

Special Report **HispanicBusiness**

# Suburbs swell with new arrivals

Local governments, businesses working hard to adapt

By **MARTHA RUSSIS**

**P**eople of European and African descent previously drove population increases in the collar counties. But the 2000 U.S. Census showed Hispanics substantially boosted suburban population gains and in some places emerged as the dominant minority.

Faced with this growing employee and consumer group, government and private companies are adapting so Latinos can join the workforce.

DuPage County last year completed a Latino outreach study, identifying difficulties of Hispanic immigrants and the problems social service agencies have assisting them.

The Hispanic population rose

135% to 81,366 in 2000, compared with 1990 figures. Latinos account for about 9% of the county's 904,161 residents.

Among the study's top recommendations: public financing of interpreters for governments and health care providers, cultural diversity training for county employees and public transit targeted at Hispanics.

"They come to our communi-

ty, and I think that to some extent, they have the perception that they are maybe viewed as outsiders," DuPage County Chairman Robert Schillerstrom says. "I think what we want to do is make them aware of the fact that they are part of our community and they are welcome, and we want to work with them to help them have as positive a quality of life as possible and to have them integrated into the community so that the overall community is stronger."

Tony Reyes, CEO of packaging products manufacturer Carton Craft Inc. and president of Reyes Consulting Group Inc. in Barrington, conducted the DuPage study. He is starting English as a second language (ESL) classes at his plant so customers can communicate directly with employees rather than rely on an interpreter. A Mexican, he plans to prospect for business in bilingual markets.

Newlyweds Foods Inc. in Yorkville, which makes food mixes and bottled sauces, has 102 employees, 80% of whom are Hispanic. After a late-1990s corporate expansion, the company added second and third shifts, but the revolving door spun.

Personnel manager Vilma Irons, an immigrant from Guatemala, found Hispanic workers were willing to stay, but needed English to be productive. On-site instruction was the answer. Meanwhile, management employees are taking Spanish classes.

"Employee output is right and it is done faster. It also gives them confidence to run the machines because they know exactly what they are doing. They know how to read the instructions," Ms. Irons says.

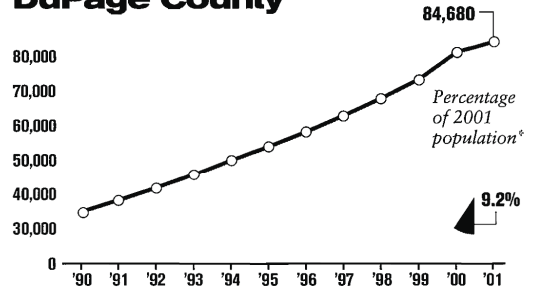
Latinos are filling a workplace void in the suburbs, but getting there has created some dangerous transit problems. Many are so desperate to get to work that they drive illegally, without licenses or insurance, the DuPage study says.

Sometimes Hispanics don't understand the U.S. driving system, and others are unable to get licensed because they are not legal permanent residents with Social Security numbers. Compounding the problem, suburban public transit is not always adequate.

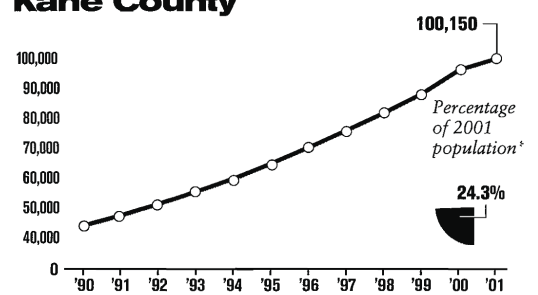
Lois Nelson, executive director of the Spanish Center Inc. in Joliet, agrees transportation is a vexing issue that is growing in importance. See **SUBURBS** on Page SR17

