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## **IMMIGRANT MENTAL HEALTH SUMMIT INFORMS AND ENERGIZES COMMUNITY TO EFFECTIVELY ADDRESS NEEDS**

ELKHART, IN, April 2024 – On April 10, the Northern Indiana Hispanic Health Coalition (NIHHC), in partnership with Mental Health Awareness of Michiana (MHAM), held a successful Immigrant Mental Health Summit to raise awareness of the unique mental health needs of Hispanic immigrants in the region, highlight immigrant voices, and discuss effective, culturally competent approaches to promoting mental health and well-being.

The event brought together over 150 people, with a full house at the Elkhart Health & Aquatics conference space and virtual attendance. Attendees included mental health providers, researchers, Hispanic community leaders, program participants, and representatives from community organizations, schools, healthcare, and law enforcement. Simultaneous interpretation was provided from English to Spanish throughout the event, promoting an inclusive environment.

Saulo Padilla, the Migration Education National Program Coordinator for Mennonite Central Committee, gave the keynote address. He shared his personal immigrant experience, which illustrated the journey of migrants, who often experience trauma and need to feel safe to be able to thrive mentally and physically. “Are we a safe community?” Mr. Padilla asked, not just for people arriving today, but also for the local community. “The better the local community feels safe, the better it is equipped to receive newcomers,” he said.

Margarita Alegria, PhD, Chief of the Disparities Research Unit at Massachusetts General Hospital and a Professor at Harvard Medical School, provided the context of state and national data, emphasizing the clear crisis in adolescent mental health and the elevated risks for minoritized youth. She presented her study conducted in northern Indiana among Mexican-origin youths, in partnership with University of Notre Dame. Their results have shown that discrimination impacts mental health, including depression and anxiety, and poor sleep outcomes. Dr. Alegria highlighted how communities can build capacity to improve mental health outcomes for Hispanic youth through systemic interventions, family engagement, and school-based mental health services. She pointed out the importance of providing consistent intervention and follow-up on a regular basis to immigrants who arrive with trauma, an idea aligned with NIHHC’s efforts to bring social workers to provide individualized support sessions for immigrant youth in schools (on average four per student) to share their stories with a trusted professional.

NIHHC’s Executive Director, Liliana Quintero, who has over 20 years of experience in research and program development working with Hispanics in northern Indiana, echoed Dr. Alegria’s view of the mental health crisis as it affects youth in Elkhart County. She discussed a study conducted by NIHHC

with researchers from Ball State University on NIHHC's youth Bienvenido program, a mental health education program focused on acculturation strategies that help new immigrants navigate their new school and community systems. Researchers identified key stressors impacting new immigrant middle and high school youth in Goshen and Elkhart Community Schools, with the top three being problems with education, loud noises, and isolation. Ms. Quintero underscored how Hispanic youth are clearly facing stressors that are triggered by trauma, on top of all of the tensions that come with adapting to a new culture.

Provider and community-school panels offered perspectives on immigrant mental health from those working and living in the community. Speakers explained how the challenges and barriers that immigrants face are not just about language, but also about acculturation. There are nuances of nationality and generational differences among Hispanics, but family is always a priority. Many youths, for example, carry the responsibility of economically supporting their family in their home countries.

In the closing remarks, Nancy Rodriguez-Lora, a clinical therapist with a practice in Goshen who also works with youth in NIHHC's Bienvenido program, reiterated what all speakers stated throughout the day—that youth immigrants are individuals who are here, in the community, and need to be embraced to enable their success.

“These kids are our kids,” she said, “and we can meet them where they are, provide them space where they are respected and can share their stories, and be intentional to highlight their strengths and support them when they are hurting. I urge you to commit to helping them thrive.”

Attendees left with hope after the day's conversation at the Summit. Several commented that they were inspired by the large group coming together to work in tandem to provide resources and services to address mental health needs among immigrants.

“From my perspective, it really opened my eyes!” said Ed Bassler, Executive Director of United Health Services. “I was encouraged to see and hear great stories of all that has been and is being accomplished. I was even more energized and enlightened in all that still needs to be done.”

“We are so pleased that more than 40 organizations gave priority to attending the summit and discussing this sensitive issue at the national and local levels,” said Quintero. “The only way that we can move the needle is if all of us do our part to welcome community members. Acculturation takes time, and it's our goal through programs like Bienvenido for youth to shorten the process.”

For those who could not be present, the full summit schedule and recordings of all sessions can be accessed online at <https://nihhc.com/immigrant-mental-health-summit/>.

*The Northern Indiana Hispanic Health Coalition's mission is to improve the health and wellness of underserved communities by providing preventative health screenings, education, and advocacy with a primary focus on Hispanics.*

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