the guidance should be strengthened to specify thresholds and corresponding services to assist recipients of funding from the department in developing and implementing written language assistance plans.
- **Advance economic and community development.** The federal government must encourage greater cooperation among transportation agencies and agencies from other parts of government: workforce investment, housing, welfare, etc. A good model of this is the Job Access and Reverse Commute program. Furthermore, two provisions can promote greater economic and community development in areas where Latinos

reside. First, states should set aside a portion of their federal highway transportation funds for recruitment, training, and supportive services for minorities in the transportation construction field. Second, local hiring agreements for communities where transportation projects are built can be an effective tool for connecting unemployed residents to the workforce, increasing job skills, and helping residents earn higher wages.

- **Focus on civil rights for minority communities.** Due to the clear patterns of disparate economic, environmental, and social impacts resulting from the historical development of services for affluent communities at the expense of low-income and minority communities, it is necessary to strengthen legislative language around Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to clarify that individuals have the right to sue states under claims of disparate impact. Transportation planning agencies should gather data specific to Latino communities with respect to job access and environmental justice impacts. Also, any new investment in predominantly Latino communities should be culturally sensitive and designed to address the needs of these communities and families. In addition, clearer performance measures and guarantees of equitable transportation investments are needed to ensure that civil rights laws are fully enforced, that future projects have more equitable outcomes, and that communities can hold transit agencies accountable for failing to ensure fair outcomes. Also, a mechanism should be developed and implemented to address the needs of communities who have been negatively impacted by past projects.

- **Strengthen public involvement in planning processes.** NCLR believes that a minimum expectation for public involvement and community control in transportation planning must be established. Full disclosure of the annual list of projects by Metropolitan Planning Organizations would improve accountability of transportation agencies and help local communities better understand and be involved in transit plans. The composition of Metropolitan Planning Organizations should also be adjusted to ensure that low-income and Latino residents can contribute to the democratic process of decision-making.

NCLR urges the Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs to address in a meaningful way the concerns and recommendations that I have presented today. I appreciate the opportunity to testify and encourage you to call on NCLR as you consider policy proposals related to these transit issues.

ENDNOTES

¹ *Mobilizing the Latino Vote: Tapping the Power of the Hispanic Electorate*. Washington, DC: National Council of La Raza, July 2002.

² For additional information regarding the impact of transportation barriers on successful exit from TANF, see the Welfare Information Network's transportation resource page at:

<http://www.welfareinfo.org/transport.asp>, October 2002.

³ Resources, Community, and Economic Development Division, *Welfare Reform: Transportation's Role in Moving From Welfare to Work*. Washington, DC: United States General Accounting Office, May 1998

⁴ *Status of Rural Public Transportation – 2000*. Washington, DC: Community Transportation Association of America, April 2001.

⁵ Boujouen Ramirez, Norma, *Welfare Reform Implementation in Puerto Rico: A Status Report*, Research Paper Series (1-01). Washington, DC: National Council of La Raza, April 2001.

⁶ "Asthma's Impact on Latinos." San Francisco, CA: Latino Issues Forum, see website:

<http://www.lif.org/health/asthma.html>, October 2002.

⁷ "U.S. Transportation Secretary Mineta Marks National Child Passenger Safety Week, Urges Parents to Buckle Up Children Correctly," Press Release, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Transportation, February 12, 2001.

⁸ For a more detailed discussion of the potential impacts of the light-rail proposal on Central East Austin, see, Almanza, Susana & Raul Alvarez, "The Impacts of Siting Transportation Facilities in Low-Income Communities & Communities of Color." Austin, TX: People Organized in Defense of Earth and Her Resources, July 1995, see website: <http://www.fta.dot.gov/library/policy/envir-just/backcf.htm#Impacts>, October 2002.