

https://www.sanfordherald.com/news/el-vinculo-hispano-opens-sanford-office/article_621d536b-0607-5cc4-b153-154a76c524bd.html

El Vinculo Hispano opens Sanford office

By Jasmine Gallup jgallup@sanfordherald.com

Jun 2, 2021



The Hispanic Liaison's Siler City staff stand in front of the Sanford office Tuesday.

Jasmine Gallup | The Sanford Herald

A Chatham County nonprofit that serves the Latinx community opened an office in Sanford on Tuesday.

El Vinculo Hispano, or the Hispanic Liaison, is a Siler City-based nonprofit that serves people in Chatham, Lee, Alamance and Randolph counties. After years of working with people in Sanford, the organization is finally opening a brick-and-mortar office in the city.

"We need to have a presence in the counties that we serve," said Executive Director Ilana Dubester.

The office, in the HAVEN of Lee County building on Bracken Street, will be a hub for the Hispanic community. People can reach out for help with immigration, healthcare, housing, education, workers rights and more, said Dubester. For example, since the U.S. Centers for Disease Control lifted the moratorium on evictions, The Hispanic Liaison has helped several recently evicted people traverse the legal system.

"We're basically the Google of our community. So it's, referring to available resources, helping to solve problems, fill out forms," Dubester said. "There's so many (issues). Relationship with government, relationship with law enforcement, transportation issues, worker's issues. The needs are many."

The Sanford office will continue the nonprofit's COVID-19 response work, educating people about the pandemic and helping them get tested and vaccinated. After the staff settle in, the nonprofit also hopes to expand its advocacy work in Sanford, said Dubester. Two years ago, staff were part of the response team for people who were arrested in the Immigrations and Custom Enforcement raid on Bear Creek Arsenal.

"We're still doing case management for several families," Dubester said.

The Sanford office will be run by Deputy Director Hannia Benitez. A second staff member is expected to be hired in the next few weeks. Lee County has a large, and growing, Hispanic community, said Dennis Duke, vice-chair of The Hispanic Liaison board. About 20% of people in Lee County are Hispanic or Latino, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

"The dream has become a reality and we have to keep it going," Duke said. "My goal now is, we're gonna be knocking on doors. We're gonna let people know we're here."

During a short celebration Tuesday, one city resident, Maria Benitez Menocal, spoke about growing up in the United States as her parents struggled to navigate an entirely new culture.

"I grew up in a home where my mother did not know how to drive, did not know the language, did not know the laws to back her up as a woman ... it was almost as if she was a helpless child in a grown adult's body," Menocal said. "I grew up in a home where my mother had to work two jobs and still try to find ways to make money by baking bread and selling homemade cakes."

Menocal has seen several new immigrants have similar experiences, she said. As she grew up, many of her Hispanic friends came to her for help translating government letters or understanding bills. Most simply wanted to talk to someone who understood who to call, where to go and what to do, Menocal said.

Now, Menocal has a business helping people prepare their taxes. She hopes to work together with The Hispanic Liaison to address issues of inequality in Sanford.

“We help the Hispanic community find their voice,” Menocal said. “We help them learn how to speak.”

jgallup