

Small Steps to Big Change

Why Support for Local Latino Groups
Is Critical to LGBTQ Organizing





The Power of Giving and Connecting

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Why Support for Local Latino Groups Is Critical to LGBTQ Organizing

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October 2013

About Hispanics in Philanthropy (HIP)

HIP brings together grantmakers to find solutions to the structural underfunding of one of the nation's greatest resources: the growing U.S. Latino community. In doing so, HIP provides information, referrals and advice to foundations seeking to support Latino leadership and capacity building; supports Latino leaders in philanthropy, from the newest to those already in the top tier; seeds capacity building for Latino nonprofits at the local level, and promotes philanthropic collaboration and investment in areas of critical need, including aging, LGBTQ, Latino men and boys, education and other issues.

For more information, please visit www.hiponline.org.



About the report

The current research results from a partnership between Hispanics in Philanthropy (HIP), Open Society Foundations, and the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race at Columbia University. The study was commissioned by HIP, as part of its ongoing work to expand its LGBTQ program to build on the power of grassroots Latino organizations.



Executive Summary

Grassroots Latino organizations and their constituents are increasingly important to the success of LGBTQ advocacy. Due in part to the dramatic increase of the Latino population over the last decade, Latino organizations are playing a pivotal role in mobilizing local communities and advocating effectively for key LGBTQ policy.

This brief examines this trend by quantitatively mapping the success rate of Latino and LGBTQ coalitions over the past five years. It also looks closely at the partnership between the LGBTQ rights organization MassEquality and the Latino-led community-organizing agency Chelsea Collaborative that proved to be essential in the passage of the Massachusetts Transgender Equal Rights Bill in November 2011.¹

The study suggests that LGBTQ campaigns are 35 percent more effective when they include Latino partners and/or have substantial Latino support. Our analysis of the MassEquality-Chelsea Collaborative partnership further indicates that investing in grassroots organizing and capacity-building can deliver major policy breakthroughs.

In 2011, the Chelsea Collaborative had no funding for LGBTQ organizing, or prior policy experience in this area. Yet the organization's staff credits the 2009 capacity-building grant provided by HIP through its Funders' Collaborative for Strong Latino Communities for allowing them to take a leadership role as advocates on behalf of transgender rights and be able to decisively influence the thinking of state policymakers.

The research also suggests that philanthropic institutions that increase their capacity-building support to grassroots Latino organizations and diverse coalition work will significantly strengthen their impact. Given the critical importance of timely information on successful strategies, we also recommend that funders invest in the dissemination of stories that document these successful efforts.



[1]

New Realities, New Strategies

Philanthropic dollars to the LGBTQ community have historically gone to medium-to-large, non-Latino, white-led organizations, while Latino and other minority-led groups remain significantly unsupported. This tendency remains unchanged, despite Latinos constituting more than 16.3 percent of the U.S. population and being one of the fastest growing sectors within the LGBTQ community. According to Funders for LGBTQ Issues, of the \$123 million in funding provided to LGBTQ nonprofit organizations in 2011, less than two percent was awarded to Latino LGBTQ groups.² Similarly, a 2011 report by the Foundation Center and Hispanics in Philanthropy found that less than two percent of all philanthropic dollars are specifically earmarked to support the U.S. Latino community.³

This lack of support indicates that important funding decisions continue to be made with the assumption that large organizations operating in the mainstream have the most capacity and/or knowledge to address the needs and nuances of Latino LGBTQ people and are best equipped to fight and win key battles. These include legislation to support same-sex marriage, condemn hate crimes, provide services for homeless LGBTQ youth, and secure civil rights protections.

While the value of these organizations is undeniably important, the lack of support for grassroots organizations led by Latinos and other minority groups is increasingly costly for the LGBTQ movement due to two major changes in U.S. society. The first is the massive shift in U.S. demographics, which has transformed historic racial and ethnic minorities into the majority of the population in Texas, New Mexico, California and other key swing states throughout the United States. The second, and in tandem with the prior trend, is a growing convergence between LGBTQ and Latino communities and organizations around fundamental concerns, such as ending all forms of discrimination and immigration reform.

