

2026 Bridges of Impact

Puentes de Impacto

Celebrating New
Jersey Latino Leaders,
Connectors &
Changemakers

Celebrando a los
líderes, conectores y
agentes de cambio
latinos de Nueva
Jersey

Second Annual
Recognition List

Presented in partnership
by:

InsiderNJ
Conexión Strategies
Marelyn Rivera
Quadratin Hispano

 **INSIDER NJ**

CONEXIÓN
STRATEGIES

 **QUADRATIN**
HISPANO



Feliz Mes de la Herencia Hispana!

National Hispanic
Heritage Month

"Unidos,
Somos Más,"

"Together,
We Are More."

Welcome to Puentes de Impacto

As we conclude Hispanic Heritage Month, the second annual Puentes de Impacto / Bridges of Impact celebrates Latino leaders, connectors, and changemakers whose work is helping move New Jersey forward.

Representing government, education, healthcare, media, business, nonprofit leadership, grassroots organizing, community engagement, public service, advocacy, and more, this year's honorees reflect the talent, purpose, and leadership found throughout Latino communities across the state.

Each honoree has made a meaningful contribution through service, advocacy, innovation, mentorship, and community-building. Together, their work strengthens neighborhoods, institutions, and opportunities for generations to come. Their stories affirm a simple truth: when Latinos rise, New Jersey rises with us.

Why "Puentes?":

Puentes—Spanish for “bridges”—represents connection, resilience, and progress.

Puentes de Impacto / Bridges of Impact honors leaders who bring people and communities together, create opportunity, amplify underrepresented voices, and open doors for future generations. These cultural translators, movement builders, and legacy builders strengthen New Jersey through service, inclusion, and meaningful community impact.



About the List

Honorees are presented alphabetically and are not ranked. Each person brings a distinct contribution to the work of strengthening communities and expanding opportunity across New Jersey.

The 2026 Puentes de Impacto / Bridges of Impact honorees represent leadership across government, education, healthcare, media, business, nonprofit service, grassroots organizing, advocacy, arts and culture, and community development.

This edition also includes a special Honorary Mention recognizing Latino elected officials and public servants whose leadership, representation, and advocacy help ensure that Latino communities are heard, included, and empowered throughout New Jersey.

Thank you to everyone who submitted a nomination and helped bring attention to leaders whose work—often carried out behind the scenes—creates meaningful and lasting impact across our state.

In This Edition:

- 2026 Honorees
- Honorary Mentions
- Federal & State Elected Officials
- County & Local Elected Officials



Partnership

Puentes de Impacto / Bridges of Impact is proudly presented in partnership with InsiderNJ, Conexión Strategies, Marelyn Rivera, and Quadratín Hispano—organizations and leaders committed to elevating Latino excellence, storytelling, representation, and leadership across New Jersey.

Together, we recognize the leaders, connectors, and changemakers whose service, vision, and commitment are helping shape a stronger future for communities throughout the state.

Media Partner:
InsiderNJ

Communications &
Editorial Strategy:
Conexión Strategies

Founder & Curator:
Marelyn Rivera

Spanish-Language
Media Partner:
Quadratín Hispano



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 **QUADRATIN**
HISPANO



New Jersey's Latino
Community
2 million+ Hispanic or
Latino residents

22.7% of New Jersey's
population

Nearly 1 in 4
New Jersey residents

Source:
U.S. Census Bureau,
QuickFacts

A Note From Marelyn Rivera

Founder and Curator, Puentes de Impacto / Bridges of Impact

Leadership is not defined by a title. It is defined by what we make possible for others.

We see it in elected offices and boardrooms, in classrooms and newsrooms, in small businesses and health centers. We see it in community organizations and in neighbors who step up, speak out, and show up—often without recognition, always with purpose.

Puentes de Impacto / Bridges of Impact was created to bring that leadership into the spotlight. To honor the people who open doors, connect communities, and turn a commitment to service into meaningful change across New Jersey.

As we conclude Hispanic Heritage Month, this second annual celebration invites us to do more than reflect on our contributions. It calls us to recognize the people making a difference today—and the possibilities they are creating for tomorrow. Our honorees remind us that Latino leadership is not a single story. It spans generations, professions, neighborhoods, and lived experiences, each adding something essential to our state's future.

Their individual accomplishments deserve recognition. But together, their stories reveal something even more powerful: a community whose talent, generosity, resilience, and vision expand what is possible for all of us.

To every honoree, nominator, partner, and community member who helped bring this celebration to life: thank you for believing these stories deserve to be told.

When we recognize one another, we strengthen one another. And when we build bridges together, New Jersey moves forward.

A message from:

Congresswoman Nellie Pou:

"Every year, Hispanic Heritage Month means a great deal to me. Being the first Latina in Congress is the greatest honor of my life. I hope to help inspire the next generation of latino leaders. I want our young girls and boys to grow up seeing themselves in leadership positions and know that they too can make a difference. Congratulations to all this years honorees for your incredible work in our communities."

Congresswoman Analilia Mejia:

"Hispanic Heritage Month is a time to celebrate where we come from, honor the leaders who paved the way, and invest in those who will carry that work forward. I'm deeply grateful to serve as the first Afro-Latina in Congress, but I know I won't be the last. Across New Jersey, a new generation of Latino leaders is already stepping up, organizing, and building power in their communities. It's on all of us to keep opening doors and make sure they have every opportunity to lead."

Senate Majority Leader Teresa Ruiz:

"'Puentes de Impacto' returns for its second year, celebrating the Latino leaders, connectors, and changemakers helping move New Jersey forward. Their stories reflect the beauty and strength of our heritage—the diverse experiences, cultures, and perspectives that enrich our communities and our state.

During Latino Heritage Month, we honor their accomplishments and the bridges they are building through service, advocacy, innovation, and mentorship. Each honoree reminds us of what is possible when we lift one another up, creating opportunities for the next generation while honoring those who paved the way. Unidos, Somos Más—together, we are building a stronger future for New Jersey."

2026 Puentes de Impacto / Bridges of Impact Honorees: New Jersey's Latino Leaders, Connectors & Changemakers



**Andrés
Acebo**

Chancellor,
Kean Jersey City

Led New Jersey City University's financial turnaround, reducing debt by tens of millions of dollars and securing its first positive outlook from Moody's. A first-generation son of Cuban exiles from Union City, he became the youngest known president of a New Jersey public university.



**Genesis
Algaba Ensor, Esq.**

Chief of Staff,
Assemblywoman Dr.
Rosaura "Rosy"
Bagolie

She helps advance Assemblywoman Rosy Bagolie's legislative priorities and coordinate constituent services and community outreach, connecting residents with the work of state government.



