Latina Bridges: Sustaining Puentes in New Orleans

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Abstract: This case study details the history of Puentes New Orleans, a community organization for Latino-identified residents of the city, most specifically under the leadership of current Executive Director, Carolina Hernandez. This case provides sociological and political perspectives of Latina activism and leadership as well as the history of Latino immigration and consequent civic engagement. Latina activism has historically differentiated from Latino activism in that Latinas often participate in grassroots organizations instead of running for elected political positions. Despite Latina leadership in social and political efforts, Latina women face discrimination as leaders based on their gender, ethnicity, and identification as members of the Latino community. This discrimination, combined with specific characteristics of the Latino immigrant population in New Orleans, contributes to challenges faced by Latina leaders in community organizations like Puentes. Hernandez experienced these challenges firsthand while she led the organization through financial and structural crises. The latter half of this case recounts her efforts to reconstruct and reorganize *Puentes*, despite significant opposition to her leadership style and the decisions she made to streamline its operations. Hernandez's experience as Executive Director provides a concrete example of the challenges and triumphs encountered by a modern Latina leader seeking to create change in her community through grassroots efforts.

Introduction

The study of Latina activism and civic engagement in the United States has become increasingly relevant, as the general Latino population continues to grow and more Latinos utilize their political influence through electoral and non-electoral means, despite facing barriers to political involvement (e.g. voting) and action. Given limitations such as poverty, citizenship status, and some states' continual attempts to reinstate voter identification laws, many Latinos turn to grassroots, community-based organizations as their primary means for political activism. Despite encountering various modes of discrimination daily, the leaders of community organizations that provide resources to their constituents by partnering with local and federal organizations and services are often Latina. By serving in organizational leadership positions, Latinas utilize community and government networks to work toward social change. In this way, Latinas fulfill their vision of connection-based politics. This kind of civic engagement has become increasingly important in New Orleans, where a relatively new and growing Latino population began seeking resources and Latino-serving organizations in the years following Hurricane Katrina.

The story of *Puentes* New Orleans, a Latino-serving nonprofit organization, provides a salient example of the evolution of Latino activism in New Orleans, the challenges of engaging a population that faces many barriers to political activism, and the rise of Latina leadership in

politically active community organizations. This case study will outline the differences between Latino and Latina leadership and activism, the history of the most recent wave of Latino immigrants to New Orleans, and the story of *Puentes*' founding and development. This case concludes with *Puentes*' near collapse due to fiscal mismanagement and excessive programming as well as a strategy for moving forward.

Puentes has had several female leaders in the past few years, and it currently operates with an almost entirely female staff under the leadership of female Executive Director (E.D.), Carolina Hernandez. A longtime activist and leader in the New Orleans Latino community, Hernandez, as a board member, led *Puentes* through many challenges. Subsequently, Hernandez used those experiences to help restructure and strengthen *Puentes* as its E.D. Her story, as well as *Puentes*' renewed status as one of the most important Latino community organizations in New Orleans, make a salient case study through which to understand the ways Latinas lead and create change in their communities.

Latina versus Latino Activism

Latino political activism has been a popular topic for political candidates, news programs, journalists, and community leaders alike over the past few decades. As the Latino population in the United States continues to increase and concentrate in politically relevant states like California, Texas, and Florida, political actors have begun to understand the importance of engaging this community and recognizing their political demands. For reference, the Latino population in the U.S. has increased by 50% since 2000 (Brown 2014). Anna Brown and Mark Hugo Lopez of the Pew Research Center also found that nearly 30% of the country's Latino population is concentrated in 10 counties, the majority of which are in California, Texas, and Florida (2013). However, this population growth does not always translate into an increased number of votes, as Latinos actually have a fairly low voter turnout rate compared to the size of the population. In the 2012 presidential election, 48% of the Latino population voted, compared to 66.6% among African-Americans and 64.1% among Whites (Lopez, Gonzalex-Barrera and Gonzalez-Barrera 2013). This disparity is attributed to many factors limiting the Latino population including citizenship status, age of the eligible population, and access to political information. Therefore, Latino political activism is conceptualized differently than that of other minority groups given that these limitations direct their political efforts more toward civic engagement-oriented activism rather than electoral engagement (Bejarano 2014: Espino 2007).

