

Local firms reach out to Latino population

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WAUKESHA - Along Main Street in Waukesha stands a large billboard written only in Spanish.

Although the words on display may be unrecognizable to most, the signs sends the message that the Waukesha Latino community is a booming market.

As the demographic grows, so does the local business landscape catering to their needs.

Nola Hitchcock Cross, managing attorney of the Cross Law Firm in Milwaukee, is one business owner taking notice of the expanding population in the county.

The firm will expand to the Waukesha area on Nov. 20 and will specialize in supporting the Latino community as well as all other ethnicities.

"Waukesha is a very dynamic area," Hitchcock Cross said. "We're moving our service here because of the demand in a number of areas."

The firm focuses on employment, consumer and business law and litigation and also handles employment and housing discrimination and civil rights issues. Cross Law employs two Spanish-speaking attorneys.

"The Hispanic community in Waukesha is underserved in these legal areas," Hitchcock Cross said.

Hitchcock Cross said the population is less likely to pick up the phone and contact an attorney in part because many do not understand how the legal system operates.

As the Latino population increases, Hitchcock Cross said she has seen "a big need for legal assistance in small business and large businesses."

As part of an outreach pro-

gram, the firm offers educational programs and seminars and works in conjunction with the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and the Small Business Association to teach Latinos about basic legal rights and business ownership.

The sessions are open to the public and include Spanish-language versions of most programs.

The Waukesha location will include space to hold the seminars whereas the Milwaukee location does not.

"This is a community that is growing and other businesses are paying attention to that," Hitchcock Cross said.

Meeting needs

Businesses such as Super Amigo Foods, 1427 E. Racine Ave. in Waukesha, have catered to the Latino community for several years. Owner John Brucker said he has noticed an increase in the number of Latino customers he serves.

"We see new customers every day," Brucker said.

The grocer offers specialty and authentic Mexican foods and includes a full-service bakery, deli, and meat section.

The grocer employs about 20 bilingual Hispanic employees and offers services for the Latino population like check cashing, money wire service, Mexico Express mail service, and phone cards.

"We're more than just a grocery store," Brucker said.

Brucker said the store attracts people from all parts of the county.

La Casa de Esperanza Executive Director Anselmo Villarreal said the Latino community still lacks the proper representation within several markets in Waukesha however.

Insurance, accounting, and banking are all areas of business that have the opportunity to capture a percentage of the Latino market, Villarreal said.

"There is a huge, huge gap," Villarreal said. "They don't have enough bilingual agents in the

area." Villarreal said although La Casa encourages Latinos to work with professionals who can help advance their business, he thinks several sectors could take a more aggressive approach at targeting the community.

Obstacles

Axel Candelaria, an attorney with Cross Law Firm, said he commonly encounters Latinos who do business as they would in their homelands.

"They trust that the other person is going to do what they say. That's how they are used to doing business," said Candelaria.

Candelaria specializes in business transactions and litigation. About 35 percent of his client base is Hispanic.

"The biggest obstacle that I encounter when it comes to under-representation is that people don't really understand the system," Candelaria said.

Part of the frustration faced by many Latino business owners is not knowing where to go or what questions to ask, Candelaria added.

"The daily responsibilities of owning a business take priority over other concerns," he said about Latino business owners who establish a business locally.

Asked if he has noticed an increase in business growth, Candelaria said, "I know for a fact that it is growing."

From a legal standpoint, Candelaria said one of the biggest obstacles faced by the demographic is establishing the proper protection for their businesses.

Several Latino business owners only establish their business with practical considerations in mind, Candelaria said.

Such practices as formalizing the business as an S-corporation or a limited liability company or working with an insurance agent or accountant are issues about which the firm hopes to educate the Latino business community.

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