The possibilities for increasing advocacy effectiveness by working together is evident in the success rates of joint LGBTQ/Latino campaigns in the past five years, particularly in states where Latinos make up more than three percent of the population. Since 2008, there have been at least 25 campaigns with national repercussions on a broad range of questions, most notably same-sex marriage, immigration reform, and hate crimes (see Figure 1). Of these, 18 were successful and 14 – or 78 percent – of the successful campaigns had Latino organizational partners and/or significant support from Latino communities. Of the campaigns in which Latinos did not constitute a significant part, only 43 percent were successful (3 out of 7).⁴

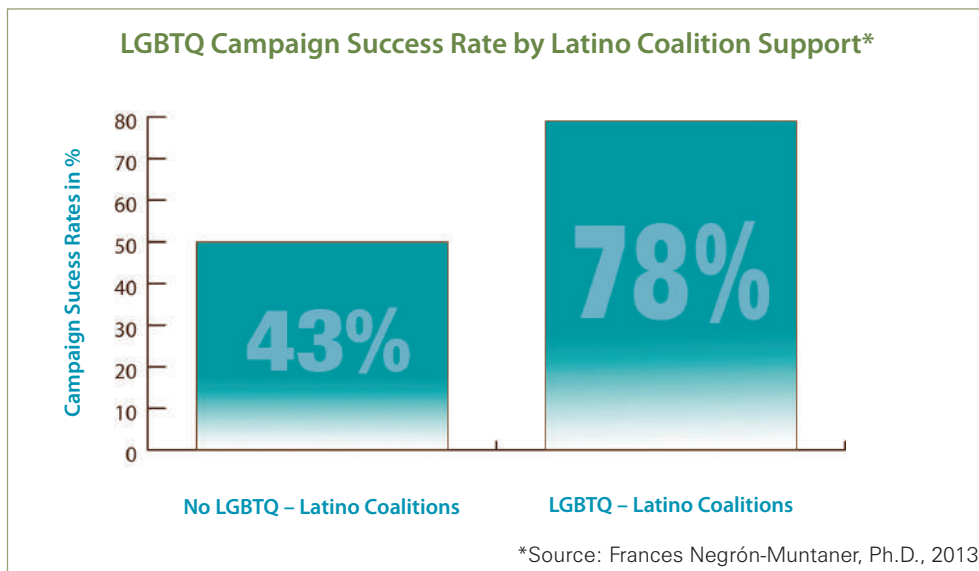
While Latino participation has not been as influential in campaigns waged in states without substantial Latino populations such as Maine and New Hampshire, in states with larger Latino populations like New York or in nation-wide mobilizations, Latino involvement has been indispensable for success. This is evident in the campaigns that produced the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009, and the most recent coalition in

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Maryland that led to the approval of two November 2012 ballot measures, one of which legalized same-sex marriage and the other made some undocumented immigrant students eligible for in-state tuition.⁵

To exemplify this important trend, we would like to examine the pivotal role of a grassroots Latino organization in the passing of legislation to extend fundamental rights to transgender people in Massachusetts. The legislation initially sought to protect transgender people against discrimination in employment, education, housing and credit, and add gender identity and expression to the state's existing hate crime laws.

Figure 1



The Power of Small: Welcome to Chelsea, Massachusetts

Since 2006, MassEquality, along with its partner, the Massachusetts Transgender Political Coalition (MTPC), had taken the lead in the movement to include transgender people in Massachusetts’s anti-discrimination laws. In 2011, a bill originally introduced as “An Act Relative to Gender-Based Discrimination and Hate Crimes” by state Reps. Carl Sciortino and Byron Rushing made its way once again to the Legislature’s Joint Committee on the Judiciary. But the Joint Committee, chaired by Rep. Eugene O’Flaherty, a Democrat from Chelsea, would not bring it up for a vote.



As chair of the committee, which considers all state safety and criminal matters, Rep. O’Flaherty had the power to retain the bill under study if there was little interest in discussing it. According to LGBTQ and Latino grassroots advocates, Rep. O’Flaherty was not sympathetic to the bill due to his religious beliefs.⁶ Yet Mr. O’Flaherty, who is an attorney, has stated that he had not championed the bill because he remained unconvinced that transgender people actually needed additional legal protection. In his own words: “My reaction to the transgender bill was that there were many laws on the books currently that offered the protections sought.”⁷ Regardless of the specific reasons, Chelsea’s influential representative was not budging.



In seeking to end the stalemate, MassEquality organizers knew that the next step would be to persuade Rep. O’Flaherty to allow a vote on the bill. The question was how. Then, on Feb. 27, 2011, the brutal assault of a transgender Latina in Chelsea made the Boston news and clarified matters: MassEquality needed a Chelsea ally.