If Latino activism must be conceptualized beyond electoral politics, Latina activism requires an even more profound degree of understanding. Latina activism, as a separate entity from Latino activism, has existed for centuries without specific recognition by academia or political analysts, but it gained attention and traction during the rise of social-protest movements in the late 20th century and the rise of Chicana and Latina feminist organizations in the 1970s (Sampaio 2013). Political literature understands Latinas as "three times oppressed" by sexism, racism, and norms within the Latino community that relegate them to specific roles. This 'tripartite oppression' inherently affects the way that Latinas engage politically in their own communities, providing a unique opportunity within Latino immigrant populations (Montoya, Hardy-Fanta, and Garcia 2000). In many immigrant families, the man may be the main source of income, but the woman is the center of the family, taking care of all the family's needs. This division of labor means that many Latina immigrant mothers, after arriving in the U.S., seek out governmental assistance or other social services and therefore have more direct contact with these organizations than their male counterparts.

Garcia and Marquez (2001) argue that women then transform these organizations and

resources into political assets and action. For example, the Mothers of East Los Angeles, an activist organization established in 1986, utilized their roles as mothers in their community and the social capital they had built through these roles to fight the construction of a prison in East Los Angeles. As immigrants serving as the main caretakers of their families, many of these women established connections with various local and state-level organizations. As mothers of both their families and communities, these women utilized these connections to build political clout and eventually prevent the construction of the prison (Garcia and Marquez 2001). Latinas often lead through community organizations partially because immigrant organizations are usually male-dominated and do not provide them with the opportunity to attain leadership positions (Jones-Correa 1998). Jones-Correa (1998) notes that the downward mobility or loss of status that often occurs for immigrant men upon their arrival in the U.S. pushes them to "form, participate in, and lead ethnic organizations focused on their country of origin" (326). Therefore, Latinas' greater focus on acting as intermediaries between American institutions and their immigrant communities provides them with an alternative route to mobilization.

Similarly, Latino men seem to define politics as election mobilization and power via access to governmental positions, while Latinas define politics as grassroots organizing and making connections with and between constituents. For instance, Garcia and Marquez (2001) illustrated how one Latina became politically active in grassroots organizing so that her son and his friends could begin developing a political consciousness and advocate for change in their generation. This example demonstrates how Latinas' motivations in their political activism stem from a commitment to the well-being of their families and communities. In her analysis of Latina activists in Boston, Carol Hardy-Fanta (1993) argues that "Latinas' approach is more effective in part because it is more in tune with cultural expectations and it overcomes many of the structural constraints on Latino political participation in the U.S." (24). This argument is especially evident in newer immigrant communities, where electoral politics and representation are often less accessible, and therefore, grassroots organization and participation constitute a more effective means for civic engagement and advocacy.

It is important to understand these differentiations between Latino and Latina activism, especially in the context of immigrant communities in cities such as New Orleans that face unique barriers to political engagement. Latinas focus on civic engagement rather than electoral politics, which determines the way in which Latinas lead as activists. Hardy-Fanta (1993) concludes that "[Latina] women focus on participation rather than power, on connecting other people to achieve change"(15). This form of political activism can help increase political participation in communities where some may not feel comfortable with the process of electoral politics. Again, this distinction is pertinent in newer immigrant communities where elected positions are often unavailable to Latinas. In this way, grassroots organizing and community organizations present an alternative form of activism for Latina leaders. Despite this viable alternative, Latina leaders still face the 'tripartite oppression' mentioned previously. Latina community leaders often come under more scrutiny for their decisions than their male counterparts and are also expected to embody gender in ways that do not violate communal gender norms. Latina leaders in New Orleans specifically face the challenges of leading a community that has only recently become more politically active and visible within a city that is still adjusting to its increasing Latino population.

