

By Adam Strunk

Navigating a new country, culture, bureaucratic system and language is no easy task.

Sal Lujano Jr. said he watched his family do it firsthand when they came to Newton from Mexico.

“When we first came here, we didn’t have a bilingual person to go to with many things,” he said. “My dad had to figure it out all on his own.”

He said it doesn’t have to be that way anymore. He, along with seven other professionals in the community, have been working to create a group named “Latinos Unidos.”

The group, with members fluent in Spanish and English, aims to help Spanish speakers in the city navigate a world that’s primarily in English. That might mean putting them in touch with services or providing help setting up a bank account or getting a loan.

Lujano, a loan officer at People’s Bank and Trust said his experience growing up and, in his job, drove home the need for such an organization.

“Speaking to other people it wasn’t just financing,” he said. “I got tired of seeing Google Translate documents floating around.”

Daniela Rivas, who is the City Manager, is also part of the group. One of the goals she stated when coming to the city was to find ways of bringing more people and community members to the table and have them represented and participate in the process.

“Our vision is empowering, advocating and celebrating Latinos to achieve their full potential,” she said of Latinos Unidos.

Rivas said initially they’re working to explain what they’re doing and looking to recruit partners and funds to help finance a community needs assessment focusing on the city’s Latino population.

U.S. Census data puts the Latino population at 18 percent in the city of Newton. The U.S. World and News Report lists USD-373’s student population as 28.5 percent Hispanic/Latino.

The Census estimates that 6.9 percent of the city’s residents speak Spanish as their primary language when at home.

The state’s Latino population increased by 25 percent from 2010 to 2020 and Latinos now account for 13 percent of Kansans.

For context, the state’s population, as a whole grew 2.9 percent over the same period.

According to Census data, 7.8 percent of Kansans speak Spanish in their homes.

Rivas said that it’s possible the Census underestimated the populations, taking place during COVID and with some in the community apprehensive about responding.

She explained the assessment could provide better answers to the population question, as well as provide a better understanding of the barriers to success experienced by the Spanish-speaking community. An example would be something as simple as a lack of transportation or a car she said.

With more data, the group can then more effectively target those barriers.

“If you can help someone standing on their own two feet, they’re not using other resources to do so,” Lujano said. “We want them to succeed and provide for themselves.”

Rivas pointed out that Latinos own five million businesses nationwide in the United States and are responsible for \$800 billion in the nation’s gross domestic product. The numbers were reported in Forbes Magazine.

Lujano said in many cases the city’s Spanish-speaking population could bring more dollars to Newton than currently spent.

He explained that with a lack of local Spanish media, many get their information from Spanish-speaking radio stations in Wichita and then drive down to the city to get services from those on the radio who advertise.

He said any service needed is available in Newton, it just has to be communicated. He said the group can help make the connections. Members include Alex Carbajal, Alex Medrano, Johanna Castillo, Veronica Mosqueda, Jonathan Chavez and Andy Ortiz, along with Rivas and Lujano.

Lujano said the group represents a wide array of experience from banking to real estate, to health care and insurance.

Rivas said the goal was eventually to incorporate the organization as a non-profit and secure sustainable funding sources to help serve the Latino community in Newton.

They’re not reinventing the wheel. A similar group – Spanish Speakers of Emporia exists and is successful.

There’s also the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce in Wichita. Chavez is involved with that chamber and working to help Latinos Unidos form.

Lujano said Newton isn’t quite big enough for its own chamber, but the group can serve a similar role.

Lujano said with the amount of bilingual people in Newton, the city is different from when his family arrived. He said there was a generation where people didn’t learn Spanish as it was a mark of being different. Now it’s a mark

of pride of one's heritage.

He said the group can serve the city's Spanish population and be a model for other communities.

"The goal is to change the conversation," Lujano said. "We want to be examples for the next people coming up."