HISPANIC POPULATION GROWTH

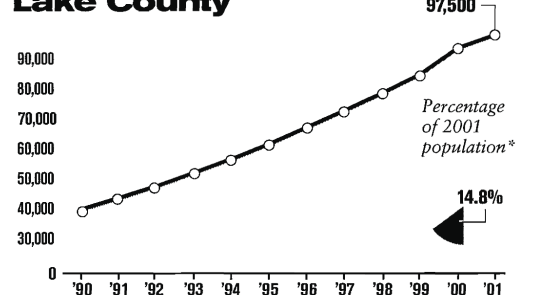
**DuPage County**



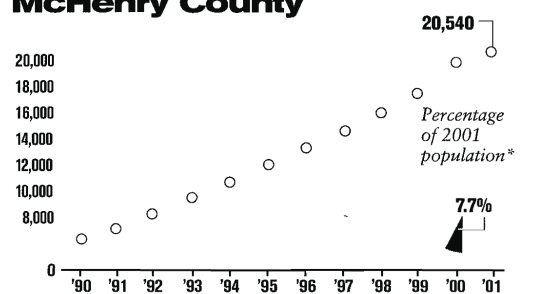
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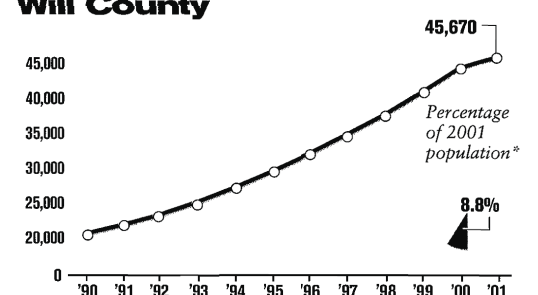
**Lake County**



**McHenry County**



**Will County**



Source: Woods & Poole Economics Inc.

\*Projection

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along with the Hispanic population. In the 2000 census, Hispanics surpassed African-Americans for the first time as Joliet's largest minority, with 18.4% of the total population.

"If there was a way of allowing people who have not gained the status of legal permanent resident to have some way of getting a driver's license," Ms. Nelson laments. "We are all safer by letting them have a driver's license, because then they can learn the rules of the road."

As a member of the newly created Hispanic Advisory Council in the secretary of state's office, she is pushing for the group to study the situation.

Meanwhile, suburban community colleges are tackling the language barrier.

For instance, Waubesa Community College in Aurora has broadened its course offerings to serve a record-high demand for ESL classes.

It also offers job training courses in Spanish, teaching health and safety issues and U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration requirements. English instruction is offered for people in health care, construction and food-service industries. Bilingual computer classes are run, and on-site English classes are conducted at corporations. The college also provides Spanish instruction to English-speaking job supervisors.

Language presents a challenge in other areas with growing Latino populations.

In Waukegan, where the 2000 census shows 34% of the city's population is Hispanic, Mayor Richard Hyde says there are still many instances where Latino high school graduates can't fill out a job application. He believes a major stumbling block to learning English is that Spanish is spoken in homes.

The Villa family bucked the odds against entrepreneurs. Antonio and Maria, who are Mexican immigrants, and their son Tony operate four small businesses in a West Chicago strip mall and a fifth in Aurora. They include two liquor stores, a department store, grocery and a coin-operated laundry.

Later this year, the family will realize one of its dreams by building and owning a new 9,000-square-foot store next to the mall where they now rent space in West Chicago.

In Aurora, Mexican immigrant John Saltijeral is opening a business with public assistance. He received a low-interest loan for \$290,000, funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, to open Pancho's Restaurant. The loan came from a program aimed at redeveloping a 60-block area plagued by high unemployment and poverty.

As a consumer group, Latinos are gaining momentum, and non-Hispanic-owned businesses are

reaching out to these potential customers.

Ms. Nelson in Joliet reports that she is frequently asked by banks, mortgage companies and real estate companies how they can better reach Hispanics.

It's also happening in Elgin, where the number of Hispanics grew to 34% of the population in the 2000 census, up from 25% in 1998.

Councilman Juan Figueroa says local businesses are trying to attract customers with bilingual employees and by advertising in Hispanic newspapers.

"I think the rest of the community has understood that they have to outreach to the Latino community, in order to have them use their services," he says.