Latino Activism in the Context of New Orleans

Historically, New Orleans' connection to Latin America has been relatively strong given the city's economic ties to companies such as United Fruit, however, the Latino population from the mid-1900s to present has been relatively small and quiet, compared to those of other similarly-sized cities. The Latino population in New Orleans increased by about 100,000 in the aftermath of

Hurricane Katrina, as many Latino immigrants came to the city to find work in construction (Grimm 2015). At first, most of these immigrants were highly mobile men seeking temporary work in a city with a high demand for work. The vast majority of these immigrants were undocumented and, therefore, easy targets for theft because they received large cash payments; others were never paid by their employers and did not have the resources to contest this wage theft. These immigrants often lived in deplorable conditions and exposed to hazardous materials or substances in poor working conditions, with no health insurance to cover them in case of injury or related health issues (Drever 2008; Fusell 2007). In addition to these challenges, racial tensions emerged between African-Americans and the newer Latino population. African-Americans claimed that the new influx of Latinos was depressing wages in the construction and labor field; Mayor Ray Nagin made public comments about "Mexican workers overrunning the city" (Campo-Flores and Gegax 2005).

Even as Latino immigrants helped rebuild New Orleans, and often settled there with their families, they still faced significant marginalization that isolated them from a sense of community and contributed to their reluctance to participate in civic engagement. Several Latino community members corroborate this noting that New Orleans' Latino population can be characterized as 'quiet' and seemingly more fearful of authority and racial tensions than their counterparts in other cities (Drever 2008). The city's Latino population is also very diverse with immigrants from Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Cuba, and several other countries. This diversity may seem like a positive characteristic, but it creates challenges in political mobilization given that many immigrant organizations unite around their country of origin. Therefore, despite similar political objectives, it can be more difficult for diverse populations to unite around a pan-ethnic identity. These characteristics have evolved slightly over the past few years as more Latinos have demanded better treatment by the city and appropriate conduct by local police and Immigration Customs and Enforcement (ICE) agents. Also, Latinos have sought out resources related to health, housing, and education in order to improve their quality of life in the city. They have had to overcome barriers related to racial tension, fear of deportation, and difficulty in the organization of their fellow Latinos in order to achieve greater visibility and political relevance in New Orleans. In this way, nonprofit and grassroots organizations formed in response to greater Latino demand for resources.

Founding of *Puentes*¹

Puentes, an organization started by three Latino immigrants before Katrina, was one of the nonprofits that filled this gap. In 2003, *Puentes*' establishment as a central organization in the New Orleans Latino community emerged from conversations between Martin Gutierrez, Salvador Longoria, and Bertha Montenegro as volunteers at the Hispanic Apostolate of the Archdiocese of New Orleans. The Archdiocese had traditionally served New Orleans' immigrants and refugees through a variety of services, such as naturalization workshops, ESL classes, and legal services, but the church was unable to help with certain needs of the immigrant population, such as financial advising or small business development, due to financial and structural limitations. These three Latinos, all members of families who had immigrated to New Orleans from Latin America, recognized the community's need for organized service delivery and resources. They also hoped that this organization would result in a more unified Latino community. Therefore, Gutierrez, Longoria, and Montenegro legally formed the Greater New Orleans Hispanic Community Center (which would eventually become *Puentes*) in 2003. They also established a board consisting of six members that would assist in directing the organization.

The founders' efforts to establish Puentes as a community organization were interrupted and

¹ The information in the remaining sections was paraphrased from an interview with Carolina Hernandez on October 14th, 2015. Additional information came from PUENTES' Organizational History (see Bibliography), as well as interviews with PUENTES staff members Korinna Sanchez and Lisa Reyes.

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reconfigured by Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. After Katrina, the Latino population increased rapidly and many issues related to the safety, health, accessibility to resources, and the acknowledgement of the Latino community emerged. The founders recognized the "unique and formidable challenges" that had emerged for Latinos in the wake of Katrina and sought to address these issues immediately (C. Hernandez, personal communication, October 14, 2015).

In April 2007, the Board changed the organization's name from the Greater New Orleans Hispanic Community Center to *Puentes*, a Spanish word meaning "bridges," appointed New Orleans resident and Dominican immigrant Lucas Diaz-Medina as executive director, and immediately began focusing on non- profit housing development, in response to the often terrible living conditions that Latino immigrants dealt with as they contributed to the reconstruction of the city. They established New Orleans' first financial literacy and homebuyer program for Spanish speakers—which still exists—to help Latino families better understand the process of buying and owning a home as well as building credit and economic assets.