Dr. Valeria Aloe

Best selling Author,
President of the
National Speakers
Association NY and
Director Strategic
Planning Montclair
University

Founder of the Rising Together Movement and author of *Uncolonized Latinas*, she bridges cultural gaps between Latino and non-Latino leaders. She brings 20+ years of experience in brand management and finance across seven countries.



**Maria J. Andrade,
MPA**

Chief of School Support,
NJ Children's
Foundation, Newark
Hispanic Commissioner,
LAN EVP

An education and community engagement leader with 17+ years of experience in education, nonprofits, and public service. She strengthens family engagement, school partnerships, and equitable access to quality education while advancing Latino advocacy and amplifying families' voices.



**Julio
Aponte III**

Legislative Aide,
Assemblywoman
Carmen Morales

Supports Assemblywoman Carmen Morales's legislative work and contributes to veteran advocacy through his involvement with the Essex County Veterans Advisory Board and the Democratic Veterans Caucus.



**Frank
Argote-Freyre**

Board Chair,
Latino Action
Network Foundation

Champions immigrant rights and social justice through Latino advocacy and service as chair of the New Jersey Commission on New Americans. A Latin American history scholar at Kean University, he is also an author, journalist, and former congressional press secretary.

2026 Puentes de Impacto / Bridges of Impact Honorees: New Jersey's Latino Leaders, Connectors & Changemakers



Guillermo Artiles

Partner, McCarter & English LLP

Advocates for clients in the courtroom and statehouse, drawing on experience in two New Jersey gubernatorial administrations and expertise in government affairs and complex business litigation. Co-founded Latinos in the Arena, adding Latino-focused leadership to his legal and public affairs work.



Saily Avelenda

Executive Director, The North Jersey District Water Supply Commission

Brings extensive legal experience and a record of grassroots leadership, including helping build NJ 11th for Change and leading the New Jersey Democratic State Committee. A proud Cuban American born in Hudson County, she has also supported the state's legislative redistricting process.



Dr. Melissa Baralt

Professor, Berkely College; Biomedical Scientist, Board Member, SHCC; CEO & Founder, Bee Better Than Me LLC

Founded the Rising Together Movement to bridge cultural gaps between Latino and non-Latino leaders and authored Uncolonized Latinas. Brings more than 20 years of experience in brand management and finance across seven countries.



Deborah Braga

Deputy Clerk, Middlesex County

Helped keep essential Middlesex County services running safely during the pandemic and strengthens coordination among departments, municipalities, and community partners. Her election administration expertise makes her a trusted resource across New Jersey, helping government work effectively for residents.



Yasmin Brissac

Chair of River Crossing's Technology & E-Commerce Practice Group and Co-Chair of the firm's Legislative Practice Group

A government affairs and legislative strategy leader with experience in technology, e-commerce, and nonprofit advocacy. She helps organizations navigate legislation and build relationships across New Jersey government and politics, drawing on a background in campaigns, fundraising, and political engagement.



Stephanie Brown

Head of Government Relations and Community Impact, Wonder; Chair, New Jersey State Ethics Commission

Connects business, government, and communities through public-sector strategy, regulatory engagement, and community partnerships, while advancing ethical governance in New Jersey. Co-founded Latinos in the Arena and participates in NLC, extending her work in civic engagement.

2026 Puentes de Impacto / Bridges of Impact Honorees: New Jersey's Latino Leaders, Connectors & Changemakers



Laura Bustamante-Gagné

COS, Jersey City Mayor James Solomon; Former Deputy State Director and Political Director, U.S. Senator Andy Kim

Brings experience in national, state, and local politics, with a record of successful campaigns and a commitment to LGBTQ+ advocacy through service on the Hudson Pride Center board. A Colombian immigrant and first-generation college graduate, she also brings expertise in public policy and emergency management.



Alexis Cabezas

Account manager for individual and Hispanic markets, Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of NJ

Combines military service and business leadership with a commitment to supporting veterans and their families. Of Puerto Rican and Ecuadorian descent, he builds partnerships that strengthen veteran support and has helped expand Horizon's Independent Broker Program.



Johanna Calle

Director of Office of New Americans, New Jersey Department of Human Services

Advances immigrant rights through statewide advocacy, including campaigns to expand access to driver's licenses and foster a fair and welcoming New Jersey. Her work includes leading coalition operations and supporting member-driven policy priorities.



Lori Campos Bergeron

Co-Founder, BINJE

Helped create BINJE to make New Jersey business news more engaging, accessible, and inclusive. Through fresh storytelling and coverage of underserved communities, the publication shines a light on the people and ideas shaping the state's business landscape.



Dr. Patricia Campos-Medina

Executive Director, The Worker Institute at Cornell; President, Latina Civic Action

Brings together academic research, labor education, and political leadership to advance workers' rights, immigrant justice, and Latina civic engagement. Her work connects research, advocacy, and leadership development to strengthen the voices of workers and communities.



Daniel Carles

Owner and President, Terrace Park Group

Advances civic engagement through election fieldwork, community outreach, and support for nonprofits across New Jersey and beyond. As a co-founder of Latinos in the Arena, he brings a commitment to Latino participation and community leadership.

2026 Puentes de Impacto / Bridges of Impact Honorees: New Jersey's Latino Leaders, Connectors & Changemakers



Daniela Carolina

Head of Events & Stakeholder Engagement, Statewide Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of NJ; Legislative Director, Assemblywoman Carmen T. Morales.

Brings together public policy, business advocacy, and community engagement to support small business growth and economic opportunity across New Jersey. Her work spans legislative initiatives, events, and strategic partnerships that connect people and resources to strengthen communities.



Heidi Castrillon

President, Hudson County Latin American Chamber of Commerce (HCLACC)

Champions Hispanic entrepreneurship and business growth in Hudson County through partnerships supporting innovation, tourism, and international trade. Through LUPE, she advances Latina leadership, civic engagement, and advocacy for Latinas and their families.



Carol Caudrado

Associate Vice President, University and Government Relations, William Paterson University

Connects higher education, government, and communities through nearly three decades of legislative and policy work with Nellie Pou. She advances Latino representation and social services through work with the New Jersey Legislative Latino Caucus and longtime service on the Passaic County Board of Social Services.



Humberto Cuadrado

Commissioner, NJ Puerto Rico Commission; Former Passaic County Undersheriff

Broke barriers as the first Latino from the Paterson Police Department to serve as Passaic County Undersheriff, with decades of public safety, military service, and community leadership. He founded the Paterson Hispanic Police Association, advancing equity for Latino officers, scholarships, community relief, and future law enforcement professionals.



