



Maryland

GOVERNOR'S OFFICE
OF COMMUNITY INITIATIVES

THE GOVERNOR'S COMMISSION ON
HISPANIC & LATIN AMERICAN
COMMUNITY AFFAIRS

October 1, 2026

2026 HISPANIC HERITAGE MONTH CELEBRATION

**HONORING OUR ROOTS,
CELEBRATING OUR HERITAGE,
SHAPING OUR FUTURE.**

***250 YEARS OF STORIES.
A LEGACY FOR GENERATIONS.***





STATE OF MARYLAND

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
Wes Moore



October 1, 2026

Dear Friends:

¡Feliz mes de la herencia Hispana! On behalf of 6.3 million Marylanders, I am honored to welcome you to Carroll Community College for the 2026 Hispanic Heritage Month Celebration sponsored by the Governor's Commission on Hispanic and Latin American Community Affairs.

Maryland is home to over 800,000 Hispanic and Latino Americans. This event brings together generations of Hispanic and Latino Americans, neighbors, public servants, and fellow Marylanders to celebrate the beautiful tapestry of our state and recognize the incredible contributions of this community to our economic, social, and cultural advancement. I want to thank each member of the Governor's Commission on Hispanic and Latin American Community Affairs and everyone who helped make this happen for being the leaders our state deserves.

You've not only produced today's celebration – you work tirelessly throughout the year to advance equity, access, and opportunity for Hispanic and Latin American communities across Maryland. It's your hands that are in service to driving economic mobility, educational attainment, improved health outcomes, and greater civic engagement for Hispanic and Latino communities that uplifts our entire state.

Stories like those of the people in this room remind us that our history is our power. So let's keep celebrating what brings us together, honoring the communities that make us stronger, and leaving no one behind.

Sincerely,

A blue ink signature of Wes Moore, written in a stylized, cursive script.

Wes Moore
Governor

100 State Circle, Annapolis, Maryland 21404

(410) 974-3400

TTY Users Call via MD Relay
governor.maryland.gov

JOSELINE A. PEÑA-MELNYK
Legislative District 21
Prince George's and
Anne Arundel Counties

SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE



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P. O. Box 1251
College Park, Maryland 20741-1251

The Maryland House of Delegates

ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

October 1, 2026

Dear Friends:

It is my great pleasure to extend warm greetings to everyone gathered for the 2026 Maryland Hispanic Heritage Month Celebration. While I regret that I cannot join you in person, I am honored to celebrate with you in spirit as we recognize the rich history, culture, and contributions of Maryland's Hispanic and Latino communities.

As the first Latina to serve as Speaker of the Maryland House of Delegates, this celebration holds special meaning for me. I know that the story of our community is one of courage, sacrifice, perseverance, family, and hope. It is the story of generations who carried their traditions with them while building new lives, strengthening their communities, and helping shape the Maryland we know today.

This year's theme, "Honoring Our Roots. Celebrating Our Heritage. Shaping Maryland's Future," is especially fitting as we commemorate our nation's 250th anniversary and reflect on Maryland's role in the American story. That story has always been written by people from many backgrounds and many places, each adding their experiences, talents, and dreams to our shared future. Hispanic and Latino Marylanders are an essential part of that story—not only through the contributions we celebrate from the past, but through the leadership, creativity, service, and determination that are shaping our state today.

Hispanic Heritage Month gives us an opportunity to take pride in where we come from, to share our traditions and stories with one another, and to remind the next generation that their voices and their dreams belong in Maryland's future.

I extend my sincere appreciation to the Governor's Commission on Hispanic & Latin American Community Affairs and the Governor's Office of Community Initiatives for bringing Marylanders together for this special celebration. And to everyone gathered at Carroll Community College: may this evening be filled with joy, connection, pride, and a renewed sense of possibility for all.

With warmest regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Joseline A. Peña-Melnik".

