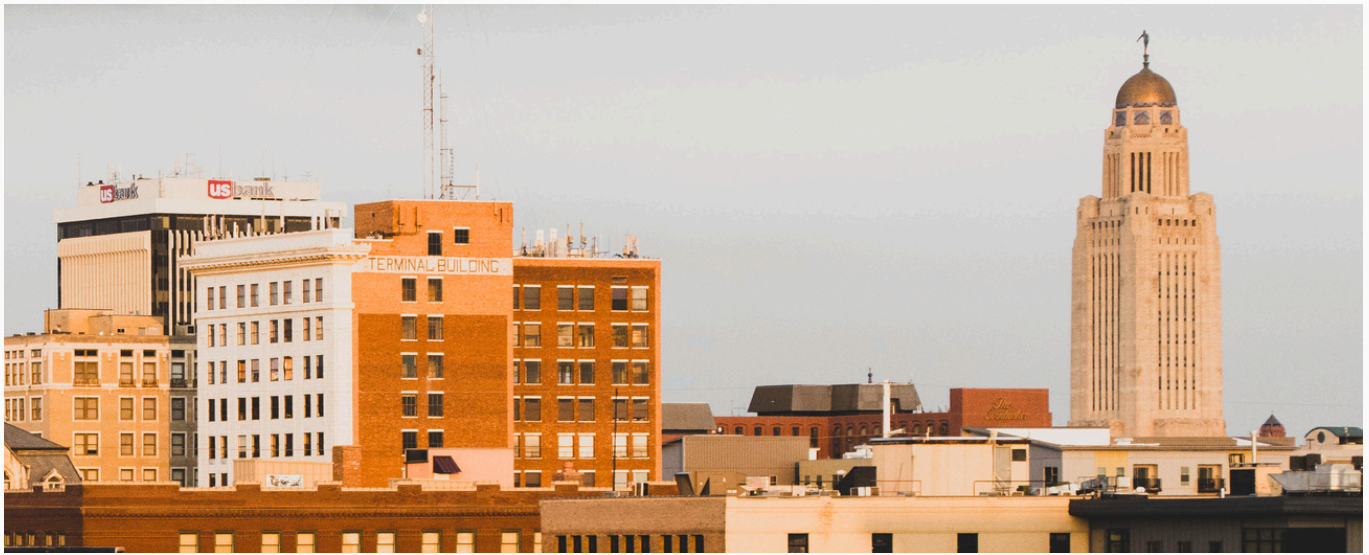


# Spring Newsletter 2025

The official newsletter of The Nebraska Commission on Latino-Americans



## Thank you for joining us

Dear Readers,

Thank you for taking the time to connect with us and for your continued interest in our work. Your engagement means a great deal to us, and we're truly grateful for the opportunity to share our journey with you.

In this edition, we're excited to give you a closer look at the projects and progress that have been driving our mission forward. Whether you've reached out with questions, offered feedback, or simply taken a moment to learn more about what we do — your involvement plays a vital role in our growth and impact.

We hope this newsletter gives you insight, inspiration, and a deeper understanding of how we're working to make a difference.

With appreciation,  
The Nebraska Commission on Latino-Americans

What's inside our latest issue:

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**COMMISSION INFORMATION-**  
**Who we are, how we started.**

**DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE-** Read  
**Executive Director Maria Arriaga's remarks.**

**WHAT WE'VE DONE-** Learn  
**about several different initiatives and events we have participated in.**

**COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT-**  
**Learn about community leader Valeria Rodriguez.**

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*Messages from  
our leadership*

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## Message from our Executive Director

WRITTEN BY MARIA ARRIAGA

We are living through complex times. Social, economic, and political tensions across the country have created fear, division, and deep uncertainty. The realities of many individuals, especially those who migrate in search of safety, dignity, and opportunity, are often overlooked or misunderstood. And while these circumstances are difficult, they also call us back to what matters most: coming together as a community, strengthening our empathy, and building collective pathways toward wellbeing.

At the Nebraska Latino American Commission, we understand that no one leaves their home, their roots, or their country by choice. Migration is often an act of survival, a deeply human decision. Seeking a better life, protecting one's children, escaping violence or poverty should not be met with rejection, but with compassion and solidarity. Understanding this is the first step toward building a more just society.