Located across the Mystic River from Boston, Chelsea is the state’s smallest city but the 26th most densely populated municipality in the nation. Since the turn of the century, it had been a largely European immigrant community. The city’s demographics, however, began to radically change in the 1980s, when Latinos began arriving in great numbers. According to the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau, Chelsea had a total of 37,483 residents, of which 62.1 percent were Hispanic, mostly of Puerto Rican and Central American descent.



Although MassEquality did not have deep connections in the city, its Deputy Director Carly Burton knew Gladys Vega, the executive director of the Chelsea Collaborative, the city’s leading grassroots organizing group. Having worked with Vega in the past on immigration issues, Burton was also aware that Vega had access to Rep. O’Flaherty and that she could help influence him to support the bill. Seeing the possibility of an effective partnership, Burton decided to contact Vega: “I wanted to connect with her to see if there was a way that we could work together both on the bill and on this particular hate crime.”⁸

On the Chelsea side, the timing was terribly right. Since 2009, violence against transgender people had been a growing concern at the Chelsea Collaborative. As the “go to” Latino human rights group in the city and as the organization known to address concerns that few others will take on, its staff members had been hearing about incidents of discrimination and harassment toward the Latino transgender community, mainly women, for some time. But when the Feb. 27, 2011, incident happened, members of Chelsea’s transgender community mobilized to prevent further violence. Shantell Saenz, a beauty salon owner who was also a friend of the assaulted woman, sounded the alarm.

“Something horrible had happened,” Saenz recalled having told Vega. “A transgender woman was severely beaten outside a local bar.”⁹

According to Saenz, the bar owner claimed that the woman wanted to engage in lewd conduct in the bathroom and attempted to stop her from using the facilities. When the woman insisted, the owner ejected her from the bar. No one tried to intervene or help the woman. “At the end,” says Saenz, “the owner treated her like she was worthless. Then, outside of the establishment, the woman ran into someone who nearly killed her and left her for dead.” This time the police arrived. But though the woman suffered severe facial lacerations and required 70 stitches, the police did not make an arrest.

Upon hearing Saenz’s account, Vega was not surprised. She was familiar with both the growing tension around transgender issues in Chelsea and the lack of official concern for those directly affected. By this point, Vega had heard a number of complaints, including previous incidents in which the police taunted the victims. So, when Vega heard of the incident, she reached out to Chelsea Police Chief Brian A. Kyes.

“I immediately called the chief of police, and I said, ‘Chief, what is going on?’ ”¹⁰ she later recalled.

While sympathetic to Vega’s concerns, Chief Kyes stated that “there’s always two sides of the story,” and that he did not have enough evidence to prosecute since the woman chose not to “push the charges.”¹¹ Apparently discouraged by the Police Department’s response and afraid of being the victim of further aggression, the woman lost interest in pursuing the case and moved from the city. But Vega would not let it go.

“A woman gets beaten, and the police are not there,” she asserted. “We started to organize so this would never happen again.”¹²

Vega’s support for LGBTQ rights runs deep. On the one hand, it was about family. Her brother, Johnny Vega, was a gay man who died of AIDS in 1996 without ever having discussed his sexuality or illness with most members of his family. “When my brother died, it was a wake-up call,” Vega said. “He didn’t die of HIV because he was gay, but because he used drugs as a way to cope with rejection and discrimination. He died because he couldn’t be himself.”¹³ On the other hand, Vega had a long history of defending LGBTQ rights. She started working on

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LGBTQ-related issues in the 1990s, when she was the board president of Centro Latino, a social service organization.

Vega's commitment to LGBTQ rights also mirrors larger trends. In addition to the sustained, if often unrecognized, organizing of Latino LGBTQ activists over the past five decades, the U.S. Latino community at large is increasingly more supportive of LGBTQ rights. According to a 2010 poll conducted by Bendixen and Amanti International, Latinos are broadly sympathetic toward LGBTQ rights, with 83 percent supporting housing and employment non-discrimination protections for gay people.¹⁴ A 2011 Univisión News Poll found that 56 percent of Latinos supported recognition of same-sex relationships, either by marriage (43 percent) or civil unions (13 percent).¹⁵ Mainstream Latino organizations have followed suit: In June 2012, two of the most important Latino civil rights organizations, the League of United Latin American Citizens and the National Council of La Raza approved internal resolutions supporting marriage equality.¹⁶ In addition, Vega's support of LGBTQ rights is consistent with the results of recent research that suggests the majority of social justice organizations led by people of color are engaged with LGBTQ issues at some level.¹⁷

Latinos are broadly sympathetic toward LGBTQ rights, with 83 percent supporting housing and employment non-discrimination protections for gay people.