Joseline A. Peña-Melnik
Speaker of the Maryland House of Delegates



MEET THE COMMISSIONERS

CHAIR

GABRIELA (GABY) ARGOTI-FERNANDEZ



Gaby, a first-generation professional from Ecuador, boasts over 12 years of banking expertise, particularly in portfolio management for commercial loans and banking services. Alongside her banking career, Gaby founded FlanCake by Gaby, a dessert business operating during off-hours at DC Green Bank, offering an ESL program as part of its community outreach. Committed to continuous learning, Gaby has pursued education in Business Administration and International Business, culminating in a Global Business certificate from Harvard Business School, with plans for further education to enhance her contributions to the community.

VICE CHAIR

LENA HERNANDEZ



Lena Hernandez, a dedicated community advocate, has devoted over two decades to uplifting and empowering the communities that have shaped her identity. Originally hailing from Albuquerque, New Mexico, Lena's commitment to giving back is evident in her extensive track record of service and leadership. In her role as Senior Director of External Affairs & Administration, Lena leverages her expertise in long-term relationship building and project management to forge impactful connections between corporate entities and non-profit organizations.

MEET THE COMMISSIONERS

DR. JOSÉ R. BALLESTEROS



Dr. José R. Ballesteros is Chair of the Department of International Languages and Cultures at St. Mary's College of Maryland, where he has taught for more than 25 years and previously served as the Steven J. Muller Distinguished Professor of the Arts and the college's first Director of Equity Programming. An accomplished author, poet, editor, and former publisher of Maryland's first Latinx literary press, Zozobra Publishing, Dr. Ballesteros has dedicated his career to advancing literature, culture, and educational opportunity. He has developed successful retention and leadership programs for historically underrepresented students and currently works to connect academic learning with student wellness and well-being. A Maryland Master Naturalist, he also volunteers with the American Chestnut Land Trust, helping connect communities with Southern Maryland's natural resources.

LORENA DE POMBO



Lorena De Pombo is a proud Colombian-American with a Caribbean soul, a devoted Christian, and a mother of four daughters. She has lived in Maryland for 13 years and is deeply committed to empowering the Latino community by helping them start their own businesses and develop their talents. Lorena is a founding partner of Zehirut Group, an organization operating in five countries. She also strongly advocates for family, faith, and community values.

MEET THE COMMISSIONERS

STEPHANIE LANDAVERDE



Stephanie Landaverde is a dedicated and accomplished professional with a strong background in Criminology and Criminal Justice. . Notably, her roles at the Baltimore Witness and the Administrative Office of the Courts involved initiatives to enhance court system accountability and efficiency. Stephanie's linguistic abilities, technical skills, and commitment to community involvement make her a valuable asset in any setting. Stephanie is poised to make significant contributions within the Governor's Office of Community Initiatives, promoting inclusivity and empowering marginalized communities across the state.

YULIANA MACEY



Yuliana Macey, a proud Latina from Peru, serves as a dedicated Community Health Organizer at Maryland Latinos Unidos. With a background in Addiction Counseling, Human Services/Mental Health, and training in Advanced Psychological First Aid, Applied Positive Psychology, and Family Coaching, Yuliana is committed to empowering Latinos through education and networking. In her current role at Maryland Latinos Unidos, she collaborates with diverse community partners and stakeholders to enhance Latino health in Anne Arundel County and across the state, particularly focusing on educating and addressing disparities among Latina women.

MEET THE COMMISSIONERS

JESSY MEJIA TERRY



Jessy brings more than 17 years of experience in government, politics, and community engagement, with a focus on strengthening Latino and immigrant representation. She served as Administrative Director of the Governor's Commission on Hispanic Affairs and the Governor's Commission on Caribbean Affairs under Governor Martin O'Malley from 2007–2015. She later worked as a political communications and outreach consultant and previously served as legislative staff to then-Montgomery County Councilmember Marc Elrich, focusing on housing, economic development, and immigrant issues. A native of El Salvador, Jessy is a University of Maryland graduate and is a wife and mother of two daughters.

