

3rd Annual Latin@ Economic Summit

“Unity es Poder”

Thursday, July 31, 2025

Moraine Valley Community College
Palos Hills, IL

9:30 AM - 2:00 PM



Illinois
Department of Commerce
& Economic Opportunity
OFFICE OF ECONOMIC EQUITY & EMPOWERMENT



CHICAGO LATINA
FOUNDATION & MAGAZINE



GREATER SOUTHWEST
DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION



BMO



ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF
Human Rights

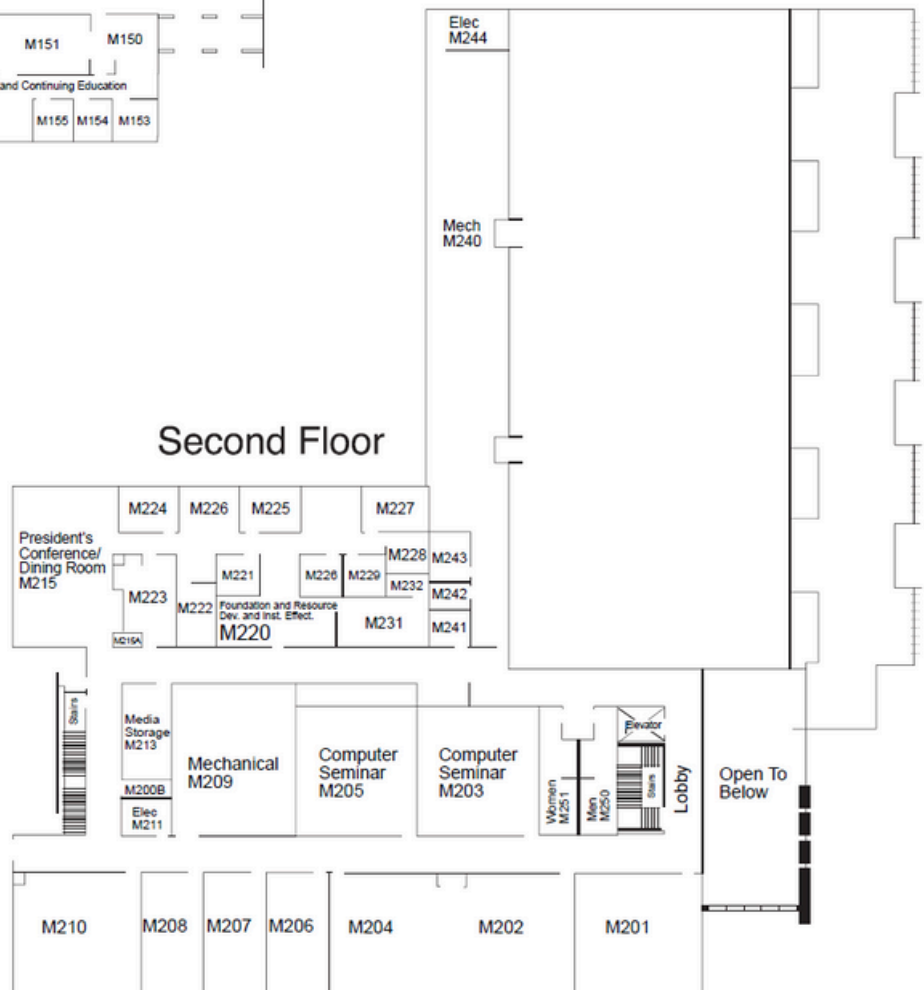
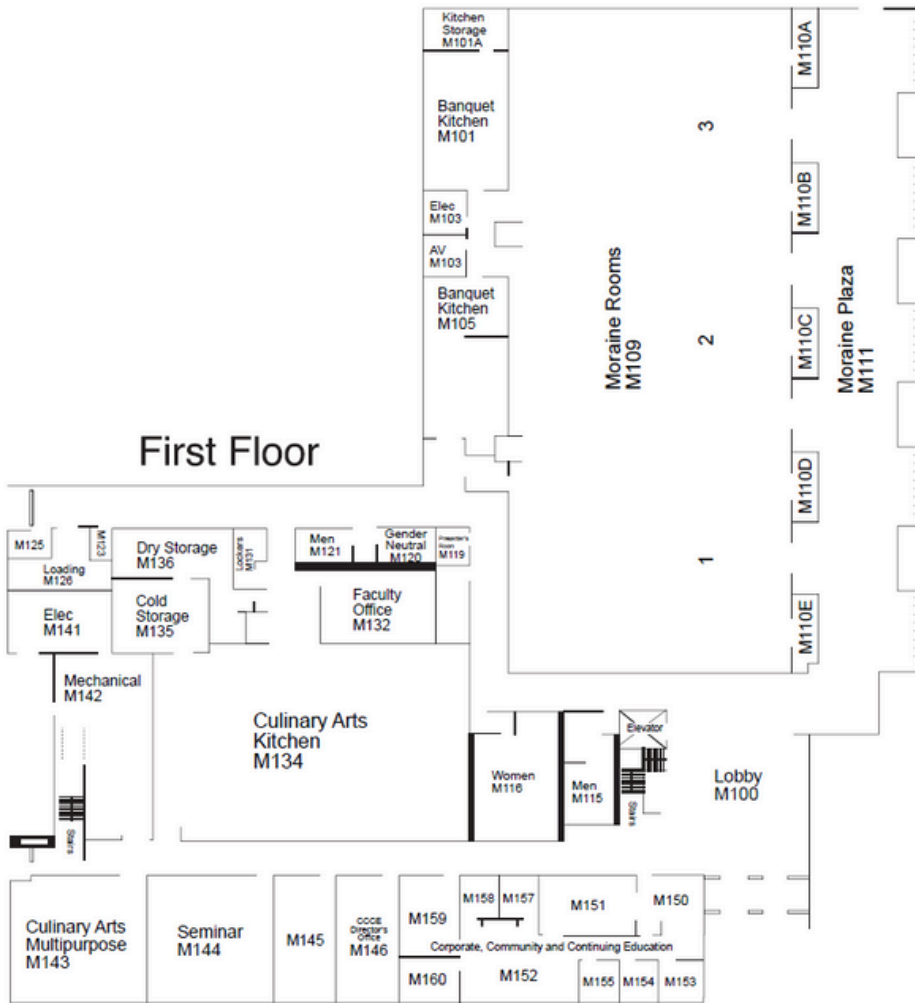