Local advocates at Massachusetts State House
Photo Credit: Chelsea Collaborative

Trans/formations

Within a few weeks, Burton spoke to Vega about the proposed partnership. Despite the Chelsea Collaborative's lack of resources specifically earmarked for LGBTQ organizing, Vega accepted Burton's invitation and started to plan a meeting at the Collaborative.

For this first gathering, Vega invited Rep. O'Flaherty, Burton, and key leaders from the agency's immigrant organizing committee. The group was left with the impression that Rep. O'Flaherty had listened but was not sympathetic toward their concerns. Given Vega's long history of working on both the same and opposite sides of the table with the representative, she realized that he needed to hear why the legislation mattered — from his own constituents.

"I approached Eugene O'Flaherty again," Vega recalled. "I said, 'Representative, I have an issue in the community. A few individuals want to approach you on something.'" This time, Vega did not tell Rep. O'Flaherty what the meeting was about or who would be there. He again agreed to attend.

To prepare for the meeting, Vega reached out to a group of transgender Latinas to brainstorm. The first person she invited was Saenz, who in turn recruited the help of a second close friend, who has a transgender daughter. Together, Vega, Saenz and her close friend spread word of the meeting and the pending legislation through the city's LGBTQ bars and social media. The gathering drew more than 50 participants, the majority of whom were Latino LGBTQ people.

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— Shantell Saenz, community activist

From that initial group, 25 volunteered to meet with Rep. O'Flaherty. The Latina group's goal was to persuade the representative to release and support the bill.

For Saenz, what kept people focused was the idea that "there would be a law that would protect transgender people and that these violent incidents would not happen again."¹⁸ When the meeting day came, the group was ready.

"We had many stories to tell," Vega said. "And they were personal. I cried as I remembered my brother. So did the other women, as they told their stories."¹⁹ For more than an hour, the women talked about their daily struggles for dignity, about police officers making fun of transgender people and ignoring emergency calls when women were being assaulted.

"I spoke about being attacked by a man who broke into my house and cracked my head open with a bottle. And the Chelsea Police did nothing — even when the man had outstanding warrants," remembered Saenz.²⁰ The group also spoke about being denied service at local

establishments and being the object of continual harassment at all hours when they walked the streets. Everyone remembered the victims of assaults in Chelsea who were not in the room.

“The ultimate message,” Vega summed up, “was that there were continual human rights violations in Chelsea and that the people affected could be your family, daughter, son, cousin. Anyone.”

Immediately after the meeting, Rep. O’Flaherty had a change of heart: “It struck me just how vulnerable some of these people are. Something had to be done.” He began to poll committee members on the stalled bill, worked tirelessly on the bill’s language, and set up a vote for the third week of November.

Rep. O’Flaherty’s commitment quickly brought forth significant opposition from Republican lawmakers. Calling it the “bathroom bill,” opponents decried the legislation, particularly its public accommodations section, as “an invitation to sexual predators to pose as transgender residents to prey on victims in women’s bathrooms.”²¹ Others expressed concern that small businesses might be “driving customers away from facilities that employed transgender workers.”²²



Although supporters of the legislation, including Rep. O’Flaherty, did not agree with these criticisms, they dropped the bill’s public accommodations protections to assure passage. In Rep. O’Flaherty’s words: “I firmly believe that, if you can get a half-loaf today, take it. You can come back and try to get the second half next legislative session. Things are done in incremental fashion here.”²³ Feeling that the law provided basic protections for the transgender community that strengthened the movement and provided broader public acceptance, both advocates and Rep. O’Flaherty decided to support the bill with limited protections.

On Nov. 15, 2011, the Massachusetts House of Representatives approved the Transgender Equal Rights Bill by a vote of 95-58. The following day, the state Senate passed the bill by a voice vote and,



Gladys Vega, Executive Director of Chelsea Collaborative and local activist
Photo Credit: Chelsea Collaborative



MassEquality staff at the signing of the Transgender Equal Rights Bill in 2011
Photo Credit: MassEquality

on Nov. 23, Gov. Deval L. Patrick signed it into law, making Massachusetts the 16th state in the nation to treat transgender citizens as a protected class.²⁴ The five-year battle to extend nearly all available legal protections to the transgender people of Massachusetts had finally come to an end.