DR. MARIA RAMOS-OLAZAGASTI



Dr. María Ramos-Olazagasti is an experienced community and developmental psychologist who has dedicated more than a decade to conducting applied, policy-relevant research related to the influence of social context, adversity exposure, culturally relevant risk, and protective factors on the emotional and behavioral well-being of Latino children. She currently works at Child Trends, where she leads the Population-Focused Research area, which aims to advance research on Hispanic, Black, and Indigenous populations from a strengths-based and equity advancement perspective.

MEET THE COMMISSIONERS

JULIAN PEREZ



Julián E. Pérez is a communications attorney and senior intergovernmental affairs professional who currently works for Prince George's County Government's Office of the County Executive. He is a former presidential appointee of the Biden-Harris Administration and previously served as Public Information Officer and Spokesperson for Hispanic Affairs for both the Maryland Department of Transportation and Prince George's County Police Department. A native of Puerto Rico, Julian completed undergraduate studies in Fordham University before graduating Cum Laude from the University of Maryland-College Park and returning to the Island to complete a JD in the University of Puerto Rico. He graduated from DHS FEMA Center for Homeland Defense and Security's Emergence Program in 2023 and is admitted to practice in Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia.

DR. JENNIFER RIOS



Dr. Jennifer Rios is an accomplished CEO with 15+ years of experience in technology, logistics, program management, grounds maintenance, and professional consulting for both civilian and service-disabled veterans. Dr. Rios served for 13 years in the United States Army, obtaining the Staff Sergeant (Airborne) rank. Dr. Rios supported Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, assisting the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force in Afghanistan, Iraq, Bahrain, and Kuwait.

MEET THE COMMISSIONERS

NITZALIS RIVERA



Nitzalis Rivera is a Puerto Rican, New York City native. She is a mother of two and a grandmother of two. She is an educator, small business owner, community leader, Hispanic cultural curator, advocate, and mentor. Her passion for advocacy alongside community service has inspired her to serve as a board member for many organizations in the Washington County area. Her goal is to be a voice for the growing Hispanic population and enhance resources as well as human services to support this community.

GLORIA ANNE SALAZAR



Gloria is a retired therapeutic professional with 34 years of deep ties to Garrett County and extensive experience in child welfare, mental health, crisis intervention, trauma-informed care, and community collaboration. She holds a Master of Social Work from New Mexico Highlands University and has dedicated her career to supporting children and families through clinical practice, advocacy, care coordination, supervision, and teaching. Known for building meaningful relationships across diverse communities, Gloria remains actively engaged with numerous Garrett County organizations focused on education, civil rights, LGBTQ+ inclusion, the arts, and community development. Bilingual in English and Spanish, she is committed to advancing equity, connection, and well-being throughout her community.

MEET THE COMMISSIONERS

KATIE SIMBALA



Raised in a Pentecostal household steeped in Honduran heritage, she found solace and inspiration in faith and music, eventually becoming a worship pastor. However, her journey took an unexpected turn when her truth as a queer individual clashed with the constraints of her religious community, resulting in her dismissal. Turning adversity into opportunity, Katie embarked on a cinematic journey, establishing two production studios in Baltimore City. Through filmmaking, she amplifies marginalized voices, crafting narratives that resonate deeply with audiences

JAVIER TORO



Javier Toro hails from the town of Sabana Grande, Puerto Rico, and holds a degree in Sociology from the University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez Campus. Actively engaged in various Carroll County, MD committees such as the Local Management Board, Youth Homelessness, CLAS & Health Equity, he also serves as a certified Notary for the State of Maryland. Currently, Javier works as a Housing Stability Coordinator, providing vital support to individuals facing housing uncertainty, potential loss of housing, homelessness, eviction, and assisting in resource identification for securing long-term housing, among other services.