Southland
Development Authority
Driving Growth in Greater Chicago



Vicinity
credit union

Moraine Valley Community College - Building M



Agenda

9:30 - 10:00 AM Registration & Sign-in

10:00 - 10:15 AM Welcome Remarks

Moraine Room

10:15 - 10:20 AM Exciting Éxito

Moraine Room

- Aidee and Monica San Miguel, VOLVERde

10:20 - 10:30 AM Break

10:35 - 11:25 AM Breakout Sessions #1

“Tech Forward: Leveraging AI & Innovation for Business Growth”

Moraine Room 1

Embracing AI and emerging technologies is key to staying competitive. This session explores how businesses can harness AI, automation, and digital innovation to drive efficiency, enhance customer experiences, and scale operations. Industry experts will share insights and practical strategies to help you navigate the evolving tech landscape and fuel business growth.

- Moderator: Kristi Dula, Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity (DCEO)
- Olga Camargo, SHENIX®
- Carlos Cardenas, DelCor Technology Solutions
- Omar Hernandez, ONEBIT Inc.

“The Franchise Playbook: Building & Scaling Your Business”

Moraine Room 2

Franchising offers a powerful path to business growth, but success requires the right strategy, resources, and mindset. This session will break down the fundamentals of franchising—whether you’re looking to franchise your own business or invest in an existing model. Industry experts will share insights on choosing the right franchise, securing funding, navigating legal requirements, and scaling for long-term success. Gain practical knowledge and actionable steps to leverage the franchise model and build a thriving business.

- Moderator: Aimee Navarro, Greater Southwest Development Corporation
- Maricella Guzman, AMC Chicago, Inc., DBA Buffalo Wild Wings-Lincoln Park
- Hernan Morfin, Cilantro Taco Grill
- Jaime Ochoa, The UPS Store Bensenville

“Private Sector Partnerships: Procurement for Growth”

Moraine Room 3

Explores how strategic procurement practices can drive economic growth through effective private sector partnerships. Experts will discuss innovative approaches to private contracts that create opportunities for businesses. Join this breakout to learn how procurement opportunities in the private sector can become a powerful tool for inclusive economic expansion for your business.

- Moderator: Letty Velez, IC Clean Energy
- Stefanie McLeese, Stefanie Santos McLeese
- Chef Atzimba Pérez, Atzimba Catering and Events
- Jose Robles-Michelena, Chicago Minority Supplier Development Council

11:25 - 11:35 AM Break

“Winning Contracts: Navigating the Government Procurement Process”

Moraine Room 1

Securing government contracts can be a game-changer for businesses, but the process can be complex and competitive. This session will provide a step-by-step guide to navigating the government procurement system, from identifying opportunities to submitting winning proposals. Experts will share insights on certifications, compliance requirements, and best practices for standing out in the bidding process. Whether you're a small business owner or an established company looking to expand into the government sector, this session will equip you with the knowledge and strategies needed to win contracts and grow your business.

- Moderator: Ivette Trevino, Hispanic American Construction Industry Association (HACIA)
- Carolyn Caballero, Bella Dia Designs
- Adrian Rodriguez, Illinois Hispanic Chamber of Commerce
- Roberto Velazquez, Semper Fi Land Inc.

“Passing the Torch: Building a Strong Legacy for Your Business”

Moraine Room 2

A lasting business legacy requires strategic planning and leadership transition. This session explores succession planning, wealth preservation, and maintaining company values. Learn key steps to ensure a smooth transition and long-term success for your business.

- Moderator: Noeli Serna, Serna Legal Services
- Haydee Caldero, ILCEO
- Yadira Enriquez, Enriquez Produce, Inc.
- Mike Moreno, Moreno's Liquors

“From Side Hustle to CEO: Scaling Your Passion into Profit”

Moraine Room 3

Turning a passion project into a full-fledged business takes strategy, resilience, and the right resources. This session is designed for entrepreneurs and aspiring business owners who want to scale their side hustle into a thriving company. Industry experts and successful founders will share insights on securing funding, building sustainable business models, leveraging digital marketing, and overcoming common growth challenges. Whether you're just starting or looking to take your business to the next level, this session will provide actionable steps to help you transition from a side hustle to a CEO mindset.

