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Bilingual Culinary Training Program Set to Expand in Region, Provide Increased Job Opportunities for Disadvantaged Communities

Local bilingual strategic communications agency and Northern Virginia nonprofit aim to build off culinary program's early success in job-skill training for unemployed individuals of color

Washington, DC — ProsperoLatino, a DC and Miami-based bilingual strategic communications firm, and local Northern Virginia nonprofit, La Cocina VA (LCVA), have joined forces to expand the LCVA's signature culinary training program which provides job skills and placement for low-income and unemployed individuals, many who are immigrants and minorities.

LCVA is the only workforce program in the region that offers courses in both English and Spanish. This is crucial since according to a 2013 Pew Research Study, the majority (62%) of Hispanics are bilingual. For those immigrants who only speak Spanish, however, this means they can become isolated and face many obstacles in their path such as: limits on job opportunities, career growth and navigating everyday situations - such as interacting with teachers at school or managing health care. That is one of the societal challenges that LCVA is focusing on solving.

"The work being done by La Cocina VA in our region has opened the door to countless members of our community to not only learn English, but also have a career in the culinary arts," said José Dante Parra, CEO of ProsperoLatino. "Helping La Cocina VA as they look to expand their successful program to more people is a natural fit for us as we look for opportunities to help our community around the country."

In the DC metro area a significant percentage of the people who work in the food industry are Hispanic and have a lack of relevant training and limited English proficiency. This often leaves them stuck in dead end work with very little room to grow financially. LCVA's rigorous training and certification helps graduates progress beyond minimum wage work to obtain a real living wage job with better future opportunities.

From 2015 to 2018, over 100 LCVA graduates completed the organization's bilingual culinary training program. Moreover, 85 percent of those graduates have been placed in steady jobs within the restaurant and hospitality industry. During this period, the organization also focused on fighting obesity by offering over 21,000 healthy meals to low-income families, which were prepared by the graduates during their training. This social aspect of the training is meant to teach them that despite their limited resources, they still have the capacity to give and help others in the community. Given the program's success, LCVA plans to expand aggressively, adding new programs that will be unveiled in coming months that will focus on serving other underserved communities and veterans. It is projected that with the enhanced capacity, donated meals will boost up nearly two-fold, job placement will increase to 95 percent, and new entrepreneurs will be trained on-site.

Karina Herrera, presently a line cook at a Hyatt Regency Hotel in the DC area, is an example of the program's success. Five years ago, desperate to find a way to take care of her three young children, she came to LCVA. Like most LCVA participants, Karina has overcome extreme hardships. She currently earns \$22/hr and has enrolled in a college culinary arts program subsidized by her employer's benefits program with the goal of becoming an executive chef. "It's been a huge help having a bilingual program like this," Herrera said. "My English has improved a lot and La Cocina VA has given me financial independence. It's an excellent investment in a better future for me and my kids."

"Karina is one of many graduates from La Cocina Virginia who are getting the culinary skills and support to transform their lives." said Patricia Funegra, CEO of La Cocina VA. "We are extremely excited by the new partnership with ProsperoLatino, which will help us tell these success stories to a wider audience. We admire the work being done by ProsperoLatino and see it as complimentary in our efforts to transform communities. For us, this partnership is not a random encounter, but an alignment of vision and mission that will allow us to tap into the undiscovered pool of talent, entrepreneurs, and leaders that exist in our communities."

La Cocina VA is a nonprofit organization that generates workforce and economic development for unemployed immigrants and minorities in the Washington DC area. Following a rigorous selection process, successful candidates participate in 16 weeks of classes, which include training in culinary skills with a professional chef, English instruction, life and employment skills, and a paid internship. Students who complete the program attain certification from Northern Virginia Community College Workforce Development and ServSafe certification by the National Restaurant Association.

Follow La Cocina VA (@LaCocinaVA) on Twitter and on Facebook – Using the power of food as an agent of change to solve social issues like unemployment, lack of access to entrepreneurship opportunities, and food insecurity.

www.lacocinava.org

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