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Director of Berks County office of aging wins Latino award

Recipient Barbara Coffin helped start Casa de la Amistad, the largest senior center in Pennsylvania.

By Erin Negley
Reading Eagle

Reading - In 1985, Berks County Office of Aging Executive Director Barbara Coffin was asked to help meet the needs of the growing Latino community.

Consuelo Jordan, the head of the Albright College Language Department, told Coffin she wanted a senior center that would offer culturally appropriate meals and activities.

Twenty years later, that senior center, the Casa de la Amistad — or Friendship House — is the largest in Pennsylvania. Operated by the Daniel Torres Hispanic Center, the senior center serves more than 500 Latino seniors annually. The program has grown so much, a satellite office has opened at Kennedy Towers in southwest Reading.

On Friday, the Hispanic Center awarded Coffin its annual Amigo Award for her service at the organization's 39th annual banquet.

"Tonight we are so pleased to present the 2008 Centro Hispano Amigo Award to Barbara Coffin, recognizing her commitment to Latino seniors in Berks County," Executive Director Jonathan D. Encarnacion said.



About 650 people attended the sold-out event in the Sheraton Reading Hotel, Wyomissing.

"It's an incredible honor," Coffin said before the banquet began.

The senior center continues to grow and, Coffin said, she'd like to address additional critical issues in the future, especially mental health services and access to medical care.

Keynote speaker Josefina G. Carbonell, the assistant secretary for aging at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, was unable to attend the banquet due to health reasons.

Nora A. Dowd Eisenhower, the secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Aging, was scheduled to speak. But she also could not attend.

Ivonne Gutierrez Bucher, chief of staff for Eisenhower, stressed the importance of health insurance. She said 70,000 Latinos in Pennsylvania have no health insurance.

“Do you wonder how they can sleep at night without health care insurance?” she asked.

Bucher urged the audience to support a state bill that would provide health coverage to uninsured adults 19 to 64 years old.

The Hispanic Center introduced 20 people participating in the Berks Hispanic Leadership Institute. During the yearlong program, the future community leaders learn about issues in the community and interpersonal skills.

In addition, the center awarded \$35,000 in scholarships to 54 Berks County Latinos.