GOVERNOR'S OFFICE OF COMMUNITY INITIATIVES



SPECIAL SECRETARY
Y. MARIA MARTINEZ



ADMINISTRATIVE DIRECTOR
SILVIA DECJA



EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT
CHERYL MADIGAN

Fer y Ale

DJ AND EVENTS

- ◆ Event Planning.
- ◆ DJ y Maestro de Ceremonias
- ◆ Creación de mixes de música
- ◆ Decoración de eventos
- ◆ Decoración con Globos.
- ◆ Photoboot
- ◆ Party Rentals

 240-598-8111

 Fer y Ale DJ andEvents

 @feryaledjandevents

 [Https://feryaleevents.com](https://feryaleevents.com)



EVENT AGENDA

Thursday, October 1, 2026
5:00 PM - 9:30 PM

5:00 PM

REGISTRATION

5:45 PM

OPENING CEREMONY
NATIONAL ANTHEM PERFORMANCE
NATALIA CARRASCO

5:47 PM

WELCOMING REMARKS
SILVIA DECJA - EMCEE
GOCI ADMINISTRATIVE DIRECTOR
MARIA MARTINEZ
GOCI SPECIAL SECRETARY
JAVIER TORO
GCOHLACA-COMMISSIONER
GABY ARGOTI-FERNANDEZ
GCOHLACA-CHAIR
JAVIER TORO
GCOHLACA-COMMISSIONER
GREG KAHLERT
CCC BOARD OF TRUSTEES-CHAIR
DR. ROSE MINCE
CCC-PRESIDENT

6:08 PM

CULTURAL PERFORMANCE
THE LOPEZ DUET



EVENT AGENDA

Thursday, October 1, 2026
5:00 PM - 9:30 PM

- | | |
|----------------|---|
| 6:17 PM | PRESENTATION OF THE HONOREES
GABY ARGOTI-FERNANDEZ
GCOHLACA CHAIR
LENA HERNANDEZ
GCOHLACA VICE CHAIR |
| 6:38 PM | CULTURAL PERFORMANCES
RAICES ECUATORIANAS |
| 6:53 PM | SPONSORS RECOGNITION & CLOSING REMARKS
LENA HERNANDEZ
GCOHLACA VICE CHAIR |
| 7:17 PM | DINNER CELEBRATION (INVITATION ONLY)
GABY ARGOTI-FERNANDEZ
GCOHLACA-CHAIR |
| 9:17 PM | EVENT CLOSING REMARKS
GABY ARGOTI-FERNANDEZ
GCOHLACA-CHAIR |



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ANNAPOLIS • MARYLAND

SPEAKERS



SPECIAL SECRETARY MARIA MARTINEZ

Appointed in February 2026 by Governor Wes Moore, Y. Maria Martinez leads Maryland's efforts to expand economic opportunity for small, minority, women, and veteran-owned businesses. She oversees socioeconomic procurement programs across 73 agencies, chairs the Subcabinet on Socioeconomic Procurement Participation, and advances statewide training and outreach for businesses seeking State procurement opportunities. Secretary Martinez also chaired the Department of Social and Economic Mobility's transition team before becoming Maryland's first Special Secretary of Public Engagement and Community Initiatives. A first-generation American and accomplished entrepreneur, she brings more than 25 years of private sector experience and serves as a strong advocate for equity and inclusion.



DR. ROSE MINCE - PRESIDENT

Dr. Rosalie V. Mince became the fourth President of Carroll Community College on July 6, 2024. With more than 35 years of leadership experience in community college education, she has served in roles including Associate President, Provost, Vice President of Academic and Student Affairs, and Dean of the Faculty.

Dr. Mince has advanced strategic growth initiatives, including Ratcliffe Works, a workforce development project designed to meet regional needs. She serves on several local and national boards and commissions, strengthening partnerships among education, business, and community organizations. Dr. Mince holds a Ph.D. from the University of Maryland, College Park; an M.S. from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro; and a B.S. from the University of Maryland, College Park.



GREG KAHLERT - CHAIR, BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Greg Kahlert is President and CEO of The Kahlert Foundation, one of the largest private foundations in Maryland and Utah. After nearly 30 years with Evapco, the global heat transfer manufacturer co-founded by his father, William E. Kahlert, Greg retired in 2011 to lead the Foundation and continue his family's legacy of philanthropy.