As all parties acknowledge, Gladys Vega and the Chelsea Collaborative were instrumental in the outcome. Undoubtedly, their success was due to multiple factors, including the fact that the Chelsea Collaborative’s leadership saw LGBTQ rights advocacy as part of its mission, and that the organization was able to develop an effective strategy to approach Rep. O’Flaherty.

But the Collaborative’s success also may have echoed the emergence of new Latino political constituencies and their growing capacity to influence policy.

At 62.1 percent of the Chelsea population, Latinos are now the city’s largest voting bloc. Rep. O’Flaherty, a veteran of more than 15 years in public office, was arguably aware of the changing demographics in his district — and so was Vega. For the past two decades, the Chelsea Collaborative has organized nonpartisan voter registration and mobilization drives. In addition, in her time off, Vega is active in the political life of the city and served as a volunteer on Rep. O’Flaherty’s last campaign.

Furthermore, the Chelsea Collaborative’s advocacy is explicitly meant to strengthen the capacity of Latino constituents to hold elected officials accountable.

“Not five weeks go by before we meet with our representative about what’s going on,” Vega said. “We don’t let him forget why we elected him.”²⁵

Ultimately, the coming together of a previously ignored segment of the Latino community to advocate on its own behalf; the recognition of this constituency by Latino leaders, and the leaders’ ability to hold public officials accountable, contributed to creating common political terrain for Latino and LGBTQ rights.

Work Ahead

The alliance between Chelsea Collaborative and MassEquality demonstrates a larger trend: As Latino voting and organizing power increases, LGBTQ groups that work with Latino partners can be more effective. It also shows that Latino LGBTQ communities and organizations have an important role in securing rights and protections for all LGBTQ people. Increasingly, it will be the groups capable of connecting at multiple levels, including with local Latino nonprofits that will provide the biggest bang for each dollar invested in social capital.

In the words of Vega, “If the small grassroots group is not supported, the bigger group may never get to benefit.”

The continued harassment of the transgender community in Chelsea, even after the law was passed, has prompted the Chelsea Collaborative to again convene a group of transgender people to create a plan to assure that the law is implemented by the local police and respected in the community.

Moreover, in order to get the legislation approved, supporters decided to drop the public accommodations protections, which means that transgender people are not covered in hotels, hospitals, grocery stores and public restrooms, among other city spaces.²⁶ As noted earlier, many of the stories of discrimination and violence precisely involved public accommodations.²⁷ Both MassEquality and Chelsea Collaborative are discussing ways to advocate for legislation to secure full rights and to educate the public.

At another level, Latino nonprofits supporting LGBTQ rights may face a funding backlash that can have long-lasting consequences for their organizations. By engaging in LGBTQ organizing, for instance, the Chelsea Collaborative violated the terms of one key funder, the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, which had supported the Collaborative’s core work with undocumented immigrants since 2007.



Kara S. Coredini, Esq., Executive Director and Carly Burton, Deputy Director from MassEquality attending the Chelsea Collaborative press conference on returning funding to Catholic Campaign for Human Development Photo Credit: Chelsea Collaborative

“Initially, they made us sign a contract that said that we could not do work that was ‘contrary to Catholic teaching,’ ” Vega explained. “This had not been a problem before because, even if our work has always included LGBTQ community members, we were organizing under the banner of housing, workers’ rights, immigration reform, and environmental justice. But once MassEquality formally recognized us for working on the Transgender Equal Rights Bill, the funder took note.”²⁸

A short time later, as part of a routine site visit, a Catholic Campaign for Human Development official questioned Vega about whether the Chelsea Collaborative supported the “gay lifestyle.”²⁹ The visit and subsequent attempts to clarify what the term meant were so unsettling that the Collaborative decided to return the funds and withdraw a proposal that it had submitted for additional support for immigration organizing.

“It was an easy decision to return the \$40,000 grant to the Campaign for Human Development, because our values are not values that we give away for money,” Vega said. “Our mission is to protect every individual, regardless of their sexual preference, their documentation status, or their race and/or gender identity. We returned the money, and we did it with much pride.”³⁰ The Collaborative has since raised the funds from alternative sources.



Gladys Vega receiving MassEquality's Icon award in 2012 for her leadership and the coalition work of Chelsea Collaborative in passing the Transgender Equal Rights Bill
Photo Credit: MassEquality

Recommendations

The impact of Latino organizing around LGBTQ advocacy and the story of the Chelsea Collaborative and MassEquality speak to the effectiveness of such collaborations. The following recommendations are meant to encourage philanthropic funding that strengthens policy success and supports coalition-building and organizing.