Today, our message is clear: we must stand together as a Latino community. We must stay informed, stay connected, and support one another across generations, professions, and experiences. From the children and youth who represent our future to the elders who carry our stories and strength, every one of us has a role to play. It is time to reach out, lift each other up, and recognize that our differences make us stronger, not weaker.

We cannot afford to turn away from those in our community still living without basic protections, still facing discrimination, still carrying the weight of uncertainty. Our responsibility is to lead with empathy and act with purpose. Only by working in unity and extending a hand to others can we truly progress toward a future of equity and dignity for all.

The Commission is deeply committed to this mission. Our work is to serve the community with respect and without distinction of politics, beliefs, or affiliations. We believe in the power of collaboration, in dignity as a guiding principle, and in the love we hold for our people as the reason behind all we do. Now more than ever, we must look at one another with empathy and recognize that the wellbeing of one depends on the wellbeing of all. For the most vulnerable, for our children, for our families, we must walk forward together. Our future will only be possible through unity. As always, we remain open to listening, to working together, and to building the bridges our communities need. Because only together, we move forward.

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## Message from our Chair

WRITTEN BY MARIA WHITMORE

Habemus Papam! In the year of hope, we ponder amazed and with tremendous joy at having had two influential Latinoamericans as successors of Peter back-to-back, whether you are a universal Chirstian catholic or not the whole world was in expectation. Tremendous excitement overjoyed the world after the message of Leo XIV included a message in Spanish revealing his tender heart for all but in a special way for his Diocese of Chiclayo, Peru. Our spiritual development goes hand in hand with the material, seeking opportunities of dignified work, dignified living and secure conditions for our family, many of us move to other countries in this quest. As humans, seeking these common ideals for our own, we encounter opportunities to serve others in self-giving. Leo XIV, a man who is a Midwesterner, of immigrant ascent, gives us his inspiring life as witness his very life has personified dedication and gift of self for many years. His missionary work truly brings each of us to reflect on how each of us is also on a mission, in each of our duties and responsibilities, in our everyday work. As Latinoamericans in the world and specifically in Nebraska how does our mission call to be more caring? How are we called to not look for what my neighbor is doing wrong but to what I can be doing better? Further, how can we create synergies to help one another cooperate to join win-win opportunities?

Each of us has many talents and qualities to bring forth to make our Nebraska better every day. The Nebraska Commission on Latino-americans is driven by this vocation of service, from assisting someone over the phone to bringing the needs of Nebraskans to the the legislature, attending forums, welcoming city celebrations, young professionals summit, as well as being conducive to the educational and professional development of new generations of Nebraskans, we strive every day to assist and bring together practical solutions. Some receive recognition and honors, and some other unsung heroes do not; yet all keep working diligently dedicating themselves into the mission. Each of us is unique, irreplaceable and needed in each of our vocations of service. Let's continue to strive together for true service to bring together peace and hope.

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*What we've done*

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## LB 299 Testimony

### ADVOCATING FOR UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFITS

On February 10, our Executive Director, Maria Arriaga, delivered powerful testimony at the Nebraska State Capitol in support of Legislative Bill 299 (LB 299)—a crucial piece of legislation introduced by Senator Teresa Ibach aimed at extending unemployment benefits to all work-authorized individuals in Nebraska, including DACA and Temporary Protected Status (TPS) recipients.

In her remarks, Arriaga emphasized the urgent need for equity in the state's unemployment insurance system. "These are individuals who pay taxes, contribute to our communities, and have earned the right to the same protections as their peers," she stated. Her testimony echoed the voices of countless Nebraskans who believe that no one should be left behind simply because of their immigration status.

Nebraska is currently the only state that excludes DACA and TPS holders from unemployment benefits, even when they lose their jobs through no fault of their own. Arriaga stood alongside fellow advocates from Nebraska Appleseed and the Center for Immigrant and Refugee Advancement (CIRA), calling attention to the critical role immigrant workers play in Nebraska's economy—and the unfair gaps that leave them vulnerable in times of need.

While the bill faced some opposition from state officials citing concerns about federal conformity, the testimony from Arriaga and others served as a compelling reminder of the human impact behind this policy. Their voices helped underscore a growing movement across Nebraska to ensure fairness and support for all workers.

However, LB299 did not progress beyond the committee stage. On March 13, 2025, Sen. Ibach withdrew her sponsorship of the bill. Later that day, Sen. Machaela Cavanaugh filed a motion to indefinitely postpone the bill, which was accepted by the Legislature. Consequently, LB299 did not advance to a vote.