Under his leadership, The Kahlert Foundation supports nonprofits focused on education, healthcare, youth, veterans, and human services. A graduate of Valparaiso University with a degree in business, Greg serves as Chair of the Carroll Community College Board of Trustees and as a board member of the Cal Ripken Sr. Foundation. He and his wife, Roberta, are active community volunteers and lifelong supporters of charitable causes.





HONOREE MENTIONS

JOSELINE PENA-MELNYK

Maryland House Speaker

Y. MARIA MARTINEZ

Special Secretary of
Public Engagement & Community Initiatives

ELENA QUIROZ-LIVANIS

Acting Secretary of the
Maryland Higher Education Commission

NATALIA MEDINA AHN

Inspector General for the
Maryland Office of the Inspector General of Education

LAURA GUTIERREZ

Chief of Staff at the
Department of Social and Economic Mobility

MARI DORN-LOPEZ

Deputy Director of the
Governor's Office of Immigrant Affairs

MD TWO FIFTY

HONOREE

PAST LEADER-LEGACY



GEORGE ESCOBAR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

WITH MORE THAN 192,000 LIFETIME MEMBERS ACROSS 46 STATES, WE ARE CASA IS A NATIONAL POWERHOUSE ORGANIZATION BUILDING POWER AND IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF LIFE IN WORKING-CLASS BLACK, LATINO/A/E, AFRO-DESCENDANT, INDIGENOUS, AND IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES. WE ARE CASA CREATES CHANGE WITH ITS POWERBUILDING MODEL BLENDING HUMAN SERVICES, COMMUNITY ORGANIZING, AND ADVOCACY IN ORDER TO SERVE THE FULL SPECTRUM OF THE NEEDS, DREAMS, AND ASPIRATIONS OF MEMBERS.

WE ARE CASA HAS COME A LONG WAY FROM THE CHURCH BASEMENT IT STARTED IN OVER 40 YEARS AGO, ESTABLISHED BY ACTIVISTS OPPOSING U.S. INTERFERENCE IN LATIN AMERICA. SINCE THOSE HUMBLE BEGINNINGS, WE ARE CASA HAS GROWN TO REPRESENT A LARGE, DIVERSE MEMBERSHIP BASE COMPOSED OF WORKING CLASS IMMIGRANT FAMILIES FROM ALL OVER LATIN AMERICA, THE CARIBBEAN AND AFRICA, WHO HAVE TRUSTED WE ARE CASA TO BE THEIR SERVICES AND ORGANIZING HOME IN THEIR FIGHT FOR JUSTICE

HONOREE

PRESENT LEADER - IMPACT



ESMERALDA GALLO

ESMERALDA GALLO IS A PROUD SALVADORAN-AMERICAN, EDUCATOR, MOTHER, AND COMMUNITY ADVOCATE WHO HAS CALLED MONTGOMERY COUNTY HOME FOR MOST OF HER LIFE.

SHE CURRENTLY SERVES AS A WELLNESS TRAINER WITH MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS, WHERE SHE SUPPORTS STUDENTS AND FAMILIES THROUGH WELLNESS, MINDFULNESS, SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING, AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT.

ESMERALDA HAS ALWAYS HAD A HEART FOR HELPING OTHERS AND BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER. WHETHER SHE IS SUPPORTING FAMILIES AT HER SCHOOL, CREATING VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS, MENTORING YOUNG PEOPLE, OR HELPING WITHIN HER COMMUNITY, SHE BELIEVES EVEN SMALL ACTS OF SERVICE CAN MAKE A MEANINGFUL DIFFERENCE.

AS A FIRST-GENERATION UNIVERSITY GRADUATE AND PROUD FOOTBALL MOM, ESMERALDA IS ESPECIALLY PASSIONATE ABOUT HELPING YOUNG PEOPLE SEE WHAT IS POSSIBLE FOR THEIR FUTURE. HER SALVADORAN ROOTS, FAMILY, AND LIFE EXPERIENCES CONTINUE TO INSPIRE HER TO SERVE WITH COMPASSION, GRATITUDE, AND LOVE FOR HER COMMUNITY.

