

## UnidosUS Hosts National Conference in Kansas City

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KANSAS CITY, KS, UnidosUS, the largest Latino advocacy organization in the United States, held its annual national conference this week in Kansas City, bringing attention to the community's growing economic footprint amid ongoing immigration enforcement across the country.

The event began just days after Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) conducted operations at two El Toro Loco Mexican restaurants in Johnson County, Kansas. Nearly a dozen individuals were taken into custody by Homeland Security Investigations agents. Footage showed workers being led away in handcuffs as food remained cooking on stoves, and one location was left abruptly closed with a handwritten sign on the door.

Janet Murguía, president and CEO of UnidosUS, who is originally from Kansas City, Kansas, raised concerns over what she views as aggressive tactics used in these types of enforcement actions. “This is not just about immigration, it’s about civil rights,” she said during the conference.

Founded nearly 60 years ago, UnidosUS partners with over 300 affiliate organizations across the country, including Kansas City-based groups like El Centro, Mattie Rhodes Center, and the Guadalupe Centers. Its mission spans from defending civil rights to advancing Latino involvement in education, health, housing, and the workforce.

UnidosUS notes that Latinos contribute over \$3.7 trillion annually to the U.S. economy, a figure that exceeds the GDP of most countries. With 64 million Latinos in the U.S. nation’s largest minority group, demographic projections suggest that one in three new workers by 2030 will be Latino.

Murguía warned that despite these numbers, public perception and political discourse often fail to reflect the economic and societal contributions of the Latino community. She pointed to false narratives that misrepresent Latinos as “outsiders,” even though the vast majority are American citizens.

The conference included presentations on immigration policy and its broader impact. Studies show that deporting a member from a mixed-status household can cut that family’s income nearly in half. A 2017 report from the Journal on Migration and Human Security estimated that the removal of all undocumented individuals from the U.S. would reduce GDP by 1.4% in the first year, with long-term losses projected at \$4.7 trillion over a decade.

Murguía, who previously served in the Clinton administration and later as a university administrator, said UnidosUS intends to pursue legal and legislative avenues to ensure enforcement policies are implemented within constitutional bounds.

UnidosUS is also working alongside academic institutions to produce research on Latino economic mobility. The UCLA Latino Policy & Politics Institute is collaborating with the organization on a forthcoming report that explores how policy decisions have shaped Latino wealth, or the lack thereof.

Rodrigo Domínguez-Villegas, director of research at UCLA's institute, said Latinos currently make up nearly 20% of the U.S. population but hold only 12% of the country's household wealth. "There's an imbalance where Latino labor is driving growth, but the wealth that labor generates isn't flowing back into those communities," he said.

The data will be used to inform policy proposals and community investment strategies. Domínguez-Villegas also helped develop the Latino Data Hub, an interactive tool designed to provide policymakers, researchers, and community organizations with detailed data on Latino populations at the national, state, and local levels. The platform, updated in July, includes 130 indicators that can be filtered by region and topic, such as healthcare access, education levels, and housing statistics.

At the local level, the Mattie Rhodes Center will release the Kansas City Hispanic/Latino Equity Index during the convention. Created in partnership with the University of Missouri-Kansas City and the Urban League of Greater Kansas City, the report focuses on disparities in economic opportunity, health outcomes, and civic participation.

Economic mobility was also highlighted through community entrepreneurship. The July 17 opening of the ninth El Mercado Fresco grocery store in Kansas City, Kansas, drew a large turnout. Owner Eddie Musallet explained that his business supports local farmers and caters to a variety of ethnic communities. "We're committed to fair pricing and diversity in our offerings," he said. Locally sourced eggs were priced at \$6.99 for a 30-count carton during the opening.

Carlos Gomez, president of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Greater Kansas City, praised the store's success as an example of how Latino-owned businesses strengthen local economies through job creation and community engagement.

David Carranza, economic development director for Grandview, Missouri, added that Latino communities are characterized by determination and a strong work ethic. "We know how to build something from nothing. That's who we are," he said.

Despite political divisions and ongoing challenges in immigration policy, UnidosUS continues to push for recognition of the Latino population's role in shaping the nation's future. "We believe in the American dream," Murguía stated. "And even in difficult times, we keep moving forward with optimism and resilience."