



hispanicfederation



CRECER Expo Connecticut 2026

Advancing Latino Entrepreneurship

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 2026
12:00 PM – 7:00 PM

PROGRAM

HARTFORD MARRIOTT DOWNTOWN
200 Columbus Blvd, Hartford, CT 06103



CRECER

POWERED BY HISPANIC FEDERATION

Hispanic Federation proudly presents the

CRECER: Latino Business Expo CT 2026

We welcome you to our second annual CRECER Small Business Expo where we convene entrepreneurs and small business leaders, providing a space for networking, resource distribution, and an opportunity to discuss both the successes of small business owners and how entrepreneurs can be better supported by nonprofit, private, and public sectors.

Held in Hartford this year, this premier event aims to celebrate Latino entrepreneurship and foster connections that strengthen Connecticut's small business community. Don't forget to explore *La Marqueta*, a small business market, where products and services from local entrepreneurs will be showcased and available for purchase.

Advancing Latino Entrepreneurship

CRECER was launched by Hispanic Federation in 2023 with the understanding that small businesses drive economic development, foster innovation, help shape community identity, and—more increasingly—provide opportunities for social mobility.

Since its launch, CRECER has engaged over 700 entrepreneurs in NYC and CT through culturally-informed, bilingual (English/Spanish) programming. We offer business management workshops, seminars and networking events, curricula and toolkits, and additional support to entrepreneurs at different stages of business growth.

About Hispanic Federation

Hispanic Federation, founded in 1990, seeks to empower and advance the Hispanic community, support Hispanic families, and strengthen Latino institutions through work in the areas of education, health, immigration, civic engagement, economic empowerment and environmental justice.

Funded in part through a Grant with the U.S. Small Business Administration.

AGENDA

12:00 PM – 1:00 PM	Registration & Lunch Access to La Marqueta and resource tables
1:05 PM – 1:25 PM	Welcome & Opening Remarks
1:30 PM - 2:00 PM	Keynote Speaker Richard L. Zayas, Zayas Law Beyond Success: Leadership, Growth & Legacy
2:05 PM - 3:00 PM	Funding Your Business: Access to Capital & Growth Opportunities Panel Discussion and Q&A
3:05 PM – 3:25 PM	Special Presentation The AI Upgrade: Transform How Your Business Works Sol Olmedo, AI Advisor · Fractional CAiMO
3:25 PM – 4:00 PM	The New Business Formula: AI + Marketing + Strategy = Growth Panel Discussion and Q&A
4:00 PM – 4:30 PM	Break Opportunity to visit La Marqueta and resource tables
4:30 PM – 5:15 PM	The Journey Behind the Success: Real Entrepreneurs. Real Lessons. Real Growth. Panel Discussion and Q&A
5:15 PM - 5:30 PM	Wrap-Up & Raffle Drawings
5:30 PM - 7:00 PM	Networking & Reception



Scan to learn more!



KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Richard L. Zayas, Founder | Zayas Law **Beyond Success: Leadership, Growth & Legacy**

Attorney Richard Zayas was born and raised in the barrio Cotto Laurel, Ponce Puerto Rico. He graduated from Ponce High School. He came to the United States in 1976.

He graduated from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. After working for several years for the General Assembly of the State of Connecticut he attended the school of law at the University of Connecticut from where he received his law degree.

Attorney Zayas opened his law office in the Hartford area in 1990. He has represented thousands of victims of accidental injuries such as motor vehicle accidents, slip and falls and medical malpractice. He has also briefed and argued cases before the Supreme and Appellate Court of the State of Connecticut. He is a member of the Connecticut Trial Lawyers Association and the American Trial Lawyers Association.

For over twenty years Attorney Zayas presented the program “La Ley y Usted (“The Law and You”) every Wednesday at noon on WPRX 1020 AM(La Puertorriquenisima) . Now he can be heard on Bomba Radio every Friday at 4:10 pm talking about legal issues.

Mr. Zayas is well known in the Hartford Community for his involvement and support of cultural and musical organizations and events. He is the main force behind the Festival de Rumba de Nueva Inglaterra, which just held its 18th issue, and the Salsa Festival of Bridgeport, who also held it 3rd issue.

Zayas Law also created and funded the Zayas Law Arts Foundation, to provide financial assistant to low income artists to pursue their dreams in arts and culture.

Although he is extremely busy with the practice of law, he always finds time to relax with his music and his vast collection of percussion instruments.

FUNDING YOUR BUSINESS

Access to Capital & Growth Opportunities

Tailored specifically for Latino entrepreneurs, this panel breaks down clear pathways to secure capital and navigate small business financing. Gain actionable insights on leveraging growth opportunities to scale your venture sustainably.

