

Multi-lingual home care company opens Hartford office

By Diane Weaver Dunne

On a cold, rainy afternoon last month, Hartford City Councilor Rjo Winch and the owners of Utopia Home Care celebrated the opening of their Hartford office with a brief ribbon cutting ceremony.

The event didn't create much fanfare in the way of headlines, but the minority-owned home health care company took another step forward into an untapped market by offering multi-lingual services. The company hires professional health care workers and aides who speak English, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian and Polish.

With 20 branch offices in three states — Florida, New York and Connecticut — Utopia, unlike most mid-sized and regional companies, caters to both mainstream and minority populations. By focusing on these two markets, the company has reaped rapid growth during its 22-year history. Utopia employs 1,450, many of whom are multi-lingual. Its employees' ranks have risen from two in 1983, when Manuel and Angelina Martinez founded the company.

That growth snagged the attention of *The Long Island Business News*, which has identified Utopia among its region's largest minority-owned businesses for the last nine consecutive years.

The founder's son, David Martinez, who heads Utopia's Connecticut oper-

ations, sees potential opportunities in the state's growing Hispanic population. In East Haven, where the company opened a branch office in 1996, Latinos make up 30 percent of Utopia's clientele, he says.

Considering that more than 40 percent of Hartford's population is Hispanic, Utopia will "zero in on the Latino market," in the city, adds David

“Connecticut is the new frontier. Marketers recognize the growth and see this as a viable market in the years ahead.”

— Diane Alverio,

Baldwin/Alverio Media Marketing

Martinez, whose parents are both Puerto Rican.

"They're smart," says Diane Alverio of Baldwin/Alverio Media Marketing, whose Hartford-based firm runs a Hispanic marketing division. "Sophisticated marketers understand the potential revenue growth in the Hispanic market."

While Hartford's Hispanic population doesn't compare to the more sizable numbers seen in Miami and Los Angeles, Hartford's Latino numbers

are substantial, she says.

"Connecticut is the new frontier. Marketers recognize the growth and see this as a viable market in the years ahead," Alverio maintains.

According to the Hispanic Market Report, there are more than 1 million Latinos in New England, with an estimated buying power of \$14.5 billion. The report, published last year by Newport, R.I.-based Ethnic Business Partners, estimates that Hispanic buying power will grow 68 percent by 2008, reaching a total of \$24.6 billion.

Vanessa Toledo, managing director and co-founder of Ethnic Business Partners, says that successful marketing to the Latino population requires a deeper understanding of the culture. Simply translating a mainstream message from English into Spanish can often result in the loss of some of the meaning in the original message.

"A company where [employees] speak the language and understand the culture — [that] is a big plus compared with any other health care provider," Toledo says.

Jose Espin, a financial representative of MetLife in Shelton who moved to New England from Ecuador 34 years ago, agrees.

"It is part of the equation not taken into consideration," he says. "It is important to understand the culture and what makes [patients] do certain things and why." That cultural understanding, he adds, "is going to be critical." ■