Margo Chaly

Secretary of Higher Education for the State of New Jersey

Made history as New Jersey's first Latina Secretary of Higher Education, advancing college access and affordability through financial aid, student loan relief, and workforce development. A first-generation American, she champions women's empowerment and student mentorship through community service and legal advocacy.



Elisa Charters

Founder, Juego.Juegos Software & AI Co.; President, Latina Surge National

Combines public-sector finance, economic development, and technology entrepreneurship to advance inclusive opportunity. Through Latina Surge National and Juego.Juegos Software & AI Co., she champions Latina leadership, small business growth, and technological innovation.

2026 Puentes de Impacto / Bridges of Impact Honorees: New Jersey's Latino Leaders, Connectors & Changemakers



Melinda Colon Cox

Chief Operating Officer & Chief Compliance Officer, New Jersey Community Capital; Chairwoman of the Cristian Rivera Foundation

Strengthens New Jersey Community Capital's lending and investment work through legal expertise, operational leadership, and ethical governance. Her commitment to community service extends to advancing Latino leadership in the legal profession and supporting the Cristian Rivera Foundation.



Francisco Cortes

CEO Setroc Group, Inc.; President & Co Founder NJ State Veterans Chamber of Commerce

Supports veteran entrepreneurship through leadership of the New Jersey State Veterans Chamber of Commerce, while bringing business experience through The Setroc Group. His service with NJIT's HLLC further connects his work to higher education and community engagement.



Jorge Cruz

Executive Director, New Jersey Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC)

Advances economic opportunity across New Jersey through community investment, support for entrepreneurs of color, and initiatives that expand access to child care, quality jobs, and financial stability. With nearly 30 years in community development, he also supports local nonprofits and college scholarships for young men of color.



Yesenia Cruz-Troy

Founder and Co-President, Latinos of Montclair; Strategic Partnerships & Business Development Executive

Combines experience in media, entertainment, marketing, and technology with a commitment to building relationships and community connections. Through co-founding Latinos of Montclair, she strengthens Latino visibility, celebrates cultural diversity, and fosters civic participation.



Dr. Jesselly De La Cruz, DSW, LCSW

Founding Executive Director, Latino Action Network Foundation

Draws on Latino advocacy, progressive policy, and 15+ years of bilingual clinical experience to advance mental health equity in underserved communities. A daughter of immigrants, she champions culturally responsive, trauma-informed care and mentors future social workers.



Luis de la Hoz

Chair, NJ Statewide Hispanic Chamber of Commerce; SVP and NJ Market Manager, PNC's Community Development Banking group

Champions economic opportunity by connecting underserved communities with capital for affordable housing, small business growth, and neighborhood investment. Through community banking and Hispanic business leadership, he builds partnerships that expand financial inclusion and strengthen economic mobility across New Jersey.

2026 Puentes de Impacto / Bridges of Impact Honorees: New Jersey's Latino Leaders, Connectors & Changemakers



James de los Santos

Founder, HudPost

Strengthens community journalism through HudPost, covering local news and regional politics while creating space for civic dialogue through mayoral and community forums. A lifelong Hudson County resident and NJCU alumnus, he has helped keep residents informed and connected since founding the platform in 2016.



Maria Del Cid-Kosso, MPAP

Director of External Affairs and Policy, chair, NJ Maternal & Infant Health Innovation Authority; Latina Civic Foundation

Champions health equity, maternal and infant health, and Latina civic leadership through public policy, advocacy, and statewide initiatives. She founded the Del Cid Dreamers Scholarship to support undocumented students and amplifies marginalized voices in politics.



Lucy Del Gaudio

Women Veterans Coordinator, NJ Department of Veterans Affairs

Advocates for the recognition, well-being, and rights of women veterans, combining community service with a national voice against military sexual harassment and assault. Her work helped establish Women Veterans Appreciation Day in New Jersey and includes congressional testimony and participation in the #MeTooMilitary movement.



Iris M. Delgado

CEO, The Wolfe Group; Former Executive Director, Middlesex County Democratic Organization and NJ Democratic Campaign Committee

Shapes political and labor campaigns nationwide and has played a key role in NJ elections, bringing more than 15 years of experience in coalition-building, electoral strategy, and organizing, including helping launch Latinos in the Arena. She is committed to working-class empowerment and building a Democratic Party that truly represents the diversity and values of the people it serves.



Lizette Delgado Polanco

CEO, NJCU Foundation at Kean University

Expands educational opportunity through philanthropy, community partnerships, and student support. Drawing on experience across government, labor, corporate affairs, and nonprofit leadership, she has played a critical role in New Jersey politics and Latino empowerment, creating pathways for future leaders.



Julie Diaz

Owner and President, Terrace Park Group

Advances workers' rights and economic opportunity while overseeing programs serving workers and employers statewide. Drawing on a career in grassroots organizing, government, and labor leadership, she helps implement laws she long advocated for and remains a strong voice for working people, immigrants, and women's equality.

2026 Puentes de Impacto / Bridges of Impact Honorees: New Jersey's Latino Leaders, Connectors & Changemakers



Wilda Diaz

Vice President, Popular Bank; Former Mayor of Perth Amboy

Fosters economic opportunity and community development through more than three decades in banking and municipal government. A former Perth Amboy mayor now with Popular Bank, she supports small businesses, attracts investment, and builds partnerships that create jobs and expand access to financial resources.



Alexander Díaz

Head of AI for Social Good, Google.org

Drives social impact through artificial intelligence as Head of AI for Social Good at Google.org. A former chief of staff and public policy professional at YouTube, he brings experience across technology, policy, and public service. He serves on Saint Peter's Prep's Board of Trustees and is a term member of the Council on Foreign Relations.



Brianna Earle

Associate Director of Government Affairs, Novartis; Former Deputy Chief of Staff, Governor Phil Murphy

Brings expertise in government affairs, political strategy, and community organizing. A former Deputy Chief of Staff to Governor Phil Murphy, she helped lead New Jersey Democratic campaigns and Latino voter engagement. Her experience includes strategic communications and labor organizing with the Northeast Regional Council of Carpenters and SEIU 32BJ.



Natalia Espejo

Founder and Co-President, Latinos of Montclair; Head of Global Marketing Strategy & Innovation, Visa

Applies her expertise in global marketing, digital commerce, and innovation to community leadership as founder and co-president of Latinos of Montclair. Her background includes senior roles at Visa and Meta, connecting business strategy with a commitment to the Latino community.