MODERATOR



Andrea Torres Fodor, Vice President, Regional Business Banking Manager, Newtown Savings Bank; President, Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Greater Bridgeport

With more than 20 years of experience in banking and financial services, Andrea Torres Fodor brings extensive knowledge of business banking and a strong commitment to supporting entrepreneurs and small business owners.

[*@andrea.torres.fodor*](#)

PANELISTS



Lucelly Espinal, Vice President, Business Banking Relationship Manager, M&T Bank

Lucelly Espinal specializes in helping business owners across Connecticut access credit solutions, treasury management services, and strategic financial guidance to support their growth. Lucelly is passionate about supporting entrepreneurs, particularly within the Hispanic business community.

[*@lucellyespinal*](#)



Celeste Tapia, Business Advisor, Community Outreach Officer & Bilingual Business Education Manager, Community Economic Development Fund (CEDF)

Celeste Tapia is dedicated to empowering small business owners, particularly within the Hispanic community, through access to capital, practical business education, and personalized guidance.

[*@cedf.ct*](#)

FUNDING YOUR BUSINESS

PANELISTS



Santiago Pallazhco, Business Banking Officer, Liberty Bank

Santiago Pallazhco is a Business Banking Officer with 15 years of experience in banking, including 10 years in management and the last five specializing in business banking. His expertise includes leadership, relationship development, business growth, and financial guidance. He is passionate about working closely with entrepreneurs, business owners, and families to help them achieve their financial goals.



Kimberly Méndez, NHE3 Administrative Assistant – NHE3 / The Community Foundation for Greater New Haven

With The Community Foundation's Mission Investments Company, Kimberly supports the NHE3 Small Business Grant Program and helps Connecticut entrepreneurs navigate funding opportunities and business resources. As a bilingual professional, she is especially passionate about increasing access to resources for Spanish-speaking entrepreneurs and historically underserved communities. She is committed to creating a welcoming and supportive experience for small business owners while helping them connect with the tools, relationships, and opportunities they need to grow and succeed.



Sonia Alvelo-Lynch, Founder / President & CEO, Latin Financial

Sonia Alvelo-Lynch is the Founder and CEO of Latin Financial and Sharpe Capital and a recognized leader in business finance and access to capital. She founded Latin Financial in 2010 to help remove financing barriers faced by Latino, minority, and women-owned businesses. Today, through Latin Financial and Sharpe Capital, she helps businesses across the United States, Puerto Rico, and Canada access working capital and financial tools for growth. [@latinfinancialllc](https://www.instagram.com/latinfinancialllc)

THE AI UPGRADE: TRANSFORM HOW YOUR BUSINESS WORKS

GET MORE DONE. KEEP CONTROL. GROW WITH AI.

You do not need a big team or a tech degree to put AI to work. If you answer customers, handle paperwork, guide staff, and market your business, this 20-minute live presentation is for you.

You will see how the information already inside your business can become faster replies, clear next steps, useful content, and simple systems, with you making the final call.

- Reply to customers faster without writing every message from scratch.
- Turn emails, PDFs, notes, and voice messages into tasks and next steps.
- Give your team clear answers based on your own business rules.
- Turn one business story into an email, script, social poster, and promo video.
- Build one simple AI workflow you can test the same day.
- Know what AI can prepare and what you must check before it goes out.

Pick one task that steals your time. I will show you how to turn it into a **simple AI workflow** using the facts, rules, and tools you already have. You will leave with a clear first step, a prompt you can use right away, and a safer way to get help from AI without giving up control of your business.



Sol Olmedo, AI Advisor, Fractional CAiMO

Sol Olmedo is an AI Advisor and Fractional CAiMO with more than 20 years of experience leading creative and digital systems. He helps leaders, teams, foundations, and entrepreneurs turn artificial intelligence into practical training, customized assistants, content systems, and workflows applicable to real businesses. His training includes Prompt Engineering at Vanderbilt University, Content Strategy and Social Media Marketing at Northwestern University, and Viral Marketing at The Wharton School.

Sol will also be a panelist in The New Business Formula Panel.

THE NEW BUSINESS FORMULA

AI + MARKETING + STRATEGY = GROWTH

This session demonstrates how small businesses can integrate artificial intelligence into their marketing while maintaining brand authenticity and genuine customer connections.

MODERATOR



Freddie Agrait, Director for Digital Initiatives, Hispanic Federation

Freddie Agrait holds a master's degree in communications from Rowan University, NJ. His work with the Hispanic community began in the mid-1980s, in rural and urban areas of New Jersey and the Northeast with the U.S. Census Bureau. Over the years, he developed business operations throughout Latin America, leading socially driven initiatives such as a community newspaper and a technology education program for seniors. In 2018, he returned to the nonprofit sector by joining the Hispanic Federation, where he now serves as Director for Digital Initiatives, combining his passion for communications, technology, and education to empower communities.

