

Latino Outreach Program targets safety issues

By Don Grigas
Staff writer

Organizers of the Latino Outreach Program, an educational program designed to educate a growing Latino population in the Woodridge area on safety issues and public services, said they hope other communities copy their efforts.

"Safety is our top priority. So if other communities want to use this program as a model to make their communities safer, then they are more than welcome," Lisle-Woodridge Fire Thomas Freeman said.

The Fire District is one of five governmental organizations that joined forces to create the program. The others are the village of Woodridge, the Woodridge Police Department, DuPage County Health Department and Woodridge School District 68.

"There have been independent efforts in the past to reach out to the community, but there never has been a coalition like this dedicated to helping the Latino community on such a wide variety of topics in one place at one time," said Bridget Johnson, director of the Community Resource Center, a Woodridge Police Department program.

On March 30, more than 75 parents and children attended the inaugural program at Siple Elementary School in Woodridge. The program was presented entirely in Spanish.

"During a follow-up session after the program, one of the things people really said they appreciated was the fact the entire program was in Spanish, both the oral presentations and the PowerPoint presentations," Johnson said.

Most of those in attendance were participants in the Community Resource Center's after-school program, of which about 90 percent are Latino, Johnson said.

Johnson, who grew up in Cuba before moving to the United States with her family in the 1960s, said the rapid growth of

the Latino/Hispanic population in the western suburbs — particularly southern DuPage County and Woodridge — prompted the collaborative effort.

"Statistics show DuPage County and Woodridge have experienced a growth rate in the Latino population of more than 9 percent over the last few years, and the (elementary) School District (68) shows an increase of 16.2 percent," Johnson said. "There has been a 300 percent increase in the last 14 years in DuPage County."

The Latino Outreach Program attempts to overcome not only a language obstacle but also a cultural barrier.

"We have had several training sessions to learn more about Latino cultures, and it really opened a lot of eyes," Freeman said. "This is certainly a reciprocal learning process."

For instance, the use of candles in a Latino home can have deep religious and cultural roots.

Candles also can be dangerous and often are responsible for home fires that result in devastating loss of life and property.

"One of our tasks is to communicate to everyone about fire safety, including the use of candles in the home," Freeman said. "But we also want to be sensitive as to why the candles are being used, and how to balance safety with cultural issues."

Jose Salgado of Woodridge said the presentations provided valuable information.

"I learned that the Fire Department can give me smoke detectors. ... I don't have any, and this can help save my family," Salgado said.

Angelica Garcia of Woodridge said information on child car seat safety really hit home.

"I really needed to hear the rules about car seats for my children. I need to make sure my car seats are installed correctly, and I will call the police to help me," Garcia said.

Freeman said some Latino cultures emphasize cradling children as the most



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Staff photo by Erica Benson

Woodridge Community Resource Center assistant Teri Vasile discusses the safe areas in a home in the event of a tornado with children March 30 during the Latino Outreach Program's safety training at Siple School. More than 75 children and parents attended the inaugural program presented in Spanish.

effective form of protection, and this practice can lead to child-safety seats and seat belts going unused.

"It is law to use child-restraint seats in automobiles. But in many Latino cultures, a mother carrying her baby in her arms on her lap is considered the most safe, most protective method of child safety. The closer to the mother, the better. Often you will see a mother driving a car with the baby on her lap being held close to her," Freeman said.

About 45 adults heard presentations in the school's gym, and about 35 children listened to a variety of safety topics in the school's learning resource center. Adults ranged from young mothers and fathers to grandparents.

"It is important to include all levels of the family because they all should be on the same page. And quite often grandparents have a significant role in the upbringing of children in a Latino home, particularly if both parents are working," Johnson said.

The idea to form a coalition began after Freeman attended a conference in Peoria last year and met with Nereida Avendano, director of the Hispanic/Latino Affairs Program, part of the state fire marshal's

office.

"A five-minute cup of coffee turned into an hour, and I learned a lot about the demand for this type of outreach program within our own community," Freeman said.

Within a few months the idea was brought up to several local agencies, and the coalition was formed.

"We have developed a strong partnership and share resources to bring something of benefit to the community," Freeman said. "It was very encouraging to see how all the agencies involved really came together and contributed enthusiastically."

Johnson said representatives from the coalition will meet and discuss results of a survey conducted at the end of the program, and will discuss potential adjustments.

Organizers will consider beginning the event earlier to provide more time for a question-and-answer session, and going into more detail on fewer areas of interest, Johnson said. The program also will be reviewed by the DuPage Municipal Mayors and Managers Conference, Freeman said.