Christian Estevez

Director, Mercer County Workforce Development Board; Former President, Latino Action Network

Supports economic opportunity as Director of the Mercer County Workforce Development Board, drawing on experience in labor leadership and Latino advocacy. A Latino Action Network co-founder, President Emeritus, and Education Committee chair, he works to strengthen workers' rights, educational access, and Latino civic engagement.



Rosa Farias

Deputy Executive Director Chief Executive Officer & former Executive Director

Leads equitable redevelopment as Executive Director and CEO of the NJ Redevelopment Authority, strengthening urban communities through investment, affordable housing, and sustainable growth. Her experience spans redevelopment finance, public policy, and service as the first Latina Deputy Executive Director of the NJ Senate Majority Office.

2026 Puentes de Impacto / Bridges of Impact Honorees: New Jersey's Latino Leaders, Connectors & Changemakers



Rev. Bolivar Flores

Chief Operating Officer, Sunrise Group of Companies; Vice President, NJ Coalition of Latino Pastors and Ministers

Strengthens community well-being as COO of Sunrise Group of Companies, overseeing mental health, addiction treatment, and supportive housing programs. A Jersey City pastor with over eleven years of leadership at the New Jersey Reentry Corporation, he also served as vice president of the New Jersey Coalition of Latino Pastors and Ministers.



Christopher Flores

Director of Communications, New Jersey Economic Development Authority

Connects public communications and Latino civic engagement as Director of Communications at the New Jersey Economic Development Authority and Social Chair of the New Jersey State Democratic Latino Caucus. His work supports economic development and Latino participation in the Democratic Party.



Roberto Frugone

Neighborhood Development and Government Relations Professional, The Frugone Group

Fosters community development and equitable opportunity through The Frugone Group, a Latino-owned neighborhood development and government relations firm. He helps organizations, businesses, and local governments build partnerships, strengthen operations, and create lasting change through inclusive decision-making, coalition-building, and leadership development.



Carmen Gandulla

Chief Financial Officer, Invest Newark; Chief Equity Officer, The C Company

Advances economic opportunity with over 15 years in government, finance, and consulting. In Jersey City, she managed a \$1.35 billion portfolio and \$650 million annual budget. Through LUPE and service as a New Jersey State Puerto Rican Commissioner, she supports equity, housing access, and Latina political empowerment.



Priscilla Garcés

UN Representative, Women's Federation for World Peace International; Disability Activist; Leader & Mentor, Climate Reality Project

Champions disability rights and inclusion as founder of Always Forward and a UN representative for the Women's Federation for World Peace International. Her advocacy supported NJ's Workability legislation. A Climate Reality Project leader and mentor and global peace ambassador, she connects local advocacy with sustainability and women's empowerment.



Roy Garcia

Assistant Vice President of Alumni Engagement and Philanthropy, William Paterson University

Supports student success and social mobility by connecting alumni engagement and annual giving. Drawing on his development experience, he inspires contributions of time, talent, and financial support that expand educational opportunity and career readiness.

2026 Puentes de Impacto / Bridges of Impact Honorees: New Jersey's Latino Leaders, Connectors & Changemakers



Jessica Gonzalez, Esq.

President, Latino Cannabis Alliance; Co-Founder & Attorney, Rudick Law Group; Founder, Veridis Quo

An award-winning attorney, activist, and adjunct professor, she connects cannabis policy, intellectual property, and equitable opportunity. Founder of Veridis Quo and president of the Latino Cannabis Alliance, she helped launch the NJ Cannabis Training Academy and played a key role in New Jersey's adult-use cannabis legalization.



Ana Maria Hill

Vice President and New Jersey State Director, 32BJ SEIU

An attorney, educator, and policy advocate advancing equity in cannabis. As founder of Veridis Quo and president of the Latino Cannabis Alliance, she helped launch the New Jersey Cannabis Training Academy, serving 2,000+ registered students, and played a key role in adult-use legalization while championing Latino representation and inclusive industry growth.



Samuel Kanig

Bonner Scholars Coordinator, The College of New Jersey; Founder, Casa Cultura

Builds community engagement and cultural connection as Bonner Community Scholars Coordinator at The College of New Jersey and founder of Trenton's Casa Cultura. A community organizer, he connects TCNJ with local communities to share knowledge, expand resources, and address social and racial inequities.



Edward LaPorte

Deputy Chief of Staff, New Jersey Department of State; Executive Director, Office of Faith Based Initiatives

Fosters community empowerment as Deputy Chief of Staff at the New Jersey Department of State and Executive Director of its Office of Faith-Based Initiatives. A bilingual professional with over 30 years of experience, he supports underserved communities through program design, training, and technical assistance.



Carlos Lejneiks

President, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Essex, Hudson & Union Counties;

Expands youth opportunity through mentorship, community leadership, and 18 years of strengthening youth programs and shaping policy. A co-founder of Democracy Prep Public Schools and Brown University trustee, he became the first person of Latinx heritage elected president-elect of the Brown Alumni Association.



Jacquelyn León

Founder & Owner, Locally Made Globally Grown

Advances educational equity through bilingual programs and Title III funding for multilingual and immigrant students at the New Jersey Department of Education. Founder of Locally Made, Globally Grown, she champions an "at-promise" approach focused on individual strengths and potential.

2026 Puentes de Impacto / Bridges of Impact Honorees: New Jersey's Latino Leaders, Connectors & Changemakers



Aixa López

Chief of Staff, Statewide
Hispanic Chamber of
Commerce NJ

Advances organizational growth with more than 34 years of experience in engineering, operations, and strategic planning. As Chief of Staff of the Statewide Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of New Jersey, she draws on a career spanning public infrastructure, business consulting, and nonprofit leadership.



Cary Lopez

Executive Director &
Co-founder, Act Now
Foundation Dementia
Resource Center

Builds dementia awareness and family support as a nonprofit co-founder and Executive Director. Her leadership has helped educate over 5,000 people, connecting Latino and underserved communities across New Jersey with culturally responsive resources, advocacy, and compassionate care.



Jennifer Lopez

Founder & CEO,
Lopez and
Associates Behavior
Consulting; Adjunct
Professor

A bilingual behavior analyst, entrepreneur, and adjunct professor expanding behavioral health access for autistic individuals, people with developmental disabilities, and their families. Through La Behaviorista, teaching, and advocacy, she connects English- and Spanish-speaking communities with resources.



Karla Lopez-Rosa

Senior Constituent
Service Representative
& Lead Field
Representative to
Bonnie Watson
Coleman

Strengthens community representation through constituent services and outreach for Congresswoman Bonnie Watson Coleman and work with Trenton Councilwoman Yazminelly Gonzalez, helping underserved residents access government services.



