

## Latina representation lacking at local, county and state level



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**SACRAMENTO —** It is no hidden secret that Latinas continue to be the most underrepresented group in all professions, including the upper echelons of state government in California.

At the California State Legislature, there are 31 women in both the Assembly and Senate out of 120 lawmakers, making up just 25.8% of the State Legislature. Among them are only five Latina women. The numbers do not reflect the changing demographics of the state where more than half of all students in K-12 are Latino and where 39 percent of the state population makes Latinos not only the largest, but also the fastest growing ethnic minority group in the state.

For these reasons, the Sacramento Latina Leaders Network organized a brown-bag lunch discussion last Tuesday afternoon at the

California Endowment offices in downtown Sacramento to hear from a panel of successful Latina leaders on how to get appointed to boards and commissions at the local, county and state level.

The goal of the discussion was to provide tips and advice to interested Latinas on how to better their chances of being appointed to boards and commissions with the hope they will apply and increase their representation in state government.

“We are not a non-profit or a club. We are just a group of motivated, educated and professional Latina women who want to be involved in the community and help other Latina women succeed in their professions, reach their goals and fulfill their potential,” said Daisy Gonzales, co-founder of the Sacramento Latina Leadership Network.

The three women on the panel never imagined they would be appointed to leadership positions in Sacramento had it not been for colleagues, mentors and community leaders urging them to apply.

“I never thought in a million years that I would be a gubernatorial appointee. I was encouraged by a colleague to apply when I worked at the State Capitol,” said Lizette Marisol Mata, Deputy Secretary of State in charge of Special Projects at the California Secretary of State.

Mata, who had been working at the State Capitol as a Communications Director and Legislative Consultant for former Assembly Speaker pro Tempore Fiona Ma, wasn’t sure an appointment would be a good fit.

Still, she applied.

The vetting process was difficult with extensive interviews and a very thorough review of her application. After submitting it, months went by without a word from the Governor’s office until she received an unexpected phone call.

“The Governor’s office had called to offer me the appointment that I had applied for but at that time, my professional career was going in an entirely different direction and I had to respectfully decline,” said Mata.

Mata had secured a post as the Communications Director for Senator Ricardo Lara, (D-Bell Gardens). It was a job she couldn’t resist.

“At that time, Senator Lara was working on immigration legislation and other bills that really impacted my community and peaked my interest, so I declined the appointment, but explained to them what my plans were for the future. I wasn’t completely ruling out a possible appointment in the future,” said Mata.

While the Governor’s office took note, Mata embarked on a new journey. It would be only a matter of months before they would contact her again for another appointment keeping in mind her professional growth, interests and goals.

“This time, it was for the implementation of the new California law, AB 60 which would provide the undocumented community with driver’s licenses. I really liked what the appointment would offer in helping implement the law, so I took it,” said Mata.

Mata was appointed Deputy Director of Special Projects through the California Department of Motor Vehicles and helped oversee the outreach strategy for the implementation of AB 60.

It was a tough job.

“It required a lot of hours and a lot of travel to ensure everyone in the state knew about the law and how it would be implemented. It, by no means, was easy, but again, it was a job that was aligned with what I truly cared about,” said Mata.

Lupita Cortez Alcala, currently the Executive Director of the California Student Aid Commission and Chair of the California Commission on the Status of Women and Girls found herself in a unique position prior to her appointment.

She had been working with the California Department of Education where she oversaw the creation of the English Learner Division, revamped the Migrant Education Program, initiated the Seal of Biliteracy to recognize students fluent in two or more languages, and worked with the CDE staff to develop the English Language Arts/English Language development framework and standards with the goal of improving the language development for English learners.

“I was working on projects that were dear to me and putting in a lot of long hours at the California Department of Education. I worked around the clock and didn’t think I could take on more than I could when the talk of a possible appointment came up,” said Alcala.

Aside from her work at the CDE, Alcala was working with the California Commission on the Status of Women and Girls, a non-partisan state agency that works in a culturally inclusive manner to promote equality and justice for all women and girls by advocating on their behalf with the Governor, the Legislature and other public policymakers.

“It was a job that I felt made an impact and I was very passionate about the work the agency did and despite how busy I was, I wanted to do both and was unwilling to give one up to commit to the other,” said Alcala.

When Academy Award winning actress, Geena Davis, then-Chair of the Commission resigned the post, colleagues at the CDE encouraged Alcala to apply. Even though she knew it would be a lot more work on her already busy schedule, nothing seemed to dissuade her from taking on the leadership role.

“I felt very honored to have been considered for that position. I won’t lie, I knew it would entail a lot more work, but it was something I was truly passionate about, so I went through the appointment process and eventually accepted the position,” said Alcala.

Alcala represents the Superintendent of Public Instruction for the State of California as Chair of the Commission on the Status of Women and Girls. Part of her role is to educate the public in the areas of economic equity including educational equity, access to health care, including reproductive choice, violence against women and other key issue areas identified by the Commission as significantly affecting women and girls.

Mariana Corona Sabeniano was selected to participate in the leadership program of HOPE (Hispanas Organized for Political Equality) when she was assigned to look up local boards and commissions that peaked her interest.

“I remember that particular assignment where we had to list all the names of the boards and commissions that appealed to us and that is how I was first introduced to this entire process of being appointed,” said Sabeniano.

Having worked at the State Capitol for over nine years in various capacities, Sabeniano had a desire to do more in the community.

“It was through HOPE that I learned how to navigate the process of applying to a board or commission and soon enough, I was browsing the city website and found a position that I cared deeply about,” said Sabeniano.

Sabeniano is now a Commissioner to the Sacramento Community Police Commission and the Natomas Community Planning Advisory Council— positions that truly connect her to the community.

“Given the social circumstances, disconnect or misunderstandings between the community and the police force, this was an appointment that allows me not only to work with both parties, but also give back to my community,” said Sabeniano.

All three women advise Latinas who are seeking appointments at the local, county or state level to keep a few things in mind prior to applying.

“Employers definitely need to know if you plan to apply to a certain board or commission,” said Alcala. “You also need to do your homework and be very knowledgeable about the position you are applying for and know exactly *why* you are applying.”

Maintaining a good relationship with colleagues, former employers, and influential community leaders, legislators, lawmakers, mentors and others is key to ensuring Latinas get appointed to boards and commissions.

“When you apply, they will look at your credit scores, things you post on social media, now, or in the past. They will really try to figure out what your reputation is like in the community, so take good care of it. They also want to know what your work ethic is like, and how you work with others,” said Alcala.

When being vetted for a position, those in charge ensure they find the right candidate.

“They want to know that you will be a good fit. That your personality, work ethic and interests are all aligned. They make phone calls to those who you know and trust and sometimes go beyond that,” said Mata.

**Dressing up with the right attire is also important.**

**“Sometimes, there are people who show up to interviews not dressed appropriately, believe it or not and immediately, points are deducted. You have to ensure that by the time you walk in to an interview, you are more than prepared to answer any question related to the role you are applying for,” said Alcala.**

**The women all agree that more Latinas need to step up to the plate and apply to become appointees or commissioners.**

**“We offer a unique perspective. First, as women and second, as Latinas. Our perspective comes from our gender, our culture, our language and experience and that is invaluable to positions of power. We deserve those positions and we should be working towards achieving full representation on boards and commissions,” said Alcala.**