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Hispanic migration finally hits northern Appalachia

CHARLES TOWN, W.Va (AP) — Rosie Flores sells Spanish cookies, Mexican spices and international calling cards at Rincon Latino. Kindness comes free of charge.

When a quiet customer with the sniffles heads for the door, Flores stops him, presses a bag of chamomile into his hand and tells him to boil it for tea.

"It will make you feel better," she says in Spanish, shaking her head as he reaches for his pocket. "No, no charge."

For six months, Rincon Latino has flourished amid the antique shops, real estate offices and historic homes of Washington Street, the main avenue in a West Virginia town where times have begun to change.

Though their numbers remain small, Hispanics are now streaming into historically homogenous, overwhelmingly white West Virginia and other parts of northern Appalachia, including western Pennsylvania, southern New York and Ohio.

Economic opportunity here — in apple orchards, poultry plants, horse farms and construction — is starting to translate to diversity.

The migration happened years ago in the nation's urban centers and southern states, but it's been slower to reach this part of the country. When Flores arrived three years ago from Miami with her jockey husband and teenage son, she saw needs that weren't being met.

So Rincon Latino has become more than a store.

Flores collects donations for the poor. She lays out business cards for Spanish-speaking real estate agents. Her doors and windows bear flyers for churches and would-be employers. Sometimes, she takes people who can't speak English to doctors' appointment and the Division of Motor Vehicles.

"Get ready," she says, the afternoon sun filtering through a polyester portrait of Our Lady of Guadalupe. "In two more years, you will have a lot of Hispanics here."

Although Hispanics have surpassed blacks as the largest minority group nationwide, that's not the case in West Virginia and the other 12 states that comprise Appalachia, a 200,000-square-mile region stretching from southern New York to northern Mississippi.

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A September 2004 study by the Population Reference Bureau found that in this region, blacks still outnumber Hispanics, although Hispanics have fueled the growth since the 1990s.

Nearly half of Appalachia's 321,000 new residents since 2000 are minority, about 80,000 of them Latinos. And because so many are children or working-age adults, the study done for the Appalachian Regional Commission concludes that racial and ethnic diversity will only grow.

Without minority growth, West Virginia and some other states would have lost population between 1990 and 2000: The report found 211,000 new minority residents offset the loss of 47,000 whites in northern Appalachia.

Jeffrey S. Passel, senior research associate with the Pew Hispanic Center in Washington, D.C., says many southeastern states had virtually no immigrants just 15 or 20 years ago.

But once the arrival of immigrants begins, he says, "it draws on immigrants in other areas in the U.S. and eventually sets up strings in migration, usually back to Mexico."

Alicia Moreno was the only Hispanic student at Jefferson High School less than a decade ago.

"Today if you go into the schools, our brothers and sisters of Latino descent are everywhere," she says.

School district officials agree: The number of children enrolled in English as a Second Language classes has surged from fewer than two dozen in 2000 to almost 260 at the start of the current school year. Nearly 80% of them are Hispanic.

"The word of mouth is getting out that there are jobs here," says the now 26-year-old Moreno, who works for Telamon Corp. assisting migrant workers who begin to arrive in the state's Eastern Panhandle this time each year.

Moreno got her job because she was bilingual, and she worries about adults who don't learn English. That's part of the reason for the formation of the Eastern Panhandle Hispanic Advocacy Coalition, a new group determined to help educate the newest residents and improve their quality of life. In December, the first Hispanic Festival drew more than 400 people.

"It's very exciting, and now that I'm more involved, I want to see more Hispanic businesses," says Veronica Hall, a Martinsburg insurance agent and native Argentinean who caters to Spanish-speaking clients. "I want to see them succeed and see people be happy."

Real estate companies and banks have also started reaching out, advertising for bilingual employees.

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston also launched a full-time Hispanic ministry. Though the 2000 census found about 12,300 Hispanics across West Virginia, the church, which surveyed parishes in February, believes that figure is now at least 16,000.

"People who come here as migrants start staying," says the Rev. Carl Crump, who works with the diocese's Ministry for Hispanics. "They have a little bit of opportunity. They speak a little bit of English."

The church, he says, sometimes pairs Latinos with English-speaking volunteer partners, who help with social services and other needs. "That not only gives them a friendship with an Anglo, but helps meld them into the community as well."

Many Latinos now work in such industries as poultry processing, gambling, construction and

farming.

George Yetsook, a thoroughbred trainer for O'Sullivan Farms, says the Hispanic population grows as people working in the horse industry spread word to friends and family. At the Charles Town Races, many are taking jobs that few others want.

"It's a real problem finding local people — black, white, whatever — who are willing to work," Yetsook says. "The grooms here are very professional. It sounds like menial labor, but they're tending to half-million dollar horses."

Jockeys are the best paid at Charles Town, earning as much as \$10,000 a week, but exercise riders also do well, earning \$700 to \$800 a week.

"In the horse industry, if you're willing to work, to do the job and to be professional, it's unlimited the amount of money you can make," Yetsook says. Even those who groom the horses and muck the stalls can make enough to live on: Yetsook has a husband-and-wife team who made a combined \$44,000 last year.

But in a region where property values are rising, some are still left out.

Ruben Castellano has worked full time for three years as a hot walker at Charles Town, cooling the horses down after they run.

"The pay is all right," he says, but not enough for a home. He lives in an 8-by-8 tack room, where the walls are wood planks and the TV, space heater and mini refrigerator are coated with dust from the barn.

Affordable housing remains a critical need for Hispanic employees, says racetrack Chaplain Rick Mann.

"They go together and rent houses, sometimes to the dismay of their landlords," he says. "Or they find no housing at all."

In fast-growing Jefferson County, bordering even faster-growing Loudoun County, Va., there is little incentive to build apartment complexes or even modest single-family homes. People fleeing the congestion of Baltimore, Washington and northern Virginia have jacked up land values and turned countless acres of farmland into subdivisions with quarter- to half-million-dollar homes.

Passel, at the Pew Hispanic Center, says West Virginia should also brace itself for problems that some southeastern states have experienced with health care and education — institutions often unprepared for explosive growth.

"The economy generates a lot of jobs that basically don't pay enough for the people who are working in them to get health care," Passel says. "What happens then is the state and sometimes the local government end up, in essence, subsidizing the employers of these people."

Delfino Resendiz struggled when he left Mexico in 1992. With 11 siblings and no money for college, he planned to work in the United States for a year. He started out cooking in a Chinese restaurant.

But seven years later, he bought Grandma's Diner in downtown Charles Town, and today he's opening a pizza shop nearby. He learned about taxes, mortgages and insurance from people who wanted to help. He paid his immigration fines and became a U.S. citizen.

Now he wants to help other Hispanics. He urges them to acclimate, not isolate themselves from their new communities.

"If you never associate with the people around you," he says, "you'll never know the rules and how things work."

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