John Lucas

President and CEO,
Statewide Hispanic
Chamber of
Commerce of New
Jersey

Connects strategy with execution drawing on a career leading transformation at global financial institutions. His expertise spans corporate strategy, operating models, governance, and risk management, helping organizations improve performance, navigate regulatory complexity, and achieve sustainable growth.



Francisco Maldonado

Senior Counsel for
Policy and External
Affairs, NJ Laborers'
and Employers'
Cooperation and
Education Trust

Shapes labor policy and partnerships as Senior Counsel for Policy and External Affairs at New Jersey LECET. His experience spans legislative leadership, gubernatorial campaigns and transitions, and voting rights advocacy with Advancement Project.

2026 Puentes de Impacto / Bridges of Impact Honorees: New Jersey's Latino Leaders, Connectors & Changemakers



Krishna Martes

Chief of Staff,
Assemblyman Vincent
Kearney; Former Director
of Labor Relations and
Stakeholder Engagement,
Office of Governor Phil
Murphy

As Chief of Staff to Assemblyman Vincent Kearney, she supports public service through legislative leadership, labor relations, and stakeholder engagement, building on experience in Governor Phil Murphy's office and with Senator Vin Gopal.



Jeffrey Martinez

Executive Vice
President, Head of
Branch Distribution
and Sales
Management, PNC
Bank

Promotes Latino opportunity as a PNC Bank executive and U.S. Army National Guard veteran, championing education and inclusion through the Statewide Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of New Jersey and LatinoJustice PRLDEF.



Laura Matos

Partner, MAD Global
Strategy

A seasoned Democratic political strategist, she brings extensive experience in political campaigns, government, and public affairs. Her career spans multiple administrations and numerous campaigns, alongside work in civic engagement and coalition-building.



Rob Matos-Moran

Government Affairs, River
Crossing Strategy
Group

A government relations professional who served as Director of Legislative Affairs for Governor Phil Murphy and worked with Congresswoman Bonnie Watson Coleman. Involved with NLC, he brings experience in legislative strategy, coalition-building, and community engagement.



Fernando Mazariego

Vice President, Tonio
Burgos & Associates
New Jersey

Advances immigrant advocacy as a government affairs professional and LAN board member. His experience spans state legislative roles and U.S. Senate constituent services, connecting policy with community engagement.



Carlos Medina

President, The
Modesto Educational
Foundation;
Executive Producer/
Host, Que Pasa NJ

A business and community leader who formerly served as president of the Statewide Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. He is founder and president of The Modesto Educational Foundation, and executive producer and host of PBS's Que Pasa NJ. His work spans business advocacy, education, media, and the arts.

2026 Puentes de Impacto / Bridges of Impact Honorees: New Jersey's Latino Leaders, Connectors & Changemakers



Juan Melli

Partner, Mercury Affairs;
Vice President, Team
Wilderness

Strengthens community engagement as a bilingual communications strategist with nearly 20 years in public relations, political campaigns, and government affairs. A former Hoboken communications manager and current Team Wilderness board president, his expertise spans crisis communications and digital media.



Carlos Irvin Merino

Business Service
Representative, New
Jersey Department
of Labor & Workforce
Development

A public service professional with experience in legislative affairs, senior campaign roles, and audiovisual production and broadcasting. He brings skills in strategy development, management, and implementation to his work at the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development.



Carolina Montes

Policy Advisor, Office
of Gov Mikie Sherrill

A government affairs professional currently serving as a policy advisor to Governor Mikie Sherrill. She previously served as a senior aide for intergovernmental affairs to Governor Phil Murphy and a constituent advocate for a U.S. senator.



**Cristian Moreno-
Rodriguez**

Executive Director,
El Pueblo Unido of
Atlantic City

An immigrant community advocate who serves as executive director of an organization dedicated to protecting Atlantic City's immigrant community. His work spans civic engagement, immigrant advocacy, and concerns affecting the community's safety and well-being.



**Irvin Moreno-
Rodriguez**

Director, Sara and
Sam Schoffer
Holocaust Resource
Center at Stockton
University

An educator and community advocate who co-founded El Pueblo Unido. His work spans Holocaust education, historical preservation, and community engagement, including collaboration with the New Jersey Commission on Holocaust Education.



Nedie Morsy

State Director, Make
the Road New Jersey

A community advocate with extensive experience in grassroots organizing and advancing immigrant and workers' rights. She has led campaigns for financial aid for immigrant students, tenant protections, and economic justice, while fostering youth leadership and community engagement.

2026 Puentes de Impacto / Bridges of Impact Honorees: New Jersey's Latino Leaders, Connectors & Changemakers



Leslye Moya

Director of Government Affairs, Office of Governor Mikie Sherrill

A government and political affairs professional with experience in Governor Mikie Sherrill's office, statewide campaigns, and party leadership. She previously served as deputy political director for NJ Victory 2025 and deputy executive director of the New Jersey Democratic State Committee.



Rosemarie Moyeno Matos

Founder + Managing Member of The Law Office of Rosemarie Moyeno Matos LLC

Rosemarie Moyeno Matos serves as President of LUPE Fund, Inc. and is currently in her third year leading the organization, where she has played a central role in expanding its reach, strengthening its programming, and deepening its impact across New Jersey.



Erika Nava

Senior Policy Advisor, New Jersey State Senate

A policy professional with over a decade of experience in policy development, advocacy, and stakeholder engagement. Her expertise spans economic development, transportation, consumer protections, and immigration. She also teaches immigration policy, Latino studies, and public policy at Rutgers University.



Juan Carlos Nordelo

Chief of Staff, New Jersey Department of Transportation

A government and community affairs professional with experience in transportation, legislative affairs, and nonprofit development. He co-founded Latinos in the Arena and previously served as legislative director to Assemblywoman Yvonne Lopez and director of development at the Puerto Rican Association for Human Development (PRAHD).

Congratulations to the 2026 Puentes de Impacto / Bridges of Impact honorees! Your leadership, dedication, and commitment to service strengthen communities and create new opportunities across New Jersey. We celebrate your accomplishments and the bridges you continue to build—connecting people, opening doors, and inspiring the next generation of Latino leaders.



2026 Puentes de Impacto / Bridges of Impact Honorees: New Jersey's Latino Leaders, Connectors & Changemakers



Adrian Orozco

Political Director, 32BJ
SEIU

A labor and political affairs professional with experience in legislative strategy, electoral campaigns, and workers' rights advocacy. His work focuses on raising standards for New Jersey's building service workers. He previously served as chief of staff to a state assemblymember and taught through Teach for America.