- Moderator: Samandra Diaz, Joyeria Di Lustro
- Ardul Aquino, Tu Party Chicago Events & Tu Party Hillside Bar Banquetes
- July Franco, Gunny Gear/Franco Hauling LLC
- Reina Marcelle, Reina's Cakes

12:25 - 12:35 PM Break

12:35 - 1:05 PM The Power of Connection: Mastering Networking for Success (Lunch Discussion)

Moraine Room

Strong networks open doors to new opportunities. This session explores effective networking strategies, relationship-building techniques, and ways to leverage connections for career and business growth. Learn how to network with confidence and purpose.

- Carmen Jimenez, Hispanic Business Network - Chicago

1:05 - 1:25 PM Keynote Speaker

Moraine Room

- Melissa Martinez, Cool Party Balloons

1:25 - 2:00 PM Unlocking Capital: Strategies for Securing Funding & Growth

Moraine Room

Access to capital is key to business success. This session covers funding options, investor insights, and financial strategies to fuel growth. Learn how to secure the right capital to scale your business.

- Moderator: Amor Montes de Oca, mHUB
- Vanessa Aguirre, LISC
- Elvin Rodriguez, Allies for Community Business
- Carlos Salazar, Huntington National Bank

List of Exhibitors:

1. BMO Bank
2. Center for Changing Lives
3. Fempreneur Poder Hub
4. Founders First Capital Partners
5. Greater Southwest Development Corporation
6. Huntington Bank
7. Illinois Commission on Equity and Inclusion
8. Illinois Department of Financial and Professional Regulation
9. Illinois Department of Human Rights
10. Illinois Department of Human Services Community Services Enterprise Programs - BEP
11. Illinois Hispanic Chamber of Commerce
12. Illinois Office of the Comptroller
13. Illinois State Treasurer's Office
14. LISC
15. Northwest Hispanic Chamber of Commerce
16. Self-Help Federal Credit Union
17. Southland Development Authority
18. Waterman Bank

List of Technical Assistance Providers:

1. 36Squared Business Incubator
2. Foundation of Little Village
3. Greater Southwest Development Corporation
4. Illinois Hispanic Chamber of Commerce
5. Rogers Park Business Alliance
6. SBDC at Arab-American Business and Professional Association
7. SBDC at Waubonsee Community College
8. The Binational Institute of Human Development (BIHD)
9. The Puerto Rican Cultural Center

Planning Committee



Diana Alfaro is the Latinx Business Development Manager for the Illinois Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity – Office of Economic Equity & Empowerment (OE3). She is equity-driven and has spent her time supporting and empowering underserved communities, minorities, women, persons with disabilities, veterans, Arab/MENA, and LGBTQIA+, focusing on Latinx/o/a and Hispanic-owned businesses. Diana supports small businesses, as they are vital to building a strong economy, by creating intentional outreach removing systemic barriers.



Sergio Anariba serves as the Business Education Manager for the Economic Empowerment Center at Southland Development Authority. He has a Business Administration academic background equipping him with the necessary knowledge to assist small businesses effectively. His passion lies in utilizing his expertise to benefit small businesses in Chicago, helping them develop their entrepreneurial skills and establish or expand their enterprises.



Mayra Avila is a Marketing & Social Impact Manager. She has over 16 years of experience as a marketing and business development professional. Mayra comes from a financial background working for credit unions in Illinois and Indiana, most recently at United Credit Union. At the Southwest Collective, she brings her passion for building relationships and helping small businesses.



Alan Castro is the Market President for Waterman Bank. He is an experienced mortgage professional who's been helping his clients reach their homeownership goals for almost 20 years. In that time, he's developed a reputation for integrity and professionalism. He's also trusted to provide tailored loan solutions that fit his clients' unique situations.



Linda Del Bosque is the Founder and Editor in Chief of Chicago Latina Magazine, a publication focusing on exceptional Latinas within the Chicagoland area, closing the gap of resources, access to information, and building generational wealth. Del Bosque is a pre-law student at Northwestern University, with a 2027 graduation date from Pritzker Law School.



Letticia Flores Poole is a Senior, Regional Manager, U.S. Zero Barriers to Business program, where she is responsible for supporting the bank's strategy to assist Latino and Hispanic business owners with access to capital, educational resources and meaningful networking opportunities across BMO Bank, N.A. U.S. footprint and specifically within its Chicago North and Arizona regions. Letticia possesses 25+ years of banking leadership and management experience homed in the personal and business banking industry.



Jennifer Franco is the founder of the Fempreneur Poder Hub, Jennifer empowers women of color in entrepreneurship, providing financial literacy education, resources, referrals, and support networks. She holds a B.A. in Political Science from NEIU and an M.A. in Women & Gender Studies from Loyola. Her commitment to eliminating racial, ethnic, and economic inequalities in the economic & educational sectors are deeply rooted in her Guatemalan background and experiences growing up in a single-mother home.



Tulio Juarez is a dedicated Business Advisor with Greater Southwest Development Corporation, serving small businesses & entrepreneurs throughout Cook County, Chicago. With a strong focus on the Southwest Side, he helps businesses start, grow, and scale by providing strategic guidance through key business support programs such as the Illinois SBDC, APEX Accelerators, Cook County Source & the City of Chicago's NBDC/BACP Programs. He assists with launching startups, expanding operations, navigating government contracting, & applying for funding opportunities. He is committed to empowering local communities by guiding clients through sustainable growth strategies, connecting them to vital resources, & fostering long-term business success that drives neighborhood revitalization.