HONOREE

FUTURE LEADER-PROMISE



EVELYN CABRERA HERNANDEZ

EVELYN CABRERA HERNANDEZ IS A FIRST-GENERATION GRADUATE AND CIVIL ENGINEERING STUDENT AT MORGAN STATE UNIVERSITY, WHERE SHE IS PURSUING A BACHELOR OF SCIENCE IN CIVIL ENGINEERING WITH A CONCENTRATION IN CONSTRUCTION ENGINEERING AND MANAGEMENT. SHE EARNED HER ASSOCIATE OF SCIENCE IN CIVIL ENGINEERING FROM CARROLL COMMUNITY COLLEGE, GRADUATING WITH ACADEMIC DISTINCTION.

AT CARROLL, EVELYN SERVED AS A STUDENT AMBASSADOR, VICE PRESIDENT AND PRESIDENT OF THE VOCES LATINAS CLUB, STUDENT ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER, AND CAMPUS EVENTS COORDINATOR FOR THE STUDENT GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATION. SHE ALSO PARTICIPATED IN THE STEM SCHOLARS HONORS PROGRAM AND WAS INDUCTED INTO THE TRI-ALPHA FIRST-GENERATION HONOR SOCIETY. THROUGH THESE ROLES, SHE SUPPORTED FELLOW STUDENTS, ASSISTED SPANISH-SPEAKING FAMILIES, CELEBRATED LATINO CULTURE, AND ADVOCATED FOR STUDENT VOICES.

EVELYN IS PASSIONATE ABOUT EDUCATION, COMMUNITY SERVICE, AND CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR OTHERS. SHE HOPES TO USE HER ENGINEERING EDUCATION AND LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE TO CONTRIBUTE TO STRONGER, MORE INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES THROUGHOUT MARYLAND.

HONOREE

FUTURE LEADER-PROMISE



KEVIN J. LOPEZ CRUZ

KEVIN J. LOPEZ CRUZ IS A BOWIE STATE UNIVERSITY STUDENT AND PUBLIC SERVANT WHOSE WORK SPANS ELECTED POLITICAL LEADERSHIP, HIGHER EDUCATION GOVERNANCE, ORGANIZED LABOR, AND PUBLIC HUMANITIES. IN 2026, HE WAS ELECTED TO THE PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY DEMOCRATIC CENTRAL COMMITTEE FOR DISTRICT 24. HE ALSO SERVES AS VICE PRESIDENT FOR UNDERGRADUATE AFFAIRS OF THE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM OF MARYLAND STUDENT COUNCIL, REPRESENTING APPROXIMATELY 130,000 UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS. HIS LABOR AND EDUCATION ADVOCACY INCLUDES SERVICE ON THE NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION'S ADVISORY COMMITTEE OF ASPIRING EDUCATORS AND RESOLUTIONS COMMITTEE, FOLLOWING SERVICE AS AN ASPIRING EDUCATOR BOARD OBSERVER WITH THE MARYLAND STATE EDUCATION ASSOCIATION. KEVIN IS ALSO THE FOUNDER OF THE MARYLAND LATINO ELECTORAL HISTORY PROJECT, AN INDEPENDENT PUBLIC-HISTORY INITIATIVE DOCUMENTING LATINO POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND COMMUNITY MEMORY ACROSS MARYLAND. BORN IN HONDURAS AND RAISED IN PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY, HE WORKS TO EXPAND PATHWAYS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE TO PARTICIPATE IN MARYLAND'S CIVIC LIFE.

PERFORMERS



NATALIA CARRASCO
NATIONAL ANTHEM



THE LOPEZ DUET
POR UNA CABEZA & VENEZUELA



RAICES ECUATORIANAS
PASACALLE, SAN JUANITO,
& BOMBA DEL VALLE DEL CHOTA

THANK YOU
PARTNERS & SPONSORS

PARTNER



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PLATINUM



BRONZE