PANELISTS



Kristina Martinelli, Founder, AI Evangelist - coaigence

Kristina Martinelli is the founder of coaigence and Fractional Director of Strategic Partnerships & Outreach at Freedom Forge AI. An AI strategist, educator, and business transformation executive, she brings more than 30 years of experience helping organizations turn complex challenges into practical strategies and measurable results. Through coaigence, Kristina champions a practical, human-first approach to business transformation and AI adoption. Hresource tables ander philosophy is simple: Start with the challenge, not the technology.



Ramon Peralta, Founder & Creative Director, Peralta Design

Ramon Peralta is the Founder and Creative Director of Peralta Design, an innovative digital agency specializing in branding, web development, and digital marketing strategies. His professional journey includes a key role on the founding team of Priceline.com. He currently serves as Chairman of the Board of the Greater Valley Chamber of Commerce and is also a TEDx speaker, author of "Launch Your Brand," and host of the MissionCTRL business podcast.

THE JOURNEY BEHIND THE SUCCESS

Real Entrepreneurs. Real Lessons. Real Growth.

This panel brings together Latino business owners for an honest discussion about the realities of building, sustaining, and expanding a company. Speakers will share the critical lessons, setbacks, and strategic decisions that shaped their ventures, offering practical insights to help fellow entrepreneurs navigate their own path to growth.

MODERATOR



Yanahi Roman, CEO & Founder, La Casa del Inmigrante

Yanahi Roman is the CEO and Founder of La Casa del Inmigrante and a Mexican-born entrepreneur, community leader, and advocate who has dedicated more than a decade to serving Connecticut's Hispanic and immigrant communities. Through La Casa del Inmigrante, she has developed a trusted resource offering guidance and services including business formation, tax preparation, notary services, translations, and other administrative support.

PANELISTS



Sandra "Sandy" Sanchez, Founder & Owner, Frida Mexican Cuisine

Sandra "Sandy" Sánchez is the Founder and Owner of Frida Mexican Cuisine in West Hartford. Originally from Colombia, Sandy moved to the United States at age 19 and built her professional journey from the ground up while navigating a new country and language barrier. After developing extensive experience in the restaurant industry, she transformed her dream of entrepreneurship into Frida Mexican Cuisine.

THE JOURNEY BEHIND THE SUCCESS

PANELISTS



Natalia Giraldo, Founder, Medical Aesthetics Bar | Medican Aesthetics Specialist & Entrepreneur

Natalia Giraldo is an entrepreneur, medical aesthetics specialist, and Founder of Medical Aesthetics Bar. With more than six years of experience in the industry, she has dedicated her career to transforming traditional aesthetics into a more complete experience that integrates beauty, wellness, technology, and education. Her purpose goes beyond appearance: she helps people feel confident and care for their well-being from the inside out.



Luis Velásquez, CEO, Entrepreneur, Mentor & Coach | Founder – Entrenando Latinos N Roofing

Luis Velásquez is an entrepreneur, CEO, mentor, and coach with more than 18 years of experience in the roofing industry. His work focuses on sales, insurance claims, leadership, business systems, and investment. He is the founder of several business and educational initiatives, including Entrenando Latinos N Roofing, and author of ÉXITO, a practical guide focused on sales, insurance, repairs, mitigation, and real estate investment.



Chris Ferreira, Entrepreneur, Content Creator | @ChrisFerreiraNutri

Chris Ferreira is an influencer, actor, content creator, and nutritionist originally from Paraguay and currently based in New York. He has more than 10 years of experience in communications, entertainment, and nutrition, and currently leads a team of more than 15 professionals who support the development of his various projects. His career brings together four key pillars: nutrition, fashion, communication, and entertainment, building a community of millions of people and a professional venture that continues to grow from New York.

Support small businesses at

LA MARQUETA

#SHOPLATINO

La Marqueta

Experience La Marqueta, a vibrant marketplace showcasing Latino-owned small businesses from across Connecticut. Meet local entrepreneurs, discover unique products and services, and support businesses representing industries such as beauty, fashion, artisan goods, professional services, retail and more.

Explore this year's small business market featuring vendors from a wide array of industries:

-  Service Providers
-  Jewelry, Art, and Apparel
-  Custom Gifts
-  Health, Wellness, and Beauty

Small Business Resources

Explore local community-based organizations, financial and educational institutions, and government agencies that provide direct service assistance and resources to small business owners. These resources extend from business advising and grant opportunities to technical assistance and lending support services.



**Scan to learn more about the businesses
and resources showcased today.**



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THANK YOU

to our partners!



EVENT PRODUCER: ROCIO LOZADA



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