

METRO HARTFORD

HARTFORD • NEWINGTON • ROCKY HILL • WETHERSFIELD



MARC-YVES REGIS / HARTFORD COURANT

Jeannette DeJesus was recently named executive director of the Hispanic Health Council Inc., a community-based organization that provides services to low-income Spanish-speaking families.

# An Advocate Lives Her Mission

By JOHNNY MASON  
COURANT STAFF WRITER

People warned her not to live in Hartford, to find a place outside the city where it's safer and quieter.

But although she briefly looked at houses in West Hartford, Jeannette B. DeJesus always felt Hartford, not the suburbs, was the place for her.

The new executive director at the Hispanic Health Council Inc. chose Hartford because she wanted to live near the Latino people she came to help. Living in the city reflects her commitment to establishing strong ties with the neighborhood, DeJesus said.

"I feel very strongly that if I'm running a commu-

## HARTFORD

nity-based organization, I need to live in it," said DeJesus, who recently bought a home on Charter Oak Place, about two blocks from the council's Main Street office. "One of the things that makes nonprofit work effective is to stay in touch with the back bench, the people who are really experiencing a lot of the needs."

DeJesus decided to take the Hartford job after two years working for a national social justice organization in Boston, where she promoted social justice issues.

Here her job is to continue the council's mission to break down the barriers to providing quality health care and other services for low-income Spanish-

## Hispanic Health Council's New Director Charts Course

speaking families, she said.

"I hope to build on the agency's unique model that integrates research, advocacy and direct service," said DeJesus, whose office is at 175 Main St.

The community-based organization has provided health and social services to Latinos and other underserved people in Connecticut for nearly 30 years. It addresses an array of health issues including HIV/AIDS, homelessness, substance abuse, prenatal care, nutrition and asthma.

DeJesus, a native of Puerto Rico who grew up in New Jersey, has master's degrees in public administration from Harvard University and in social work from New York University. She will oversee approximately 70 full-time workers and a nearly \$5 million budget.

Derreth Duncan, assistant director of the volunteer center at an HIV/AIDS service organization in New York City, was one of about 200 people who attended a welcoming party for DeJesus at the health council office recently.

"She's one of the most outstanding people I know," Duncan said. "She's able to straddle many worlds and can negotiate many different kinds of people and circumstances."

Laura Victoria Barrera, board president and chair-

woman of the selection committee, said she was impressed by DeJesus' energy and enthusiasm.

She also valued her experience of working with the public/private sector and on fund-raising projects, said Barrera. "We were not just looking for a director. We were looking for someone who could be part of our family," she said. "Someone who could dance to our music."

One of her first tasks was meeting with workers participating in a migrant farm program in Granby, DeJesus said. The agency provides workers with health care and other services in collaboration with a Massachusetts health services center.

Her face-to-face meetings with workers allowed DeJesus to get a firsthand view of their concerns and lives, she said. That approach strengthens her credibility and gives Latinos a sense that she cares and is connected to the community, she said.

DeJesus feels the Hispanic community faces some "troubling" problems that include high illiteracy rates, high rates of HIV/AIDS and unemployment.

She believes gaining people's confidence and trust and presenting them with options in a culturally appropriate way can help improve lives, she said.

"I think Hispanics need the same things everyone else needs, that is a community that is a vibrant one and in which there are expectations and standards that are the same across the board and there are opportunities for folks to take advantage of and improve their lives," she said.