

HOLOKE

Crises in Puerto Rico highlighted at summit

Focus on engaging young people, informing diaspora

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Puerto Ricans from across New England gathered at Holyoke Community College recently for the Puerto Rico, Puerto Ricans New England Diaspora Summit 2019 spearheaded by Enlace de Familia in Holyoke and Centro, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies in Hunter College in New York City.

Community leaders, representatives from regional businesses, non-profit organizations, law enforcement, several public school systems and individuals gathered to discuss the economic and political crisis in Puerto Rico and how it affects the diaspora on the mainland.

"This conference is so critical especially at this time more than ever before because of what is going on

in Puerto Rico and that the information that is coming in from the mainstream media in Puerto Rico does not inform us about what it really going on in the island," said Betty Medina Lichtenstein, executive director of Enlace de Familias. She organized the event along with Edwin Melendez, director of Centro. "The island is in crisis. We have a number of issues that have not been addressed and are only getting worse."

One of the panelists, Gretchen Sierra-Zorita, a public policy and communications strategist, spoke about the economic and political crisis currently facing the island.

"Puerto Rico has been in crisis for a long time. It started in 2006 and since then we have had a recession and it has been punctuated and accentuated by different events," she explained. "First in 2016 when Puerto Rico was unable to pay their debt and that led to the passage of Promesa, the law that established the financial management oversight



BETTY MEDINA LICHTENSTEIN

Sierra-Zorita said Hurricane Irma and Hurricane Maria in 2017 exacerbated the crisis.

"Now we are looking at a third crisis which people are unaware of and that is the restructuring of the debt. As we stand here today the island's \$70 billion debt is being restructured by the financial oversight management board as a representative of the government of Puerto Rico in the negotiations and we are not sure if the government or the oversight board has Puerto Rico's best interest at heart" she said. "I say this because most economists agree that the current financial structure that they are putting in place is unus-

tainable and several years down the line we will find ourselves in a situation where we cannot pay the debt again because of the service debt fees and the way it's structured. We will find there are fewer people in Puerto Rico both to work and to pay taxes."

Karianne A. Santiago-Ruiz, of Amherst, is an HCC alumni and current student at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. She participated in the event and moderated a panel of millennials that included representatives of the National Puerto Rican Student Coalition.

"It's important to give a different perspective of what young voices are doing right now in the community and in a way although we are following the steps of the leaders in the community who are already ongoing with their projects it's a way of restructuring whatever they are doing so we can capture the entire population that entails the area of Holyoke," she said.

Although the coalition is focused

on engaging college students it plans to expand.

"We are planning to create a junior program for high school and middle school students. We don't know yet how it will be organized but the intention is for us to create leaders in the community and teach them about their culture and what it means for them to be Puerto Rican," she said.

"We want them to be proud of who they are and who they represent and to know that they aren't alone and that there are amazing resource they can connect to not only just here in Massachusetts, but many other places across the country and even in Puerto Rico. That's what we are trying to do is create a network not just for los de aquí sino par los de allá tambien (not just for those who live here, but for those who live in Puerto Rico as well).

The all-day event included a keynote address from Carlos Santiago, state commissioner of higher education, who is Puerto Rican.