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Corporate Citizen

Verizon's Mario Acosta-Velez proves that "corporation" and "community" are complementary, not contradictory

By Matt Alderton

While millions of tourists pour into the nation's capital each year to admire the sights, many people still view the District of Columbia as "big government." **Mario Acosta-Velez** is not one of them. When he first visited the city as a junior in high school, he witnessed more opportunities than challenges. Now grown and based there, he still sees in government more solutions than problems, and he's doing his part to enable and promote them as director of state government affairs for Verizon's Mid-Atlantic region. A broker among business, government, and communities, Acosta-Velez is making a difference for Latinos by working with government rather than against it.



I was born in Puerto Rico in a town named Adjuntas. My parents always placed a strong emphasis on staying in school and achieving my goals. My father was a businessman. He ran a construction company. I remember always following my dad around and asking him how he ran the business. I learned a lot from him by observing how he managed his employees and his company. He always taught me that my success as a Hispanic professional should be guided by determination, a strong work ethic, and integrity in everything I do.

My interest in government affairs started when I was in high school. I had the opportunity in 11th grade to attend a wonderful program called Presidential Classroom for Young Americans, which brought students from all over the United States to spend a week in Washington, DC. That experience opened my eyes about how government works and the impact it has in people's lives. After that I became really interested in the process of influencing public policy.

I wanted to work for a company with a well-established government-relations office as well as a record of community involvement and commitment to diversity. Verizon became a clear choice not only because of the company's excellent reputation as a good corporate citizen, but also because of the important role the company plays as a technology leader.

In 2007, I joined Verizon-DC's government affairs team as director of external affairs. In my current role, as director of state government affairs for the Mid-Atlantic region, I manage our relations with customers, employees, partners, and shareholders with a focus on building alliances to promote public policies that are consistent with Verizon's goals and objectives. At Verizon, our focus is on our customers; I am always listening, anticipating, and responding to their needs. I see my job as a two-way street of communications and advocacy; I advocate for the company and resolve issues and concerns important to our consumers and the public.

Verizon's philosophy is based on believing in the power of technology to build a better future. As an industry leader, our company offers a wide range of telecommunications platforms that benefit both consumers and businesses. Our approach is to educate policymakers about our vision of the future and how it impacts their constituents. We work with policymakers to help them understand the business implications of their policy decisions and provide solutions that can help create a business environment that fosters innovation and business growth.

Expanding the company's community involvement in the region is one of my most important accomplishments. [So far,] I've built more than 90 strategic community partnerships across the region in the areas of education, health care, sustainability, domestic-violence prevention, and business development. We have supported domestic-violence-prevention programs across the region that provide education, support services, and prevention among youth, adults, and seniors. We partner with several academic institutions that engage students and faculty and promote sustainability and energy management on their campuses. And we're involved in supporting programs that are using technology to improve remote access to quality health care in places such as Baltimore and Virginia.

Education has always been a priority for me. My role at Verizon enables me to have a positive impact by identifying and supporting community education initiatives. Today, I believe technology is motivating students—especially Hispanic students—to learn about STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) careers. Through my community involvement on behalf of Verizon, I talk to a lot of Hispanic students about how technical and scientific professions are becoming increasingly important in our society. The Hispanic community, in particular, has a great opportunity to advance educational [achievement], especially in STEM education. That is done by creating partnerships with both government and corporations to support programs that prepare the next generation of Hispanic professionals for success. These types of partnerships are important because they allow communities to develop a dialogue in which government representatives and stakeholders can learn how [investments in technology and education] create better opportunities and improve the lives of students and their families.

I have also been involved in promoting economic and business development as part of my role as chair of the Greater Washington Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. I joined the board of the chamber as a Verizon representative and became chair in June 2012. This leadership role allows me to strengthen the Hispanic chamber as an advocate for a diverse business community while expanding Verizon's presence in the business community and support of initiatives that help promote business development in the region's Hispanic community.

From Verizon's perspective, the Hispanic community is an important consumer and business segment. Therefore, the company has long supported important social causes in the community. I believe being Latino has enabled me to enhance the company's understanding of the community, effectively align issues important to the community with the company's philanthropic priorities, and share the company's message and story in a way that connects with the community. It is important for both businesses and consumers in the Hispanic community to see a Latino representing the company and being directly involved in initiatives to support it.



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