*"Nebraska is currently the only state that excludes DACA and TPS holders from unemployment benefits"*



## Crete welcoming city celebration

### CELEBRATING A MAJOR MILESTONE FOR NEBRASKA

On Friday, February 28th, the City of Crete made history by becoming the first city in Nebraska to officially earn the Welcoming City certification—a significant recognition of the city’s ongoing commitment to inclusion, equity, and belonging for all residents.

Certified Welcoming is a formal designation for cities and counties that have created policies and programs reflecting their values and commitment to immigrant inclusion. To celebrate this landmark achievement, Commissioner Marilyn Schacht and the City of Crete organized a community-wide event that brought together residents, local leaders, and organizations from across the region. The atmosphere was filled with excitement, pride, and unity as Crete embraced its new role as a statewide leader in fostering a welcoming environment for everyone, regardless of background or identity.

As part of this momentous celebration several community organizations, including the Nebraska Commission on Latino-Americans, were honored to participate by hosting booths, connecting with attendees, and sharing in the collective joy of this milestone. The event served not only as a celebration but also as an opportunity to deepen relationships, showcase local resources, and highlight the power of community collaboration.

A special highlight of the event was a heartfelt address by Maria Arriaga, Executive Director of the Commission, who shared words of congratulations and support on behalf of the Commission. Her remarks underscored the importance of recognizing and uplifting cities like Crete that are leading by example in their commitment to diversity and inclusion. As Nebraska’s trailblazer in the Welcoming City movement, Crete has set a high standard, and a hopeful tone, for other cities to follow. This certification marks the start of a new chapter rooted in shared values, mutual respect, and a vision for a more inclusive future.

*“Crete made history by  
becoming the first  
Certified Welcoming City  
in Nebraska”*





## Know your rights forum

### EDUCATING PEOPLE ON THEIR RIGHTS

The Nebraska Commission on Latino-Americans held a public forum on February 7, 2025, aimed at informing and empowering the local Latino community about the fundamental rights afforded to everyone in the United States, regardless of immigration status. Held at Chona's restaurant, the event brought together families, workers, and local leaders in an open dialogue about civil rights, legal protections, and available resources. The Commission emphasized the importance of understanding that all individuals—regardless of their background or immigration status—have basic rights under the U.S. Constitution, such as protection from discrimination, the right to due process, and the freedom of speech and assembly.

Executive Director Maria Arriaga shared valuable information on what to do during encounters with law enforcement or immigration officials. Attendees received guidance on how to protect themselves and their families, including knowing the right to remain silent, the right to an attorney, and the importance of not signing documents without understanding them. These conversations were presented in both English and Spanish to ensure accessibility for everyone in the audience. The event concluded with a call to action—reminding attendees that knowledge is power, and that no matter their immigration status, they deserve dignity, respect, and the full protection of their human and civil rights.



## New office

### NEW LOCATION SAME MISSION

The Nebraska Commission on Latino-Americans has temporarily relocated its offices within the Nebraska State Capitol due to ongoing renovations in the Capitol's iconic tower. As part of a major restoration project aimed at preserving the structural integrity and historical significance of the tower, several offices—including the Commission—have been moved to new locations for the duration of the work.

While the Commission was previously located on the 6th floor of the Capitol, staff can now be found on the 2nd and 3rd floors, in offices 2404 and 340 respectively. The move is expected to last approximately two years, aligning with the estimated timeline for the completion of the tower renovations. Though this is a temporary change, the Commission remains fully operational and continues to serve the public from its new location.

The Capitol renovation is a significant project that reflects the state's commitment to maintaining one of its most important landmarks. Once the work is completed, the Commission plans to return to its original 6th-floor office space in the newly restored tower.

Community members are encouraged to visit the Commission in its temporary location or reach out by phone or email with any questions. Office hours and contact information remain the same.

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*Short highlights*

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## Forced migration symposium

Marketing and Communications Specialist Ricardo Alcala attended the UNL forced Migration Symposium. The Symposium focused on educating industry professionals on the causes and effects of forced migration as well as providing a space for professionals to discuss their communities and the issues affecting them. This symposium offered the Commission a fantastic opportunity to grow our network and interact with other community focused organizations to learn how they have solved a wide variety of situations affecting their communities.