Anggi Lewis is the Marketing Data Specialist at the Office of Economic Equity & Empowerment (OE3). She leads OE3's marketing targeting diverse demographics and communities. Her previous employment includes Southern Illinois University Carbondale, where she focused on online and nontraditional students at military bases and community colleges across the US. She has a master's in Television Management from Drexel University.



Irma Lopez is the President and Owner of ICL Consulting, LLC, with over 20 years of experience in economic development, government outreach, and small business advocacy. She currently serves as a Community Engagement Consultant with the Illinois Department of Human Rights, leading outreach on the Illinois Human Rights Act and available state programs. Previously, Irma coordinated the Illinois Coronavirus Response & Relief Business Center at the Chicago Minority Supplier Development Council, supporting minority-owned businesses during the pandemic. She has also contracted with the Illinois Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, offering technical assistance through the PTAC program.



Amor Montes de Oca is the Strategic Initiatives Program Manager at mHUB, where she designs and executes strategic initiatives with a focus on manufacturing readiness for hardtech startups, product innovation, and commercialization pathways. She helps entrepreneurs and small businesses build capacity, access resources, and scale their ventures through hands-on support and cross-sector collaboration. Previously, Amor served as the Executive Director of Illinois Women in Cannabis. Amor is also a co-founder and former Director of Strategic Initiatives at 2112—Chicago's first incubator for creative industries.

Also serves as a moderator for: Unlocking Capital: Strategies for Securing Funding & Growth



Aimee Navarro is a Director of the Illinois SBDC at Greater Southwest Development Corporation and a Certified Business Advisor with deep roots in Chicago and a strong commitment to economic equity. She has extensive experience in small business advising, nonprofit leadership, and community organizing, she is fueled by her passionate to tackle mission-minded work that creates lasting impact. Aimee's focus is on strengthening underserved communities by helping entrepreneurs build, grow, and sustain their businesses. Whether facilitating access to resources, advocating for fair opportunities, or guiding clients through strategic planning, her work is driven by a belief that strong small businesses lead to stronger communities.

Also serves as a moderator for: The Franchise Playbook: Building & Scaling Your Business



Sindi Palomino is the Administrative Assistant and Fiscal Liaison in the Office of Economic Equity & Empowerment (OE3) at DCEO. She has been serving Chicago for over 15 years working in not-for-profit, education, and IL state agencies. She joined the Illinois Department of Human Services in 2019 and provided critical Medicaid, CASH and SNAP services during the pandemic. Sindi has seen the importance and impact of education, financial literacy, and small businesses supporting IL families and communities.



Cindy Patino is the Membership Manager at the Hispanic American Construction Industry Association (HACIA), a nonprofit and membership organization working to ensure equity in the construction industry. As a Membership Manager, Cindy develops and implements engagement strategies with new members, manages outreach events, fosters strategic relationships with partners and stakeholders, and provides technical assistance to support member's business needs.



Vanessa Rodriguez Aguirre is a Senior Small Business Program Officer with Local Initiatives Support Corp. (LISC); a national community development financial institution. She earned an MBA in Finance and has 15+ years of business banking experience. Vanessa is the daughter of immigrants who taught her to work hard and help others, she does this by providing equitable lending services and technical assistance to small businesses.

Also a speaker for Unlocking Capital: Strategies for Securing Funding & Growth



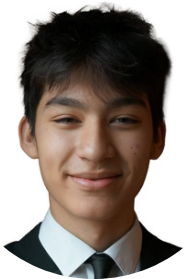
Eddie Soto is the Executive Director of the Lake County Tech Hub and Business Incubator. He is certified as an IESBGA/SBA Business Specialist (CBDA) and SBA 7(J) in government contracting negotiations. Holds Harvard U certification in Contract Law. Prior, he spent 11 years at the College of Lake County (CLC) as Sr Advisor with the Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at Grayslake, Vernon Hills, and helped open the Waukegan SBDC office, conducting over 2,700 client sessions, facilitating workshops and teaching business classes. Fluent in Spanish, Eddie also owns E.S. Online Enterprises, Inc., a global branding, and communications agency founded in 2005, and New Norm Biz, Inc. (2021). He brings 19 years as a small business owner and 24 years of corporate business management experience.



Letty Velez is CEO of Velez Global Enterprises & IC Clean Energy, Velez works on revenue growth, amplifying brands, and access to capital with a focus on grants, and IC is a clean energy company focused on solar & EVs. She is known as a “Community Navigator” by creating value for her Clients/Community Partners. Letty is also the Founder of IC U/Latinas, an entrepreneur learning cohort (that’s like a mini MBA on steroids) with over 275 Latinas nationwide.

Also serves as a moderator for Private Sector Partnerships: Procurement for Growth

Assisted by:



Brandon Grochowski is a rising senior at Michigan State University studying electrical engineering. He is currently a D&I Intern for the Office of Economic Equity and Empowerment, where he has been creating business resources for local underserved entrepreneurs and business owners. He has also been tasked with reviewing grant applications from small businesses across Illinois, which he finds extremely meaningful, as it allows him to help those who deserve it.