1 Increase funding to U.S. Latino LGBTQ and Latino grassroots organizations

Latino and LGBTQ communities tend to be under-resourced, with only a small sliver of annual foundation giving specifically earmarked for each one.

Although often small and/or underfunded, however, Latino LGBTQ organizations and Latino-led LGBTQ initiatives can have significant impact. They also provide a crucial voice for a twice-marginalized community, which often has additional challenges from immigration status, racial discrimination, and lack of employment opportunities, among others. Strategically, these organizations and initiatives can provide key leadership and help resolve challenges affecting all LGBTQ people.

Building strong Latino LGBTQ organizations and leaders is essential for the creation of effective coalitions across the LGBTQ and Latino movements.

2 Strengthen local engagement and collaborations to advance common issues

There is still a great need to seed coalitions and to continue to increase support for intersectional work between Latino and LGBTQ organizations. According to the “2012 Funders in LGBTQ Issues” report, only 1.66 percent of philanthropic dollars are invested in community organizing and coalition-building is not listed as a strategic category for philanthropy.³¹

As exemplified by the Chelsea Collaborative and MassEquality collaboration, support for this kind of partnership can greatly accelerate the rate of change, result in historic policy victories, and make substantial contributions to a more inclusive society.

3 Disseminate strategic communications that raise awareness of Latino LGBTQ issues and strengthen leadership among Latino and Latino LGBTQ people

In addition to funding collaborations, it is important to back communications strategies that highlight Latino LGBTQ issues and victories during active campaigns in order to expand advocacy and civic engagement. The Chelsea Collaborative and MassEquality, for instance, combined their messages in advocating for statewide protections for transgender people through small group sharing of personal stories and online outreach.

To further strengthen coalitions, policy and other victories should be amply disseminated. As groups such as Cuéntame demonstrate, the sharing of stories through new platforms and social media has been an important factor in expanding constituencies and organizing successfully. In step with this trend and to further disseminate the findings in this brief, a video version has been co-produced with the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race’s Media and Idea Lab. It is being distributed by HIP and the Center.

HIP's Role

For more than a decade, HIP has sought to inform and empower LGBTQ and Latino leadership and has leveraged dollars from LGBTQ-focused funders almost 10 to 1 in local communities around the country. HIP is now working to increase LGBTQ activism by exploring collaborations with its network of funders and among the more than 600 Latino nonprofit organizations in its grantee network, including the Chelsea Collaborative.

HIP's website contains additional resources and information:

<http://www.hiponline.org/programs/more-issues/lgbt-rights>

To learn more about the work and to support the Chelsea Collaborative, please visit their website:

<http://chelseacollab.org>

To learn more about the statewide advocacy efforts of MassEquality and to get involved, please visit their website:

<http://www.massequality.org>

Acknowledgements

This paper would not have been possible without the generous support of the Open Society Foundations. HIP and Frances Negrón-Muntaner are deeply grateful to Carly Burton, Speaker Robert DeLeo, Rita Falzarano, state Rep. Eugene O'Flaherty, Shantell Saenz, and Gladys Vega for their work and generosity. We would also like to thank the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race's staff, Josephine Caputo and Teresa Aguayo, research assistant Samuel Robson and social media coordinator Dennis Daccaret for their support and contributions to the production of this policy brief and video.

Notes

- 1 This study is based on quantitative and qualitative research. For the qualitative part of the study, a wide variety of printed and other sources were consulted and Negrón-Muntaner conducted in-depth interviews with key participants of the described events, including Gladys Vega, Carly Burton, Shantell Saenz, and Rep. Eugene O’Flaherty. To create the quantitative mapping of LGBTQ-Latino coalition impact, Negrón-Muntaner and research assistant Samuel Robson tracked the outcomes of LGBTQ campaigns with national impact over a five-year period, from 2008 to 2013, in the New York Times archives.
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- 3 Foundation Center and Hispanics in Philanthropy, *Foundation Funding for Hispanics/Latinos in the United States and for Latin America* (New York: The Foundation Center, 2011): v.
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- 8 Interview to Carly Burton, MassEquality, Boston, June 27, 2012.
- 9 Interview with Shantell Saenz, Chelsea, June 22, 2012.
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- 28 Interview with Gladys Vega, June 22, 2012.
- 29 Interview with Gladys Vega, June 22, 2012.
- 30 Interview with Gladys Vega, June 22, 2012.
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