**Marcela Ospina
Maziarz, MPA**

Vice President for
Community and
Government Affairs,
Thomas Edison State
University

A government and community affairs professional who served as deputy commissioner at the New Jersey Department of Health and held roles in the State Senate Democratic Office and Department of Labor. She brings experience in legislative affairs, public policy, health equity, and community engagement.



Karem Ospino

Founder Ospino
Consulting; Vice
President of LUPE Fund,
Member of the
Statewide Hispanic
Chamber of Commerce
NJ

A business and community leader who founded Ospino Consulting and is involved with LUPE Fund and the Statewide Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of New Jersey. Her background brings together entrepreneurship and community leadership.



Sara Pena

Director of External
Affairs, PSEG; President,
Boys to Leaders
Foundation

A bilingual public affairs leader experienced in policy, economic mobility, civil rights, and civic engagement. Formerly led LUPE Fund and the Center for Hispanic Policy, Research and Development, with work spanning youth leadership and community and government partnerships.



Gus Penaranda

CEO/President at
Evolvare Consulting
Inc; NJ Unity
Chamber of
Commerce

A business and public policy leader with experience in strategic communications, business development, and community engagement. His work focuses on advancing LGBTQ+ and allied businesses, supporting small and midsize enterprises, and expanding economic opportunities through education, networking, and partnerships.



Milagros Peralta

Deputy Chief of Staff
for Regional Affairs,
Kean Jersey City

A government and institutional affairs professional with experience in legislative analysis, management, and community relations. She previously served as chief of staff to State Senator Sandra Cunningham and at New Jersey City University. Her work spans regional affairs and collaboration with elected officials, legislative staff, and professional associations.

2026 Puentes de Impacto / Bridges of Impact Honorees: New Jersey's Latino Leaders, Connectors & Changemakers



Simon Pereira

Vice President and
Managing Director,
Mercury Affairs

A public affairs and government relations professional specializing in strategic communications, technology policy, and stakeholder engagement. He previously worked with Cory Booker in the U.S. Senate and Newark mayor's office.



Leany Pichardo

Director of Policy, NJ
Assembly; Ironbound
Political Operative

A public policy expert with nearly a decade of experience in government and political affairs. She works as a dedicated right hand to Budget Chair Eliana Pintor Marin. She also has deep relationships with the Booker Team and LD29.



Cristina Pinzon

President/CEO,
Stateside Affairs; VP of
Membership, Latina
Civic Action

A communications and public affairs professional with 18+ years in media, government, and campaigns. Her work spans Spanish-language media, Latino engagement, affordable housing advocacy, and Latina political participation.



**Arlene Quinonez
Perez, Esq.**

Equity Partner, DeCotiis,
FitzPatrick, Cole &
Gilben; Chair, NJ
Democratic State
Committee (NJDSC)
Latino Caucus Chair

An attorney and community leader with extensive experience in legal advocacy, elected office, and political leadership. Her work spans labor relations, public affairs, and civic engagement, supporting Latino representation through professional and community organizations.



Emy Quispe

Chief of Staff, NJ
Department of Labor;
Former Deputy Chief
of Staff, Governor Phil
Murphy

A political strategist and community organizer with experience in policy and legislative affairs. She has held senior roles in Governor Phil Murphy's office and worked with Assemblywoman Annette Quijano, connecting government leadership with community engagement.



Paulaska Ramirez

Founder & Executive
Director, Generation
Fearless; Board
Member, LUPE Fund

A leadership development and community advocate helping first-generation individuals and young professionals pursue new opportunities. Her work spans higher education, consulting, and mentorship, alongside community leadership through LUPE Fund.

2026 Puentes de Impacto / Bridges of Impact Honorees: New Jersey's Latino Leaders, Connectors & Changemakers



**Jessica Ramirez
D'Arcy**

Partner, D'Arcy Johnson Day; Law Clerk, ADAM'S LAW; Former Assemblywoman

An attorney and public servant with 25 years of experience in litigation, advocacy, and community service. A former state assemblywoman, she has represented injured individuals, sexual abuse survivors, and underserved communities, with additional experience in media legal analysis and court television.



Anjuli Ramos-Busot

Director – New Jersey Chapter, Sierra Club

An environmental scientist and advocate advancing pollution prevention and a just transition to clean energy. She combines climate and air quality expertise with community engagement to support conservation, clean transportation, and climate resilience.



**Manuel (Manny)
Riaño**

Major Gifts Officer, Zufall Health; Board Member, Franklin Township Chamber of Commerce

A partnerships and social-impact leader with experience in corporate engagement, philanthropy, and revenue generation. His work focuses on building cross-sector relationships, engaging key stakeholders, and connecting resources to community needs.



Anna "Cuqui" Rivera

Outreach Director, Latino Action Network Foundation

A civil rights and community advocate with decades of experience in youth development and Latino engagement. Her work spans early childhood education, HIV/AIDS prevention, and prisoners' rights, with a focus on improving children's lives and combating discrimination.



Javier Robles

President, Latino Action Network; Assistant Teaching Professor, Rutgers University.

A disability rights advocate and educator advancing accessibility, adaptive sports, and inclusion. Through Rutgers University and public service, he expands opportunities for people with disabilities and strengthens Latino community leadership.



Rudy Rodas

Managing Director—Policy, Research and Government Affairs, New Jersey Economic Development Authority

A public policy and government affairs leader with experience in legal counsel, statewide operations, and stakeholder engagement. He advances economic development and federal investment opportunities through research and government partnerships, and co-founded Latinos in the Arena.

2026 Puentes de Impacto / Bridges of Impact Honorees: New Jersey's Latino Leaders, Connectors & Changemakers



Idida Rodriguez

Managing Partner, 1868
Public Affairs

A government affairs and political strategy leader with 30+ years in campaigns, business development, and community engagement. She mentors women pursuing public office and supports educational opportunities for young Latinas. Her work connects political leadership with a commitment to advancing women and strengthening communities.



Maria Rodriguez-Gregg

Director of
Government
Relations and
Community Affairs,
Montclair State
University

A former New Jersey assemblywoman and trailblazer, she was the first Hispanic Republican woman to serve in the Assembly. A key member of the university's government and community relations team, she helped guide Bloomfield College's integration and the university's acquisition of PBS.



Jocelyn Rojas

Chief of Staff,
Assemblyman Gabriel
Rodriguez

An entrepreneur and community advocate dedicated to strengthening and empowering the Latino community in Elizabeth, New Jersey. As founder of the Latin District Association, she brings a multicultural perspective and a commitment to fostering unity, supporting local businesses, and creating opportunities for others to succeed.