Anthony Mata-Bolandi is a Summer Intern with the Office of Economic Equity & Empowerment (OE3) at DCEO. He is a recent graduate of Olivet Nazarene University, where he earned a double major in Business Administration-Management and Entrepreneurship. His background includes roles in economic development, public service, and community leadership, with experience working with the Mercado on Fifth’s Minority-Based Business Incubator and volunteering as a tax preparer with the IRS Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program. On campus, he served as President of both the Collegiate Entrepreneurs Organization and the Hispanic Student Christian Association.



Jude Stephenson is a rising senior at the University of Wisconsin - Madison, where he is completing a degree in Legal Studies and Political Science. He is one of two Curry Interns working within the Office of Economic Equity and Empowerment this summer, where he has been working on building community-based business development guides. In tandem with those, he has also been helping review current grant applications, and generally anywhere that the team needs help.

AMBASSADOR



Mari Arriola is a Certified Business & Life Coach at Mujer Audaz LLC. La Mujer Audaz's mission is to empower women to master their lives and businesses through transformative Life Coaching, with a bold focus on cultivating emotional intelligence, building growth & resilience. She inspires actionable change, unlocking unshakable self-confidence through the Audacious Mindset Podcast.



Diana Beltran is a dynamic and multi-passionate entrepreneur making a significant impact in various industries. As the founder of Latina Boss Babes International, a thriving Latina-based networking group, she empowers and uplifts aspiring businesswomen. Alongside her successful venture, Diana is also the proud owner of Beltran Cleaning Service, a reputable residential and commercial cleaning business serving Chicago's Northwest Suburbs.



Patricia "Trisha" Beltran is a powerhouse business strategist, speaker, and founder of JMB Innovative Business Solutions. Known for her bold yet deeply grounded leadership style, Trisha helps growth-driven entrepreneurs, especially Latinas, align their vision with strategy to create lasting success and impact. As a NAWBO Next Gen award recipient, published thought leader in Chicago Latina Magazine, and creator of Latina Leaders Unleashed series, she empowers women through transformational experiences, practical tools, and community.



Antonio R Guillen serves as a Business Development Officer for Wintrust Bank. Antonio has over 35 years' experience in business banking, specifically lending to small to medium size businesses and commercial real estate financing and development. He supports Community Organization serving as the President of the Hispanic Bankers Association and several other boards including the Little Village Chamber of Commerce, Chicago Latino Theater Alliance, Alivio Medical Center, Bernie Mac Foundation, and is a Member of the Latino Advisory Council for Catholic Charities. Antonio is a Chicago native and married with five children.



The Hermosa Belmont Cragin Chamber of Commerce is the first Chamber to fully serve two of Chicago's most vibrant and historically underrepresented communities on the Northwest side. Built by local entrepreneurs and organizers in 2024, we focus on small business support, community development, and youth entrepreneurship. Our hyperlocal approach fuels long-term impact and ensures that progress uplifts those who live, work, and lead in our neighborhoods.

AMBASSADOR



Tony Santana is a dynamic banking professional with 25 years of experience where he has served customers and communities. He has lead banking teams throughout Northwest IN., South side of Chicago, and the South Suburbs. He currently is a Vice President/Manager with BMO in Crete, IL. He was born and raised in Gary, IN., went on to play college football, and graduated from University of Evansville with a B.S. in Marketing/Finance. His passion is teaching youth and small business owners about financial literacy.



Jennifer Solarte is an author, entrepreneur, trauma life coach, reiki master, somatic practitioner, and speaker who is passionate about helping women live their best lives after trauma and abuse. She is the Founder of the nonprofit organization, &Rise, whose mission is to empower women to be the ultimate versions of themselves no matter their adversities. Jennifer has years of experience working with survivors and provides trauma-informed care to those she works with.



Sunshine Enterprises' mission is to empower high-potential entrepreneurs living in under-resourced neighborhoods to start or grow their businesses and transform their communities. Rising entrepreneurs are encouraged to complete our 12-week Community Business Academy. After graduation, alumni are then able to participate in our Business Acceleration Services and Credit to Capital programs.

Remark



Rebecca Estrada is the Deputy Director of the Office of Economic Equity & Empowerment (OE3). She has over 15 years of progressive leadership experience working in the nonprofit and government sectors. Her work has addressed issues in the areas of education, immigration reform, fair housing, violence reduction, and workforce development. She holds an MBA from National Louis University and a BS from Loyola University Chicago.

Master of Ceremony



Lisbeth Vargas Jaimes is a proud first-generation Mexican-American and Chicago native who finds joy in bringing people together. A bookworm turned builder with a Master's in Integrated Marketing Communications from Northwestern, she's helped scale multi-million dollar brands across tech and cannabis. Her experience spans academia and startup life, with work in marketing, growth, operations, and fundraising. She now leads Fraction Agencia, a bilingual events and marketing studio helping mission-driven brands show up with intention and culture at the center. Lisbeth is honored to serve as your MC today, amplifying voices, creating space, and celebrating our collective power.

Exciting Éxito



Aidee San Miguel is one of the Co-founders of VOLVERde. She studied electrical engineering at the University of Illinois at Chicago and spent 6 years working in various engineering firms in the Chicagoland area. She left her corporate career as a design engineer to launch VOLVERde. She is a mom, indie music fan and avid science fiction reader.



Monica San Miguel is the other VOLVERde Co-founder. She studied economics and public policy at UCLA and Princeton University. Mónica spent 12 years working in financial technology, culminating in several business leadership positions. She has launched and scaled several consumer finance businesses around the world. She is a mom, music lover and nature enthusiast.