Shortly after starting this initiative, *Puentes* leaders realized that in order to make a broader impact on the Latino community, they needed to expand their efforts beyond housing development. This shift led to the establishment of various initiatives addressing public safety in New Orleans, including civic participation, voter registration, youth organizing, and language access, among several more. During 2008-2009 *Puentes* not only hosted countless community events and actively addressed the needs of the local Latino community, it also joined and created several coalitions, including the Louisiana Language Access Coalition, the LatiNola Youth Leadership Coalition and the New Orleans Coalition on Open Governance. These coalitions, particularly the Forum on Racial and Ethnic Equality purposed for connecting Latino and African-American leaders, discussing racial tension, and developing strategies for change. Finally, *Puentes* also established the Public Leaders Fellowship, a program designed to develop community leaders through skills and advocacy training.

Luis Diaz' Departure and the Beginnings of Leadership Transition

As *Puentes* expanded and even received international recognition for its work in New Orleans, Diaz-Medina was offered a position in Mayor Mitch Landrieu's Office of Neighborhood Engagement. He took the position, and the board appointed Anna Frachou, a Los Angeles native and daughter of Cuban immigrants, as the Interim E.D. In the first several months after Diaz-Medina's departure, *Puentes* further expanded its community programming by launching a College Prep Series through its youth leadership coalition. At this point, *Puentes* had a relatively large staff (around 15 employees) for a small nonprofit and significant funding from grants and other fundraising efforts. The organization's larger budget allowed for a larger staff and extensive programming, but it would require the continued support of its donors and community partners to sustain its organizational model and permanent programs. *Puentes* also relied on significant startup funding from various financial and community organizations that would require substitution as it moved into its third year. Current E.D. Caroline Hernandez describes this time period as *Puentes*' financial peak, which the organization has yet to recover from due to previous financial mismanagement and leadership turnover.

As the Board continued to look for a candidate to replace Frauchou in a permanent E.D. position, *Puentes* founded a coalition based in New Orleans East, helped organize a parent leadership training initiative, and expanded its College Prep Series. The organization seemed to be in a good place in terms of finances and community impact despite its lack of permanent leadership. However, in September of 2011, community organizer and previous *Puentes* volunteer, Rafael Delgadillo, was assaulted and nearly blinded by two men in Mid-City. Though Delgadillo

recovered, this incident devastated the Latino community, as it indicated that interracial bridging and anti-crime efforts had not been as effective as expected. Almost six months after the assault, the Board appointed Scarlett Lanzas as the new E.D. Lanzas, previously' *Puentes*' assistant director, was a Nicaraguan native who had worked in Managua and Miami and had experience working for the UN Food Programme.

Financial Crisis and Mismanagement

After Lanzas took over as E.D., *Puentes* embarked upon yet another period of expansion. The Board had become somewhat disillusioned and weary in the months prior to selecting an E.D., given the state of the Latino community after Delgadillo's assault and after all the work they put into finding new leadership. However, *Puentes* seemed to be in good standing, as the organization had built a small business development program, created a city-wide language access campaign, partnered with the Committee for a Better New Orleans, and expanded its parent leadership training. In 2012, *Puentes* became the only Louisiana affiliate of the National Council de La Raza (NCLR), the largest Latino organization in the United States. Board members had voted against becoming an affiliate in 2009 given concerns about *Puentes*' independent development, but now NCLR was planning to host its National Conference and Family Expo in New Orleans and hoped to partner with *Puentes* for this endeavor. The conference went smoothly, but board members perceived that Lanzas had not taken advantage of the opportunity to network on behalf of the organization.

Members of Puentes' board hoped that Lanzas and other staff members would take advantage of the NCLR's time in New Orleans by networking with its leaders and establishing a stronger relationship between Puentes and the NCLR. A stronger relationship with the NCLR would have allowed *Puentes* to acquire additional funding to support expanded programming. increased national recognition for their programming, and better access to resources. Though affiliation presented a good first step, Lanzas had missed the opportunity to procure more support or grant funding from NCLR while its entire staff and all of its partners were in New Orleans. Two weeks after the conference, Lanzas announced her plans to leave *Puentes* to pursue other opportunities in Miami to board members Salvador Longoria and Martin Gutierrez. Despite a fiveyear commitment from Lanzas, *Puentes* suddenly faced another leadership transition. Although the organization saw relative success under Lanzas' leadership, it had continued to expand and was now maintaining a large staff without significant additional funding. The board sought a new E.D. who could deal with this financial mismanagement and who could also run the organization more effectively on less funding. *Puentes* faced a situation that many nonprofits deal with in their first few years of development: it had expanded too quickly for an organization of its size and budget, and now had to address leadership turnover that could negatively impact its ability to address its financial issues. As the only organization of its kind for Latinos in New Orleans, Puentes had to stay functional and in good financial standing in order to serve a growing and increasingly politically active Latino population.

