

# Delta Sources and Resources

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## **Serving a Growing Community in Northeast Arkansas:**

### **The Hispanic Center / El Centro Hispano**

**311 West Huntington Avenue**

**Jonesboro, Arkansas**

**by Anne McGee**

As one of the fastest growing regions in the state, the population of Jonesboro, Arkansas, and the surrounding area, has increased by well over 20% since the year 2000. A notable part of this growth has been in the city's Hispanic population, which has come to represent a significant sector of the community. Located in Jonesboro, The Hispanic Center / El Centro Hispano is a community-based nonprofit organization that works to improve the quality of life of Hispanics living in Northeast Arkansas by offering a variety of related services for this group. The center is a United Way member agency and receives grants and assistance from a number of both local and national organizations, including the City of Jonesboro, the Craighead County Community Foundation, and the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation.

The Hispanic Center was founded in 1997 by Sister Elaine Willett as an outreach program of the Hispanic Ministry of Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church in Jonesboro. Originally named The Catholic Hispanic Center, the organization, which was located at 308 West Monroe Street, grew out of Sister Elaine's work serving the Hispanic population both in Jonesboro, and in the five surrounding counties of Northeast Arkansas. At the time, there were an estimated 300 Hispanics living in the Jonesboro area. Sister Elaine, who continues to serve as a board member, was the center's original director and, together with volunteers, provided multiple services to this community.

In 2004, it was decided to separate the center from the Hispanic Ministry at Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church in order to better serve the diverse needs of Hispanics in Jonesboro, whose population had grown to an estimated 3,500 individuals. The new nonprofit, non-denominational organization was renamed Hispanic Community Services Center, Inc. (HCSI) and was relocated to a newly purchased facility at 311 West Huntington Avenue in downtown Jonesboro. Sister Elaine Willett continued to direct the new center until 2005 when Gina Gomez, the organization's current Executive Director, accepted the position. Despite its change in name, over the years HCSI continued to be known simply as The Hispanic Center or El Centro Hispano by most people in the region, and in September 2017 this popular moniker will become the organization's new official name.

According to Gina Gomez, the Hispanic population of Jonesboro, which she estimates to be around 6,000, has changed significantly since the center's founding in 1997. While originally it was comprised mostly of recent immigrants and migrants, today the Hispanic population in Jonesboro represents an established, and increasingly bilingual, community made up principally of young families. Thus, the services and the programs that the center offers have evolved to meet the community's changing needs. This is reflected in their vision statement that one finds on a bilingual banner in the center's reception area: "One Community, One family. Una comunidad, una familia." In this way, the Hispanic Center seeks to improve the quality of life of the families it serves, while empowering them to be productive members in the larger community of Jonesboro.

In order to achieve this vision, the Hispanic Center is staffed by volunteers, as well by a full-time staff made up of an office assistant, finance director, coordinator of educational



Artist's rendering of the new Hispanic Center scheduled to open in September 2017.  
Courtesy of the Hispanic Center.

programs, and executive director. Additionally, the center has several full-time AmeriCorps VISTA and DeltaCorps members who work at the center. Many of the most in demand services are basic social services that are typically provided for a minimal fee or a donation. These include services such as providing identification cards, interpreting services for medical and legal appointments, as well as translating and notarizing documents. The center also provides clients with referrals in housing, employment and health matters, assists men in registering for Selective Service, and accommodates clients in need of other types of support or counseling. Several times a year the center helps bring the Mobile Mexican Consulate of Little Rock to Jonesboro, which provides passports, consular IDs, and other essential services to Mexican nationals living in Northeast Arkansas. This is an invaluable service for these individuals, especially those who may not be able to travel to the consulate in Little Rock. The center also

offers legal services to its clients. Ariel J. Snyder, Esq., an attorney at the Jonesboro law firm of Womack Phelps Puryear Mayfield & McNeil, provides free and low cost legal assistance by appointment at the center on Monday afternoons. Ms. Snyder, who is a 2008 graduate of Arkansas State University, Jonesboro (ASU) and earned her law degree in 2013 from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock William H. Bowen School of law, first volunteered at the center in 2006 when she was a student at ASU. Currently, Ms. Snyder sees 12-15 clients a month on average, most of whom she helps with immigration issues.

In addition to social and legal services, one of the principal goals of the Hispanic Center is to provide its clients, and the larger Jonesboro community, with educational opportunities and cultural events that will improve their quality of life, prepare their youth for the future, and promote cultural understanding through community involvement. Throughout the year the

center offers both free and low cost educational programs both on and off site, which are specifically geared towards the particular needs of the Hispanic community in Jonesboro, such as citizenship classes, English as a Second Language classes, and computer classes. In the fall of 2016, the center created the Northeast Arkansas Hispanic Professional Network in an effort to reach out to professional and college-educated Hispanics in the area who may not use other services provided by the center. The group, which meets quarterly, invites speakers to present on specific topics of interest, and provides networking opportunities for its members.