Keynote Speaker



Melissa Martinez is the founder and CEO of Cool Party Balloons, Illinois' leading retail and wholesale balloon distributor. She launched the company in 2024 with no advertising budget, building it from the ground up into a trusted resource for balloon professionals nationwide. Melissa began her journey in the balloon industry as a decorator in 2022, driven by a passion for creativity and design. Prior to launching her business, she spent over 20 years in the corporate world leading marketing, strategy, and sales initiatives across the telecom, lottery, television media, and newspaper industries. As a proud Latina entrepreneur, she's committed to building community and supporting others on their entrepreneurial journeys.

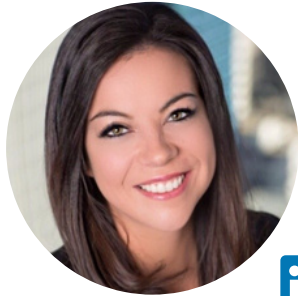
The Power of Connection: Mastering Networking for Success



Carmen Jimenez is a seasoned public accounting professional with 18 years of experience, based in Chicago and a proud graduate of DePaul University. She specializes in financial accuracy, compliance and strategic decision-making for individuals, businesses and nonprofits. Passionate about community impact, she co-founded the Hispanic Business Network 11 years ago, which launched a foundation and a scholarship fund supporting first generation college students. She values strong relationship building as the cornerstone of effective networking. Outside of work, Carmen is a proud mother, loyal White Sox fan, and absolutely adores her 104-pound Pitbull Granddog - Concrete.

Tech Forward: Leveraging AI & Innovation for Business Growth

Moderator:



Kristi Dula is a Deputy Director at the Illinois Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity, where she leads the Office of Entrepreneurship, Innovation & Technology to advance innovation, entrepreneurship, and tech-driven growth across the state. She previously served as Director of Network Relations at Pritzker Group Venture Capital, connecting portfolio companies with strategic partners, customers, and advisors. As a founding team member of 1871, Kristi helped shape Chicago's startup ecosystem by engaging industry, academic, and international collaborators. She was a Founding Board Member of the Women in Entrepreneurship Institute at DePaul University and a co-founder of Chicago:Blend, which promotes diversity and inclusion in the region's startup and venture capital community. Kristi has spent her career building bridges across sectors to support founders and strengthen innovation ecosystems.

Speaker Bios:



Olga Camargo is a seasoned financial professional with over 20 years of experience in the industry, specializing in retirement plan advisory for organizations including non-profits, charter schools, and healthcare institutions. She is the Managing Director and Co-Head of FARO Advisory at Centric Wealth Management LLC, where she helps clients achieve their financial goals through strategic guidance. Olga is also the founder and CEO of SHENIX®, a culturally relevant financial wellness app aimed at increasing financial literacy and empowering users. As the first Latina Chair of Northeastern Illinois University's Foundation Board, she is committed to promoting diversity and inclusion in finance. Olga holds advanced degrees from the University of Illinois at Chicago and has been recognized among Chicago's Most Influential Latinos and Most Powerful Latinos by Crain's Chicago Business.



Carlos Cardenas is a U.S. Marine Corps veteran who served five years globally, and during Operation Enduring Freedom. He is the Senior Strategic Consultant at DelCor Technology Solutions. Carlos co-founded Association Latinos and serves as Board Secretary, advancing Latino leadership in associations. He is also a past chair of the American Society of Association Executive (ASAE) Tech Council, is an alum of their Diversity Executive Leadership Program (DELP) and is a founding member of the Veterans Chamber of Commerce. Outside of work, he is a passionate traveler, street photographer, and mentor, sharing visual stories.



Omar Hernandez is the founder and CEO of ONEBIT INC., a Chicago-based fintech company providing real-time financial insights for small businesses. As a first-generation Latino entrepreneur, he is committed to building accessible tools that empower independent business owners to thrive. He is a member of the 1871 FinTech Innovation Lab and a recipient of the Google for Startups Latino Founders Fund. His work has been recognized at the MIT Sloan FinTech Conference and other national stages. Omar's mission is rooted in economic inclusion, leveraging technology to help Latinx entrepreneurs make confident, data-driven decisions.

The Franchise Playbook: Building & Scaling Your Business

Moderator:



Aimee Navarro is a Director of the Illinois SBDC at Greater Southwest Development Corporation and a Certified Business Advisor with deep roots in Chicago and a strong commitment to economic equity. She has extensive experience in small business advising, nonprofit leadership, and community organizing, she is fueled by her passion to tackle mission-minded work that creates lasting impact. Aimee's focus is on strengthening underserved communities by helping entrepreneurs build, grow, and sustain their businesses. Whether facilitating access to resources, advocating for fair opportunities, or guiding clients through strategic planning, her work is driven by a belief that strong small businesses lead to stronger communities.

Also serves on the planning committee for this event.

Speaker Bios:



Maricela Guzman is a restaurateur and owner of AMC Chicago, Inc. dba Buffalo Wild Wings-Lincoln Park. Maricela has been a franchisee of this brand for two years. Although new to the industry, many of Maricela's skills and talents have been transferable in this new role as a restaurateur. Maricela works to develop her team as she focuses on the processes that drive profit and growth for the business. Maricela earned a degree in Exercise Physiology/Personal Training from UIC and a Master's degree in Business Leadership from The American College.



