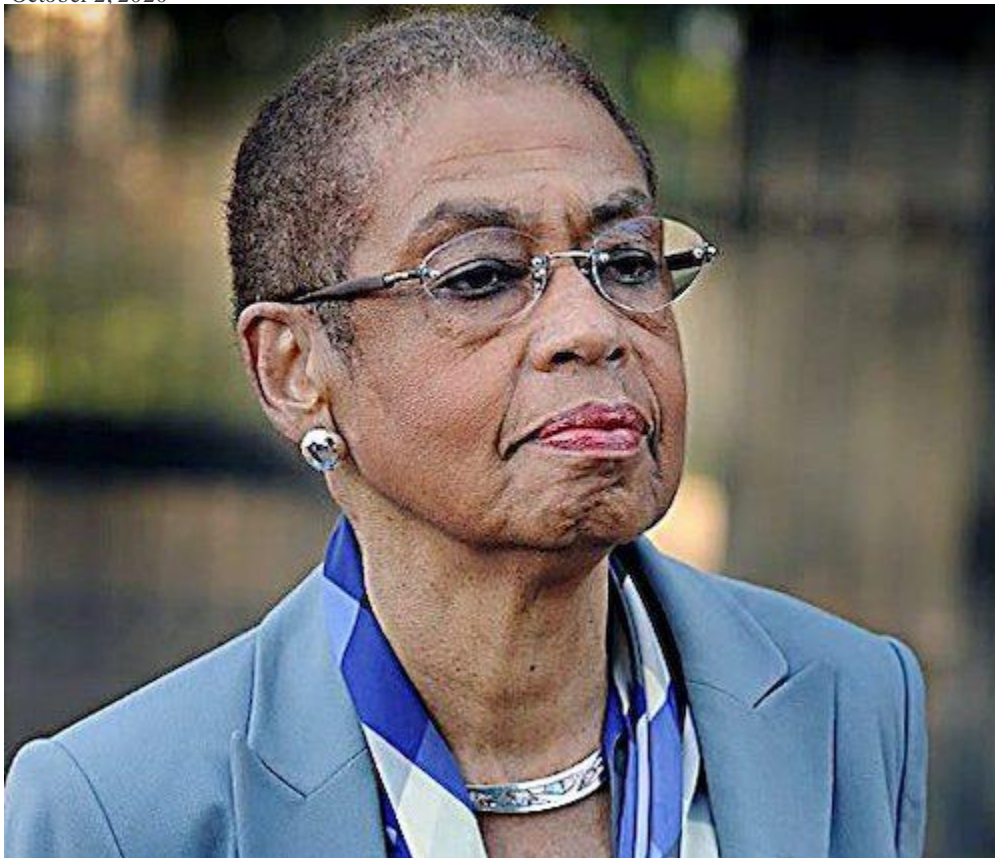


Eleanor Holmes Norton Meets with D.C.'s Latino Leaders



James Wright

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D.C. Del. Eleanor

Holmes Norton (WI file photo)

Leaders of D.C.'s Latino-oriented organizations met Thursday with Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton to articulate their concerns about housing, education and employment on behalf of the people they serve.

Norton said hearing the anxieties of the city's Latinos will give her a better sense of what their needs are.

"We're now in Hispanic Heritage Month, which makes it an especially appropriate time to hear from Latino leaders in D.C.," she said. "I started the Latino Council in 2009 to draw a more coherent and extensive agenda to serve my Hispanic constituents, who come from many backgrounds and diverse needs. I'm very grateful to the distinguished members of our Latino Council to serve."

Census data shows 11.3% of the city's population consists of Latinos, people of Central and South American descent. Latinos live throughout the District but have a strong presence in neighborhoods such as Adams Morgan, Columbia Heights, Petworth and Mid-16th Street.

It is the housing that concerns Allison R. Kokkoros, CEO of Carlos Rosario International Public Charter School.

"There are concerns about evictions once the mayor lifts the public emergency," Kokkoros said. "Because some people have lost their jobs, they cannot pay rent and they are making it so far because of the eviction moratorium but we know things will get bad when the moratorium is lifted and the back rent is due. Parents are really struggling to make ends meet and living in the District is so expensive but they are really trying to do what they can."

Kokkoros said despite the economic challenges the coronavirus pandemic has presented to her parents and students, education remains a priority.

"We are a school for adults and they want an education," she said. "We work largely with the immigrant community and we have 2,000 students. Our students are determined to learn and about 75 of them are looking at higher education."

Rebecca Read Medrano, co-founder and executive director of the Gala Hispanic Theatre, told Norton her organization has suffered economic loss and that “half of our season is lost” due to the pandemic.

“We are a small, nimble organization and we have had to take risks,” Medrano said. “We have had to shift to virtual programming. We used to have a vibrant program serving 20,000 youths that were 65% Latino and 15% African American but because of COVID-19, our programming stopped with the schools closing.”

Medrano said the Gala Theatre’s Zoom program have had a lot of success but worries about Latinos in the creative fields.

“We employ Latino artists for our productions but with the pandemic, they don’t have anywhere to work,” she said. “These are youth who are giving the money they earn to their mothers. We need those jobs to come back.”

Medrano said despite the challenges, the Gala Hispanic Theater “is here to stay” and “we want people to know we are here.”

Norton, after the hourlong session, said she was both pleased and concerned about what she heard.

“It is great to have this council,” the delegate said. “They keep me informed on what is going on.”

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