Sandra Rojas

Owner, Don Ricky
Bakery; Founder, Latin
District Association

A civil rights and community advocate with decades of experience in youth development and Latino engagement. Her work spans early childhood education, HIV/AIDS prevention, and prisoners' rights, with a focus on improving children's lives and combating discrimination.



Adam San Miguel

CEO, Cortaditos; Co-
Founder, Executive
Director, Cuban
American Alliance for
Leadership and
Education (CAALE)

A multifaceted leader whose work spans entrepreneurship, military service, and community impact. He combines business leadership with a commitment to education and mentorship, helping prepare the next generation for future challenges and opportunities.



Vereliz Santana

Director of Advocacy,
Office of Governor
Mikie Sherrill; Co-
Vice President,
Newark Board of
Education

An advocacy and community engagement leader with more than a decade of experience in government and politics. She champions educational equity, supports students and families, and brings a deep commitment to uplifting Latino voices, building coalitions, and expanding opportunities for future generations.

2026 Puentes de Impacto / Bridges of Impact Honorees: New Jersey's Latino Leaders, Connectors & Changemakers



Dr. Reinaldo Santiago

Sr. Director for Workforce Development and Employment Services, The Arc of Union County

A workforce development professional expanding employment and career education opportunities for underserved communities. His experience spans program management, strategic partnerships, and mentorship to strengthen services and improve outcomes.



Goyo (Gregory) Schipilliti Cid

International Director and Emerging Partnerships, DailyPay, Inc.

A fintech and international business strategist focused on financial empowerment and inclusive workplaces. Through strategic partnerships and global operations, he creates opportunities for workers and strengthens support for Latino professionals and caregivers.



Kevin Soto

Trenton Fire Captain; Director of Government Affairs, NJ Latino Chamber Director; Legislative, NJFMBA

A public safety and government affairs advocate supporting firefighters, safer communities, and Latino-owned businesses. His experience spans emergency response, legislative engagement, and labor representation, helping expand economic opportunities across New Jersey.



Jacquelyn A. Suárez

Commissioner, NJ Department of Community Affairs (DCA)

A government and community development trailblazer and the first Hispanic commissioner to lead New Jersey's Department of Community Affairs. She combines experience in local government, affordable housing, and data-driven policy to expand homeownership opportunities and strengthen communities.



Nataly Tamayo Espinosa

Deputy Director of Legislative and Intergovernmental Affairs, NJ Department of Labor and Workforce Development

A legislative and intergovernmental affairs specialist working at the intersection of government relations, labor, and workforce development. Her work connects legislative priorities with coordination across government to support workforce policies and initiatives.



Lori Tarke

Executive Director, Joseph A. Unanue Latino Institute (Seton Hall University)

A dynamic leader in higher education advancing Latino leadership, inclusion, and cultural engagement. She promotes high-impact, culturally responsive leadership, helping organizations build cultures where people feel seen, heard, and empowered, and where staff and communities thrive.

2026 Puentes de Impacto / Bridges of Impact Honorees: New Jersey's Latino Leaders, Connectors & Changemakers



Bill Tipacti

Senior Director of Community Empowerment, Univision New York / Univision Communications Inc.

An Emmy-winning journalist, producer, and community advocate informing and uplifting Latino communities. Through storytelling and partnerships, he connects people with resources and strengthens community ties across the Tri-state area.



Brian Varela

International Director and Emerging Partnerships, DailyPay, Inc.

A business and civic leader and former Democratic congressional candidate focused on issue-driven engagement. He has advocated for a constructive approach to politics, emphasizing shared priorities rather than personal attacks.



Valentina Vargas

Executive Assistant, Hudson County Office of Cultural & Heritage Affairs / Tourism Development; Deputy Executive Director, Hudson County Democratic Organization

A first-generation Latina and proud daughter of Colombian parents, she fosters community engagement and encourages young people to get involved. Her commitment to public service and cultural connection drives her work to create opportunities for others.



Dr. Lauren Zyriek Enriquez

Assistant Secretary of State, New Jersey Department of State

A public administration and government affairs veteran with experience across local, state, federal, and international settings. The first Latina to serve as Bergen County's deputy clerk, she plays a critical role in New Jersey's election administration and champions inclusive, community-responsive policymaking.



Honorary Mention

Honorable Evelyn Padin

United States District Judge for the District of New Jersey

Judge Evelyn Padin serves as a federal judge for the District of New Jersey and was the first Puerto Rican and Latina president of the New Jersey State Bar Association. Her background spans civil litigation, family law, and social work, alongside a longstanding commitment to diversity, inclusion, and public service.



Honorary Mention

Honorable Esther Salas

United States District Judge for the District of New Jersey

Judge Esther Salas serves as a federal judge for the District of New Jersey, where she was the first Latina appointed to both the magistrate and district court benches. A former federal public defender, she champions judicial safety and privacy in honor of her son, Daniel Anderl.

2026 Puentes de Impacto / Bridges of Impact: Honorary Mention – Latino Elected Officials in New Jersey

Public Service, Representation & Advocacy

The Honorary Latino Elected Officials List recognizes Latino public servants serving communities across New Jersey. From local councils and county offices to the State House and Congress, these elected leaders help ensure Latino communities are represented, heard, and included at every level of government.

Through their public service, advocacy, and leadership, they help shape policy, expand opportunity, and strengthen the communities they represent. We are proud to acknowledge their contributions and the important role they play in building a more inclusive and representative New Jersey.

Federal Leadership:



**U.S. Congresswoman
Nellie Pou**
NJ-9



**U.S. Congressman
Rob Menendez Jr.**
NJ-8



**U.S. Congresswoman
Analilia Mejia**
NJ-11

State Leadership:



**Senator M.
Teresa Ruiz, Senate
Majority Leader**
NJ-29



**Senator
Nilsa I. Cruz-Perez**
NJ-5

2026 Puentes de Impacto / Bridges of Impact: Honorary Mention – Latino Elected Officials in New Jersey

General Assembly Leadership:



**Assemblywoman
Rosaura "Rosy" Bagolie**
NJ-27



**Assemblywoman
Alixon Collazos- Gill**
NJ-27



**Assemblywoman
Yvonne Lopez**
NJ-19



**Assemblywoman
Eliana Pintor Marin**
NJ-29



**Assemblywoman
Carmen Theresa Morales**
NJ-34



**Assemblywoman
Annette Quijano**
NJ-20



**Assemblyman
Ed Rodriguez**
NJ-20



**Assemblyman
Gabriel Rodriguez**
NJ-33



**Assemblyman Larry
Wainstein**
NJ-33

2026 Puentes de Impacto / Bridges of Impact: Honorary Mention – Latino Elected Officials in New Jersey

County Leadership:

- Bergen County Commissioner Germaine Ortiz
- Bergen County Commissioner Rafael Marte
- Cumberland County Commissioner Yolanda Garcia-Balicki
- Cumberland County Commissioner Antonio Romero
- Essex County Commissioner President Carlos M. Pomares
- Hudson County Commissioner Fanny J. Cedeño, Vice-Chairperson
- Hudson County Commissioner Caridad Rodriguez
- Hudson County Commissioner Yraida Aponte-Lipski
- Hudson County Clerk Junior Maldonado
- Hudson County Surrogate Tilo Rivas
- Middlesex County Commissioner Claribel Azcona-Barber
- Middlesex County Commissioner Ronald Rios
- Middlesex County Surrogate Claribel Cortes
- Mercer County Commissioner Cathleen Lewis
- Passaic County Commissioner Orlando Cruz
- Passaic County Commissioner Christina Schratz
- Passaic County Surrogate Zoila Cassanova
- Somerset County Commissioner Sara Sooy
- Union County Commissioner Lourdes Leon

Municipal Leadership - Mayors & Deputy Mayors:

- Belleville Mayor Frank Velez III, Essex County
- Bernards Township Mayor Ana Duarte-McCarthy, Somerset County
- Butler Mayor Ryan Martinez, Morris County
- Frelinghuysen Township Mayor Kirk Perez, Warren County
- Maplewood Deputy Mayor Malia Herman, Essex County
- Mount Laurel Township Deputy Mayor Silvia Catalan-Culnan, Burlington County
- Passaic Mayor Hector Lora, Passaic County
- Pennsauken Township Deputy Mayor Vince Martinez, Camden County
- Perth Amboy Mayor Helmin Caba, Middlesex County
- Ridgefield Mayor Hugo Jimenez, Bergen County
- Ringwood Mayor Jaime Matteo-Landis, Passaic County
- South Hackensack Mayor Luis Perdomo, Bergen County
- South Harrison Township Deputy Mayor Robert Diaz, Gloucester County
- Union Township Mayor Patricia Guerra Frazier, Union County
- West New York Mayor Albio Sires, Hudson County
- Wildwood Crest Mayor Don Cabrera, Cape May County
- Woodcliff Lake Mayor Carlos Rendo, Bergen County

2026 Puentes de Impacto / Bridges of Impact: Honorary Mention – Latino Elected Officials in New Jersey

Municipal Leadership - Council:

- Atlantic County, Buena Council, Jorge Alvarez
- Atlantic County, Egg Harbor City Council, Tanner Ortiz
- Atlantic County, Egg Harbor Council, Ingrid Nieves-Clark
- Atlantic County, Pleasantville Council, Victor Carmona
- Bergen County, Bergenfield Council President Domingo Almonte
- Bergen County, Hillsdale Council President Clemente Osso
- Bergen County, Teaneck Council, Michael Pagan
- Camden County, Camden Council, Falio Leyba-Martinez
- Camden County, Camden Council, Jannette Ramos
- Camden County, Camden Council, Nohemi Soria-Pérez
- Camden County, Camden Council President Angel Fuentes
- Camden County Gloucester Council President Orlando Mercado
- Camden County, Pennsauken Council, Jessica Rafeh
- Cape May County, Woodbine Council, Eduardo Ortiz
- Cape May County, Woodbine Council, Hector Cruz
- Cape May County, Woodbine Council, Mary Helen Perez
- Cumberland County, Bridgeton Council, David Gonzalez
- Cumberland County, Bridgeton Council, Rosemary DeQuinzo
- Cumberland County, Vineland Council, Cruz Gomez
- Essex County, Bloomfield Council, Monica Charris Tabares
- Essex County, Newark Council, Anibal Ramos
- Essex County, Newark Council, Luis Quintana
- Gloucester County, Greenwich Council, President Tony Chila
- Hudson County, Bayonne Council, Juan Perez
- Hudson County, Hoboken Council President Ruben Ramos
- Hudson County, Jersey City Council, Danny Rivera
- Hudson County, Kearny Council President Marytrine De Castro
- Mercer County, Princeton Council, Leticia Fraga
- Mercer County, Trenton Council President Yazminelly Gonzalez
- Patricia Hendricks-Farmer, Lawrence Township, Mercer County
- Middlesex County, Carteret Council, Jorge Diaz
- Middlesex County, Highland Park Council, Norma Iris Vargas
- Middlesex County, New Brunswick Council President Manuel Castaneda

2026 Puentes de Impacto / Bridges of Impact: Honorary Mention – Latino Elected Officials in New Jersey

Municipal Leadership - Council:

- Middlesex County, New Brunswick Council, Rebecca Escobar
- Middlesex County, Perth Amboy Council, Hailey Cruz-Batista
- Middlesex County, Perth Amboy Council President Milady Tejeda
- Middlesex County, Perth Amboy Council, Rose Morales
- Middlesex County, Perth Amboy Council, Stacey Perelta
- Middlesex County, Piscataway Council, President Dennis Espinosa
- Middlesex County, Sayreville Council, Alberto Rios
- Monmouth County, Aberdeen Council, Pedro Mirabal
- Monmouth County, Atlantic Highlands Council, Jose Pujols
- Monmouth County, Matawan Council President Deana Gunn
- Morris County, Dover Council, Sandra Milena Wittner
- Morris County, Morristown Council, David Silva
- Morris County, Parsippany-Troy Hills Council President Judy Hernandez
- Morris County, Wharton Council, Paola Vasquez
- Passaic County, Clifton Council, Rosemary Pino
- Passaic County, Haledon Council President Nereyda Curiel
- Passaic County, Passaic Council, Jose Garcia
- Passaic County, Passaic Council, Maritza Colón-Montañez
- Passaic County, Passaic Council, Thania Melo
- Passaic County, Paterson Council, Luis Velez
- Passaic County, Paterson Council Vice President Maritza Davila
- Passaic County, Pompton Lakes Council, Bobby Cruz
- Passaic County, Prospect Park Council, Elizabeth Rodriguez
- Passaic County, Prospect Park Council, Felicia Ortiz
- Passaic County, Totowa Council, Sanders Reynoso
- Passaic County, Woodland Park Council President Luis Torres
- Union County, Elizabeth Council, Carlos Cedeno
- Union County, Elizabeth Council, Carlos Torres
- Union County, Elizabeth Council, Georgette Gonzalez Lugo
- Union County, Elizabeth Council, Manny Grova
- Union County, Elizabeth Council, Nelson Gonzalez
- Union County, Linden Council, Carlos Rivas
- Union County, Linden Council, Eloy Delgado
- Union County, Rahway Council Vice President Jeremy Mojica