Hernan Morfin was born in Guadalajara, Mexico, as the youngest of his siblings, he grew up traveling between the USA and Mexico. He always showed great interest in computers, video games, and electronics, which led him to pursue engineering. He studied at the University of Guadalajara and the University of California at Berkeley, where his studies focused on engineering and entrepreneurship. He was the founder of a startup in Mexico called tecXcon that offered nearshoring software services from Mexico to Central Europe. He later consolidated his work in technology as a key player at INBest. In 2022, he made the decision to move to Chicago to help CTG form a new level for the company, supporting its national and international growth.



Jaime Ochoa is a Franchise Trainer at UPS Store Bensenville. He facilitates, teaches, and shares corporate policy, operating procedures, and best practices in preparing new franchisees to operate their centers. Jaime is a retired U.S. Navy Lieutenant, Supply Corps Officer. He had 20 years of military experience, training, and achievements to mentor, grow, and advance individuals and organizations with their goals and visions.

Private Sector Partnerships: Procurement for Growth

Moderator:



Letty Velez is CEO of IC Clean Energy, a clean energy company focused on solar and EV Charging Station installations. She is known as a “Community Navigator” by creating value for her Clients/Community Partners. Letty is also the Founder of IC U/Latinas, an entrepreneur learning cohort (that’s like a mini MBA on steroids) with over 275 Latinas nationwide.

Also serves on the planning committee for this event

Speaker Bios:



Stefanie McLeese spent the first eight years of her career in corporate communications roles with global brands and has been independently serving clients across the globe since 2011, and is based in Central Illinois. Stefanie builds brand equity for her clients by providing strategic counsel to operationalize their brand, giving stakeholders consistent brand experiences at every touchpoint. She also operates in fractional branding or communications leader roles to contribute and work as an extended member of an in-house team, often helping develop emerging leaders. With 20 years of experience, Stefanie expertly guides executives and teams through transformative journeys, from focused workshops to immersive retreats throughout the continental United States and Puerto Rico.



Chef Atzimba Pérez is the owner of Atzimba Catering and Events. With over 25 years of experience in the culinary arts industry, Atzimba brings Pre-Hispanic, traditional Mexican cuisine to Chicago. She is also an entrepreneur, founder, owner, and philanthropist. Her work has been recognized, warranting several interviews, shows, and programs like PBS Kids Channel 11, in which she is in a six-episode series called “No Passport Required”.



Jose Robles-Michelena is the Executive Vice President and Chief of Staff of the Chicago Minority Supplier Development Council. He is responsible for daily operations, minority business enterprise (MBE) development programs, supplier diversity certification, and corporate member engagement. He is also responsible for financial stewardship, ensuring fiscal responsibility and operational efficiency, while leading a dynamic team of staff and contractors.

Winning Contracts: Navigating the Government Procurement Process

Moderator:



Ivette Trevino is the Director of Strategic Partnerships and Membership Engagement at HACIA, where she leads initiatives to support and grow small and diverse businesses in the construction industry. With 18 years of nonprofit experience, Ivette has built inclusive ecosystems that drive economic impact and create opportunity. She previously served as Executive Director of the Little Village Chamber of Commerce and held key leadership roles at the Illinois Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. A lifelong learner, Ivette recently completed her MBA and leadership programs, including the Chicago Latino Caucus Foundation Leadership Academy, Mujeres de HACE, and the Metropolitan Leadership Institute's Next Generation Leadership Program.

Speaker Bios:



Adrian Rodriguez is the Co-Founder of Contract Radar Maximizer (CORAMA). CORAMA, a collaborative AI platform, streamlines the bidding process for small, minority-owned, and women-owned businesses. In 2023, CORAMA was a finalist at the 13th World Chambers Congress, recognizing innovative projects by chambers of commerce.



Carolyn Caballero is the owner and Creative Director of Bella Dia Designs, LLC, a certified MBE/WBE/DBE sign company based in Chicagoland. She partners with businesses to create impactful visual identities through signage and design. Inspired by her grandfather, a printer who immigrated from Jalisco, Mexico, Carolyn carries forward his entrepreneurial spirit and passion for craft in every project. Her work leaves a lasting footprint across the city, with projects at Midway Airport, Microsoft Chi22 Data Center, the National Public Housing Museum, and numerous construction firms. Carolyn serves on the Board of Directors for HACIA and is dedicated to helping entrepreneurs tell their stories through design.



Roberto Velazquez is the founder of Semper Fi Land Service Inc. He served as an Infantryman during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Semper Fi began as a small neighborhood landscaping business powered by grit, determination, and unwavering family support. Semper Fi has grown into a 40 full-time professionals specializing in all facets of heavy landscape construction, including habitat enhancement, wetland restoration, stream and shoreline stabilization, green infrastructure, and natural areas management.

Passing the Torch: Building a Strong Legacy for Your Business

Moderator:



Noeli Serna is a Spanish-speaking corporate attorney and the founder of Serna Legal Services. She guides ambitious entrepreneurs through business growth, strategic business purchases and sales and complex contracts. She is the daughter of an entrepreneurial Latine family and knows first-hand the challenges and sacrifices of entrepreneurs. She grew up at the family restaurant, which contributed to her interest in business and appreciation for excellent customer service.