Carolina Hernandez

After hearing of Lanzas' decision to leave, a frustrated Salvador Longoria called Carolina Hernandez, a *Puentes* Board member since 2004 and frequent volunteer who had witnessed all of the organization's challenges. While venting his concerns about hiring another E.D. and the current status of the organization, Longoria wondered aloud if Hernandez would be willing to take over the leadership of *Puentes* for a few years. Hernandez, a deeply committed member of the board who wanted to see *Puentes* succeed in spite of the numerous challenges it faced, said she would consider this proposal. However, given the somewhat lackluster E.D. searches that had occurred previously,

she asked that the Board complete a "serious search" for other candidates to be considered along with her, so that she was not just appointed based on her status as a Board member.

Carolina Hernandez had a history of activism long before her time at *Puentes*. Born and raised in Kenner, Louisiana, she attended Bonnabel High School and helped reinstate the men's varsity soccer program by starting a tutoring program for the team members. She graduated from the rigorous architecture program at University of Louisiana-Lafayette in 1999, after designing a Latino community center called "Casa Corazón" for her final thesis. She worked for an architectural firm immediately after college and was "propelled into a man's world" as she began to take clients. One very wealthy client noticed her work and her "get-things-done" mentality and encouraged her to open her own firm with his support (C. Hernandez, personal communication, October 14, 2015). In 2004, Carolina became one of twenty women in New Orleans that owned an architectural firm. After *Puentes* offered her the E.D. position, Hernandez spent several weeks meeting with various leaders in both the nonprofit and architectural world seeking advice on this decision. Eventually, she decided that she would apply. After completing an application and interview process with several candidates, the Board selected Hernandez as *Puentes*' next E.D. replacing Lanzas in November of 2013.

Director Hernandez's Leadership

After her appointment, Hernandez's first priority was to determine why the organization seemed to have lost significant funding in the past few years and how it could begin operating more efficiently. Hernandez notes that at the start of this process, she "struggled to make sense of PUENTES' finances." Despite being under pressure from NCLR to sign a grant agreement, Hernandez opened up a larger investigation into *Puentes*' finances, consulting other nonprofit leaders and reading material on non-profit financing. Eventually, she realized that she had not been able to make sense of the finances because they were a disaster—*Puentes* was losing money at an alarming rate due to fiscal irresponsibility, and somehow owed its employees \$4,000 in back pay. *Puentes* was not only in the red, but its large staff and extensive programming presented a financial drain on the organization. Facing a serious financial situation, Hernandez realized that without financial and organizational restructuring, *Puentes* might not exist by the end of the year, leaving behind the Latino community that had come to rely upon its resources and programming.

Hernandez's first project involved poring over expenditures and revenues from the previous two years and compiling this information into an expansive spreadsheet that revealed why the organization had lost so much money. Hernandez and Anna Ramirez, the organization's accountant, realized that PUENTES had spread itself too thin, attempting to run over 15 programs over the previous years and continuing to expand even when it did not have the financial means to do so. The organization had effectively run several programs as it expanded in its first few years, but had continued to expand its programming even as it faced reduced funding. Hernandez also reviewed the old employee handbook and found a policy related to salary distribution that led to the extensive back pay that *Puentes* owed to its staff. The employee handbook had not been reviewed since *Puentes*' founding in 2004, and somehow this particular policy had remained in place, even as the organization developed to a point where it could no longer sustain the salary distribution policies it previously followed.

Hernandez and Ramirez presented these findings to the board in the early summer of 2013, and Hernandez immediately began to plan ways to keep *Puentes* afloat, despite the fact that its current budget would only sustain the organization through September. Hernandez eventually made the difficult decision to let go of several staff members because *Puentes* no longer had the financial means to support a staff that size. This decision led to incredible turmoil within the organization. Two staff members sent a negative letter about Hernandez's leadership to the Board. One of the

employees that she had laid off filed a complaint related to their discharge with the National Labor Relations Board, which Hernandez saw as a personal attack manifested by an attack on the organization. The case was eventually settled, but had only worsened *Puentes*' condition and left Hernandez feeling betrayed and shocked by the level of resistance she had encountered in her attempts to keep *Puentes* alive.

