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Local Hispanics react to military recruits in their communities

BY MEDILL NEWS SERVICE STAFF
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Mercedes Calzadillas didn't always spend her weekends protesting the war in Iraq.

Before she began writing letters to lawmakers and attending anti-war demonstrations, the Mexican immigrant said she passed long hours looking for work and trying to find a way to make the American Dream come true for herself and her son.

So four years ago, when the military promised to give her son money for college, Calzadillas said she thought she found the solution.

"It seemed very good," she said. "I thought he'd be safe [at a] university, but he hasn't seen the inside of a school yet."

Instead, the military shipped her son off to Iraq, and Calzadillas joined the grassroots Committee Against the Militarization of Our Youth, part of a growing movement in Chicago's Hispanic community to reject the military as a career for its young people.

"We want the kids to know that they can do so much with their lives," Calzadillas said. "There is no reason for them to waste their talents by getting killed in a war."

The antiwar movement comes at a time when the military is putting special emphasis on recruiting. Recent reluctance by Americans to join the armed forces during wartime has caused the military to miss its recruitment goals nationwide and extend the terms of service for those already enlisted.

In Chicago, where the U.S. Census Bureau lists Hispanics as comprising more than 25 percent of the city's population in 2000, any increased effort by the military to meet recruiting goals will mean, in part, a push to sign up Hispanic youth.

Sgt. 1st Class Luis Medina, a Puerto Rican officer responsible for U.S. Army recruiting in northwest Chicago, said he uses his Spanish almost everyday to talk to young people who might join the Army or to their parents. His goal of recruiting two people per month has sometimes been hard to reach, he said, because people say they don't want to sign up with the increased chance of serving abroad.

But Medina remains active in the community, often attending musical or sporting events at Steinmetz High School, at 3030 N. Mobile Ave. Next month he plans to go to the neighborhood's Puerto Rican Day parade to recruit.

About 15 percent of the Army's advertising budget for the Chicago area is devoted to reaching the Hispanic community, according to Bill Kelo, chief of advertising and public affairs for the Army's Chicago recruiting battalion. In addition to attending cultural events, the Army collaborates with Hispanic advertising agencies to put Spanish-language ads on television and in newspapers and has recruiters standing by to chat on-line in Spanish with potential applicants.

In combination with persistent recruiters, that advertising works, Calzadillas said.

"I feel guilty, because when I saw the [Spanish] ad on television, I told my son, 'Don't you think you should go and see if you can get some money?'" she said. "After he went to get some information, [the recruiter] kept calling and calling two or three times a day. My son would try to hide and say, 'Tell them I'm not here.' But when he talked to them, they convinced him to join."

The Army has seen a growth in Hispanic recruits in recent years, according to Douglas Smith, a spokesman for the U.S. Army recruiting command. Hispanics currently make up about 13 percent of the active Army, up from 10 percent in 2000. That year, 16.4 percent of the total U.S. population between the ages of 17 and 21 was Hispanic, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the age group that makes up the Army's prime recruiting demographic.

Much of Chicago-area recruiting takes place in the city's public high schools. Marco Garduno, a Mexican-American graduate of Kennedy High School on the West Side, said that in his experience, recruiters disproportionately target minority students.

"The first time they tried to recruit me, I was taken out of my gym class and brought to the library to see a presentation on the military," he said. "I was taken with about 20 other kids, and we were all Latino or black males. I really don't know how they chose us. That's just what I noticed."

During the 2002-03 school year, Kennedy High School was about 45 percent Hispanic, 40 percent white and 14 percent black, according to Chicago Public School statistics.



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