## Community in motion capitol tour

Commissioner Marilyn Schacht brought the Community in Motion leadership group to the Capitol to meet with our office staff and learn more about our day-to-day operations. Executive Director Maria Arriaga was more than glad to answer any and all questions that these bright young minds threw at her. During our tour with this group, we took a brief pause to meet with some incredible state representatives. Senators Margo Juarez and Tom Brandt were kind enough to step off of the Legislative floor to meet with these future leaders and answer their questions. We are confident in the bright future that these Latinas have ahead of them and look forward to seeing what they accomplish.



## Support for Head Start

On May 6<sup>th</sup> we attended the Head Start rally at the State Capitol. Head Start is a vital initiative that provides crucial early childhood education, health, and family support services to children from low-income families. These early interventions help close the achievement gap by preparing children for school both academically and socially. By supporting these vital programs we help break the cycle of poverty that many of our families face.



## Meeting with the DMV

Executive Director Maria Arriaga and Crete Commissioner Marilyn Schacht recently held a productive and solution-oriented meeting with DMV Director Rhonda Lahm to address challenges faced by members of the Latino community when seeking a driver's license or state identification. This meaningful conversation focused on ensuring that the diverse backgrounds and unique circumstances of our community are understood, respected, and met with policies rooted in equity and dignity.

Director Lahm and her team were receptive to feedback and committed to working collaboratively to improve accessibility and communication. Together, we explored potential solutions that could streamline the identification process, reduce barriers, and improve the overall experience for Latino residents across the state.

Collaborative efforts like this not only lead to tangible improvements but also strengthen the relationship between public institutions and the communities they serve. We are proud to be part of a forward-thinking, inclusive Nebraska. One where everyone has the opportunity to be seen, heard, and supported.



## YP Summit

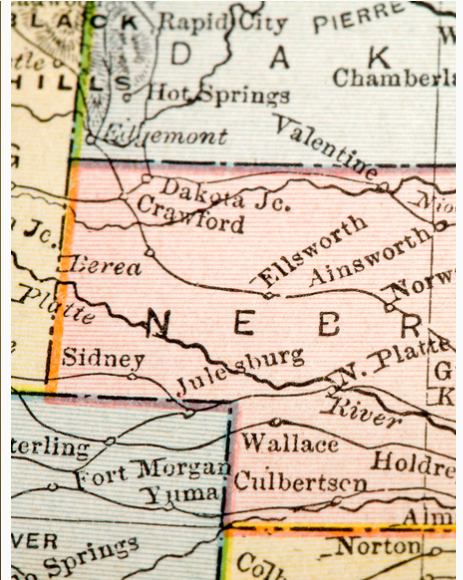
Our Marketing and Communications Specialist Ricardo Alcala recently attended the Young Professionals (YP) Summit in Omaha, Nebraska's largest conference for emerging leaders. The summit provided an exciting opportunity to engage with innovative thinkers, gain fresh insights on leadership and community impact, and connect with professionals from across the state.

By participating in workshops and discussions focused on equity, storytelling, and strategic communication, our team member brought back valuable ideas to enhance how we share our mission and connect with the communities we serve. We're proud to invest in professional development that not only strengthens our team but also helps amplify our message across Nebraska. Attending events like the YP Summit keeps us inspired, informed, and better equipped to serve our diverse community. We look forward to applying these new tools and perspectives to our ongoing outreach and engagement efforts.

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# *Community Spotlight*

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## Valeria Rodriguez

### COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT

Valeria Rodriguez immigrated from Mexico to Mitchell, Nebraska, when she was five years old. She became the first and only person in her family to pursue higher education. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Spanish and Political Science from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and a Master of Public Administration degree from the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Valeria co-founded Empowering Families in 2018, driven by a passion to advocate and build collective power within her community. She currently serves as Empowering Families' Executive Director. Her commitment to community empowerment and advocacy defines her impactful leadership.

Empowering Families was founded in 2018, in Scottsbluff, Nebraska, by a group of Hispanic, immigrant, and Native American community members. Since our inception our mission has evolved to truly reflect the work the organization is doing. Empowering Families works to build a community of belonging through education, civic participation, and bridge building in the Panhandle of Nebraska, with a vision of fostering an equitable, inclusive, and strong community by harnessing the collective power of all people.

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