

CONFEMEX, A transnational organization in Chicago

By Marcia Soto, President, and Claudia Lucero

Last year, Mexicans living in the United States achieved a major political victory—they were awarded the right to vote absentee in Mexican national elections. After years of fighting for this basic right, Mexican emigrants would have the chance to vote in the presidential elections in 2006. The Confederation of Mexican Federations in Chicago (CONFEMEX) played an active role in this process: first, by working along with many other organizations to win approval of the new voting rights; and then by organizing fellow migrants to exercise those rights. Unfortunately, the great expectations that many leaders had for absentee voting were frustrated by the complex process and short time frame for registration. Many leaders felt profoundly disillusioned when the government reported extremely low voter registration numbers.

CONFEMEX took a hard look at this discouraging panorama and decided to put all hands on deck to take up the challenge. Using all the ingenuity and volunteer energy that characterizes Mexican hometown associations, CONFEMEX decided to demonstrate that, given the chance, Mexicans do have an interest in participating in the political process in Mexico. Over a few intense days, CONFEMEX members went out into the streets, supermarkets, theaters, and churches in search of Mexican citizens with valid voter cards who wanted to register to vote. With financial support from the Solidago Foundation, CONFEMEX registered 1400 people in three days, through a networked system of registration sites at Casa Michoacan, the Durango Unido/CONFEMEX offices in Pilsen, and in the Guerrero Federation office in northern Chicago. Now CONFEMEX will turn its energies to making sure that Mexicans in Chicago understand the issues in the upcoming Mexican elections, and that those who can vote make their voices heard in July of this year.

CONFEMEX is a membership organization formed by seven Mexican hometown federations in Chicago. Because each of its members is itself a network of hometown clubs and committees, CONFEMEX has a broad reach into the Mexican immigrant community. CONFEMEX has a binational mission—to work with the Mexican immigrant community to achieve a more dignified and just life for immigrants and their families, both those in Chicago and those who have remained in their places of origin. In order to achieve this mission, CONFEMEX has designed a series of training courses aimed at building leadership and organizational capacity among its members. This past January, the Chicago Community Trust approved a grant of \$50,000 to launch this capacity-building program.

The immigrant leadership development program will offer workshops at different levels. Workshops on basic planning and leadership will target young leaders and those identified by their clubs as having leadership potential. More in-depth retreats for seasoned leaders will dig deeper into issues such as: analysis of the current political context for immigrants and their families, challenges for increasing civic participation, and implications of development models on the quality of life of Latin Americans in the United States and their families in countries of origin.

The program will also include a mechanism for exchanging experiences with other Latin American transnational organizations who are working on similar issues. Specifically, the leadership program will offer opportunities for Mexican hometown federations and clubs to exchange experiences and engage in peer learning with other organizations that are participating in the National Alliance of Latin American and Caribbean Communities (NALACC).

We have high hopes for this young organization, which, over a very short time has carved out a unique niche among Mexican immigrant organizations and demonstrated a serious and credible track record of community work. With

each accomplishment comes increased recognition, but also increased responsibility. CONFEMEX has been named “General Coordinator” of the celebration of the Mexican national holidays that will take place throughout the month of September. Other organizations, along with the Mexican Consulate General in Chicago, selected CONFEMEX for this honor. It is a vote of confidence in CONFEMEX’s ability to coordinate this large and important Mexican civic event.