TuSalud

Encouraging Latino Youth to Pursue Health Care Careers

As the U.S. Latino population grows, so does the need for Latino health care workers.

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To encourage and inspire young Latinos to pursue careers in medicine has always been the goal of the Tampa Bay Latin American Medical Society (TBLAMS).

The philanthropic organization helps the next generation of Latino health care providers secure their future without the burden of student loan debt and the stresses that accompany it.

“The mission has grown a lot, because initially we organized trips to different countries in Latin America to make contacts with doctors, give conferences and donate books,” Celia López-McCormack, MD, FAAP, TBLAM’s president told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution (AJC).

Since the group’s founding in 1980 as an initiative of Hernan León, MD, and a group of Latino physicians to assist their Latino colleagues, the organization has flourished and now provides financial aid to more than 80 Latino students at the University of South Florida (USF) through its support of the USF Latino Scholarship and the Morsani College of Medicine Latino Scholarship, according to the AJC article.

The group has also established a $100,000 endowed scholarship to help Latino USF students pay for books and other school supplies.

USF student Paolette Pimentel, who aspires to become a physician’s assistant, receives an annual scholarship of $2,000 via TBLAM, which allows her to focus on her studies rather than her finances.

“It’s important having someone to encourage and believe in you when you’re the first to go to college in your family and deal with that milestone,” Pimentel told AJC.

The group has awarded $225,000 in scholarships since 1995, according to Jose Valiente, chair of the USF Foundation and organizer of various scholarship programs. Valiente was raised in a low-income household and was the first person in his family to attend college. He graduated from USF in 1973 with an accounting degree and understands the importance of young Latino students pursuing their dreams.

Nationwide, only 6.2% of students enrolled in medical schools from 2018 to 2019 were Latino or of Spanish origin, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges, a nonprofit based in Washington, DC. When compared with the country's growing Latino population, the number of Latino doctors has not kept pace with the rising demand.

Haywood Brown, MD, associate dean for diversity at the USF Health Morsani College of Medicine, said that although there had been a small increase in the number of Latino medical students from 2020 to 2021, more must be done to build a diverse medical student body.

"Support for my students is critical if we are going to address the disparity in matriculants, including scholarships and creating pathway programs for students at the high school and undergraduate levels," Brown told AJC. "Mentoring and fostering an 'I can' attitude is one of my goals."

To that end, the organization hosts many fundraisers throughout the year for its 80 society members and their families. The group also honors Latino traditions by promoting family-oriented activities, such as La Noche de San Juan (San Juan Night) and Fiesta de Reyes (the Festival of the Three Kings), according to the group's mission statement.

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