Education is a vital part of the center's mission, and each year the Hispanic Center, together with ASU offers two scholarships worth up to \$250 per semester to qualifying students of Hispanic origin currently enrolled at ASU. In addition to these programs, the center also routinely offers

Spanish classes for both children and adults at its facility, and arranges additional classes off site in partnership with other organizations. For example, last spring the Hispanic Center partnered with the NYIT College of Osteopathic Medicine on the Jonesboro campus of ASU to offer a series of Spanish classes for its medical students. The Hispanic Center similarly worked with the Paragould Police Department to provide an eight-week Spanish course at the Paragould Police Station for its officers. Such programs work to both enhance how these professionals will serve the Hispanic population of the region, and to strengthen their relationships with this community.

Perhaps the most important educational program offered by the center is its After School Bilingual Learning Program, which is popularly known as "La escolita." In this program, which serves 34 children in grades K-8, participants receive transportation to the center where from 3:30-6:00 p.m. they receive tutoring and homework assistance. The program especially focuses on improving reading, speaking, writing, and spelling in the English language. According to the center's director, Gina Gomez, the primary goal of the after school program is to "fill in the gaps" in the education of its participants, whose learning needs are often not sufficiently ad-

ressed in school alone. Thus, the program works as a team with both parents and the particular school in order to meet the needs of the child. Many of the participants in the program are English Language Learners (ELLs), that is students whose first language is not English. ELL students often benefit from



Members of the Paragould Police Department participating in a Spanish course for Law Enforcement. Photo courtesy of the Hispanic Center.

this type of program as local school districts often find it difficult to meet the unique challenges faced by ELLs. In August of 2016, the program began working with undergraduate students from the Department of Communication Disorders at ASU in a program known as the Language and Literacy Project. ASU students involved in the project were enrolled in a new course entitled, "Multicultural Issues in Communication Disorders" offered by Dr. Christina Akbari, Assistant Professor of Communication Disorders at ASU. As a part of the class, students were required to provide between 10 and 15 hours of service to the after school program. In total, the students logged over 600 hours of

volunteer service. In August, they administered standardized assessments to the children in the after school program in order to determine their specific needs in terms of language and literacy skills. The students then designed specific programs to address the children's primary areas of weakness, and in the spring, standardized test-

that specifically target Hispanic youth. In 2015, the center partnered with the Junior Auxiliary of Jonesboro to launch Girl's Enrichment, a free program that matches female students in grades 7-9 with women who serve as mentors and positive role models, and who accompany them on monthly activities and outings throughout the



Students participating in the center's After School Bilingual Program.  
Photo courtesy of the Hispanic Center.

ing was again administered in order to measure any changes. Dr. Akbari describes the project as a win, win situation that benefited both her students and the children in the program. The data collected, and ultimately analyzed by graduate students in the department, indicates that the children made significant improvements in several areas, and Dr. Akbari's students reported that the project was a rewarding experience. According to Dr. Akbari, one student reported that "the Hispanic Center seemed like home for the children." The Department of Communications Disorders at ASU plans to continue its work with the Hispanic Center during the 2017-2018 school year. Collaborations such as the Language and Literacy project allow the Hispanic Center to create new and innovative programs in order to better serve their clients, and ultimately the community.

In addition to the after school program, the Hispanic Center offers a variety of programs

school year. For the 2017-2018 school year, Girl's Enrichment has been expanded to include high school students as well. Another important new program introduced in September of 2016 was the Hispanic Emerging Leaders Program or H.E.L.P., which was organized through a pilot program with Jonesboro High School. Ten students successfully completed the eight monthly meetings of this leadership-training program, whose purpose is to introduce Hispanic youth to Hispanic professionals and other leaders in the area so that they may learn from their experiences. The H.E.L.P graduates participated in a wide variety of activities and service projects, including visits to local factories, the ASU Bioscience Institute, the Jonesboro Fire Department, Saint Bernard's Medical Center, and meetings with local government leaders. This fall, the program will be expanded to include high school students from other school districts.

As the Hispanic population of Northeast Arkansas continues to grow, so too does the work of the Hispanic Center. In order to meet the expanding needs of this growing community, the center broke ground on a new facility in August of 2016, which should be completed by September 2017. Located at 211 Vandyne

the year for fundraising, and to begin offering cooking and nutrition classes. The center will also have adequate space to host the Mexican Mobile Consulate of Little Rock on site.

The Hispanic Center publishes a biweekly bilingual newsletter, *La Ventana*, which includes important information for the Hispanic



First graduating class of the H.E.L.P program with center director Gina Gomez.  
Photo courtesy of the Hispanic Center.

Street in Jonesboro, the new building will provide the center with approximately 5,000 square feet of space, or roughly double the size of the current center. The new, modern facility will include larger meeting and classroom spaces, a computer lab, a commercial kitchen, and office space. This new center will allow for more students to participate in the after school program, and for increased educational offerings. The Ritter Family Endowment awarded the center a Digital Literacy and Public Education Grant that will provide new computers for the new lab. The addition of a commercial kitchen will allow the center to produce the tamales and other products they sell throughout

community, including current events at the center. *La Ventana* is available at Mexican restaurants and stores in Jonesboro. Information is also available on the center's Facebook page "Centro Hispano en Jonesboro" or follow the center on Twitter, Centro Hispano JBoro @JHCSI. The Hispanic Center is open Mon., Tues., Thurs. from 1:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m., Wed. and Fri. from 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., and Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. For more information visit their website at <http://www.jhcsi.org> or contact the center at (870) 931-1884 or [info@jhcsi.org](mailto:info@jhcsi.org). ▲▼▲