Hernandez attributes much of the resistance she encountered as a leader to her gender. She believes that a man in this particular leadership position would not have received the same level of backlash she faced while trying to restructure the organization. Hernandez's leadership style, assertive and direct, can come across as 'harsh' for a woman. Therefore, her decision to restructure *Puentes*' finances along with its staff made her into an enemy who "had ruffled too many feathers" rather than a successful leader (C. Hernandez, personal communication, October 14, 2015).

According to Hernandez, her distinctive leadership style did not fit the traditional model of a nurturing, demure female leader that some expected, which again relates to the 'tripartite oppression' that Latina women face. As a Latina, Hernandez faced discrimination based on her gender, her race, and norms within the Latino community, and her decision to contest the "traditional" ideal of a Latina leader, though it led to effective change within the organization, earned her substantial criticism.

Despite Hernandez's intrepid efforts to reconstruct a vital community organization facing multiple obstacles to sustainability, ex-staff members targeted her as the source of *Puentes*' problems. At this point, with very little money remaining in *Puentes* budget, frustrated ex-staff members, a smaller staff available to direct programming, and various local and national partners depending on *Puentes*' survival, Hernandez faced a difficult situation in which the future of the organization depended on her reconstructive plan.

Future of *Puentes* and Latina Activism in New Orleans

In the months following the financial and staff crises that *Puentes* had encountered, Director Hernandez and the remaining staff members rebuilt the organization from the ground up. They reevaluated all of its programs and decided to direct all resources toward four programs, with one staff member in charge of each. They retained Mi Casa, the first-time homebuyer education program and one of *Puentes*' first programs. Through a grant from NCLR, they launched the Escalera STEM program, an afterschool college prep program focused on Latino students interested in STEM fields. The Escalera program uses a curriculum designed by NCLR, but it also incorporates some aspects of *Puentes*' previous college prep initiatives. New staff member Lisa Reves helped launch Mi Fuerza Economica, a small business development program designed to support Latinos in opening and maintaining their own businesses. In addition, they decided to maintain *Puentes*' branches of policy advocacy and civic engagement through voter registrations, community events, a volunteer program, and a health and assessment education program. Along with this general downsizing and refocusing of *Puentes*' programming, Hernandez and her staff carefully monitored the organization's expenditures and expanded their grant application process to procure additional funding. Within this process, Hernandez also hired a staff of almost all Latinas, whereas previous staff had been a mix of Latinos and Latinas. She notes that this was not entirely intentional, but that the selfless nature of nonprofit work, particularly in this community, aligns well with the community-oriented model of activism that many Latinas embrace. The current staff members noted that this approach has allowed for the creation of a more sustainable organization, one that will expand more slowly in its accommodation of the Latino community's needs.

The staff maintains a generally optimistic outlook on the future of *Puentes*. Lisa Reyes, the leader of Mi Fuerza Economica, says she is confident that with its new structure, *Puentes* can grow more effectively and build upon the community reputation it has created for itself. Every staff

member cited continuity and sustainability as both relevant improvements for the organization, but also emphasized that these aspects will require constant work. Director Hernandez, whose previously contested leadership led to this restructuring, cites financial sustainability as one of the most important goals for *Puentes*. Though the organization has gotten its previous fiscal mismanagement under control, it continually faces financial challenges. Hernandez says that she wants "*Puentes* to fulfill its name and be a bridge for the Latino community, by providing the resources and support to make it flourish and prosper" (C. Hernandez, personal communication, October 14, 2015). She is aware that as a Latina and executive director of one of the few community organizations designated specifically for Latinos in New Orleans, she will continually face resistance from male leaders and even older Latina community members. However, her decisions about the financial and organizational restructuring of *Puentes* helped the organization survive a difficult time in which it could have ceased to exist completely. Now, as *Puentes* moves forward and continues to provide resources and build capacity among Latinos in New Orleans, Hernandez and her staff must use their unique brand of leadership to overcome the barriers that Latina activists in New Orleans face in order to create sustainable social change.

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