Speaker Bios:



Haydee Caldero is the Executive Director of the Illinois Center for Employee Ownership (ILCEO), a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the economic well-being of workers throughout Illinois. ILCEO achieves this by educating business owners, their advisors, local governments, and community stakeholders on the social impact and business advantages of employee ownership. She previously served as COO of a 100% employee-owned company, Haydee oversaw the implementation of the ESOP, annual audits, valuations, ESOP administration, and employee engagement.



Yadira Enriquez is the Chief Financial Officer, VP of Business Development, and Family Business Advisor of Enriquez Produce, Inc., a wholesale produce distribution company founded in 1989, named one of the 50 Most Powerful Hispanic Businesses in Illinois in 2022. She has been involved in various scaling programs such as The Stanford Latino Entrepreneurship Initiative, Ernst and Young's Entrepreneur Access Network, and Goldman Sachs' 10,000 Small Businesses Program.



Mike Moreno is a co-owner of Moreno's Liquors, which was founded in 1977 on the corner of 26th Street & Harding in Little Village, Chicago. He is a self-made entrepreneur, had the vision of bringing the most diverse collection of Mexican spirits available to the Chicagoland area. Along with having family roots in the Little Village community, Moreno's Liquors has made itself an asset to the community through its continuous support of local community organizations and churches.

From Side Hustle to CEO: Scaling Your Passion into Profit

Moderator:



Samandra Diaz began her career in hospitality with Lettuce Entertain You and later transitioned into hotel management, where she gained a deep understanding of corporate structure, systems, and operations. Her most recent role as a Director of Catering & Conference Services at a luxury hotel in Chicago expanded her skills in sales, mentoring, and leading high-performing teams. Together, she and her husband co-own Colectiva Social Hospitality with four concepts focused on event planning, consulting, pop-ups, and catering. She also runs Joyeria Di Lustro, a jewelry showroom & wholesaler with her sister in Little Village - more than a wholesaler, she provides opportunities for others to start their own business.

Speaker Bios:



Ardul Aquino. After completing a Computer Science degree in Oaxaca, Mexico, Ardul emigrated to Chicago in November 2004. He worked in various fields such as restaurants and construction. Ardul eventually landed a job as computer teacher at a private school; however, he lacked the freedom to create, design, organize, and plan. One day in 2010, a student asked Ardul if he knew who rented chairs and tables, he knew that his sister had 40 chairs and 4 long tables, thus began the party equipment rental adventure. In time, they added bouncers and table linens to create a complete package for each event. By December of 2012, they were so busy that Ardul resigned as a teacher, devoted all of his time to the business and made it official by registering the as “Tu Party”. By 2014 they expanded the business model by adding planning, design and organization for events, now as “Tu Party Chicago”. In May 2025 their dream came true when they purchased an event hall offering what no event hall offers, a full service in design, equipment, advice, planning and total organization for each client. Thus was born now “Tu Party Hillside”, banquet bar.



July Franco is a proud U.S. Marine Gunnery Sergeant turned entrepreneur, driven by purpose, passion, and service. She recognized the lack of gear that truly reflects our service, and intentionally created Gunny Gear — a woman-owned, military-inspired brand designed to empower, honor, and support active-duty members, veterans, and those who stand beside them. She continues leading Franco Hauling LLC, a trusted and certified hauling and supplier business in the construction industry. From heavy-duty logistics to job site support, our mission is simple: deliver with integrity, precision, and reliability — every time.



Reina Marcelle is a self made street vendor to storefront bakery owner. She believes in uplifting her community's youth by providing jobs and a safe environment for them to thrive as young entrepreneurship. She spreads a message to believe in yourself no matter the odds, and the more you pour into your community, the more they pour into you.

Unlocking Capital: Strategies for Securing Funding & Growth

Moderator:



Amor Montes de Oca is the Strategic Initiatives Program Manager at mHUB, where she designs and executes strategic initiatives with a focus on manufacturing readiness for hardtech startups, product innovation, and commercialization pathways. She helps entrepreneurs and small businesses build capacity, access resources, and scale their ventures through hands-on support and cross-sector collaboration. Previously, Amor served as the Executive Director of Illinois Women in Cannabis. Amor is also a co-founder and former Director of Strategic Initiatives at 2112—Chicago's first incubator for creative industries.

Also serves on the planning committee for this event.

Speaker Bios:



Vanessa Rodriguez Aguirre is a Senior Small Business Program Officer with Local Initiatives Support Corp. (LISC); a national community development financial institution. She earned an MBA in Finance and has 15+ years of business banking experience. Vanessa is the daughter of immigrants who taught her to work hard and help others, she does this by providing equitable lending services and technical assistance to small businesses.

Also serves on the planning committee for this event.



Elvin Rodriguez joined Allies for Community Business in 2019 as a Senior Community Lender, where he has had the pleasure of helping neighborhood entrepreneurs grow their businesses. Prior to A4CB, Elvin worked for 14 years in retail banking where he held multiple roles including Senior Banker, Branch Business Banker, and Assistant Branch Manager. Elvin was born and raised in Chicago's Humboldt Park and Logan Square neighborhoods.



Carlos Salazar serves as Vice President and Relationship Manager in the Business Banking Group at Huntington National Bank. He works with small to midsize businesses & organizations in the Chicagoland area and is responsible for both managing a portfolio as well as acquiring clients in that space. With over 30 years of experience in banking and financial services, Carlos has forged many long-lasting relationships with clients, partners, as well as community leaders.