

# CentroNia looks to Maryland as clients move out of D.C.

Katie Wilmeth, The Examiner  
Sep 25, 2006 5:00 AM (4 hrs ago)

## WASHINGTON -

CentroNia, a Columbia Heights nonprofit that provides educational and family support programs to low-income residents, has plans to open a Maryland location by the end of the year.

The additional center will meet the growing demand of an immigrant community that has been pushed across the border as District neighborhoods continue to gentrify.

CentroNia currently serves about 1,000 families from its Columbia Heights headquarters in Ward 1 and at school-based programs throughout the District, said BB Otero, president and chief executive officer of CentroNia. But as the neighborhood undergoes redevelopment and property values spike — the newest condos in the area run into the high \$600,000 range — CentroNia's clients and staff increasingly can't afford to live near the center.

Instead, CentroNia's clients come from all over the District and Maryland. "There has been a significant shift for us over the last five years," Otero said.

"Traditionally, you saw the immigrant community in Ward 1 only and now they're in every ward."

The Maryland center will be located in the Montgomery County neighborhood of Langley Park at the intersection of University Boulevard and New Hampshire Avenue. Montgomery County's Hispanic population has swelled by nearly 25 percent between 2000 and 2005, according to U.S. Census figures. By comparison, the District has seen only a 2 percent increase during the same period.

"Many neighborhoods in this city have for years and years been underserved ... the revitalization of the urban core has been an important piece for both the District and the region," Otero said. But "what distresses me is I don't think we have an aggressive enough policy in this city that protects the poor and working poor while we are increasing property values and renewing neighborhoods and bringing in new business."

City officials said the District government did consider low-income families in its redevelopment plans for District neighborhoods. Jim Graham, D-Ward 1, said the Columbia Heights redevelopment included the preservation of 3,000 affordable housing units. "I think we've done a model job of preserving low-income housing in Ward I," Graham said. "We have no doubt we've lost some poor people, but we've worked hard to keep them."

CentroNia isn't the first Columbia Heights nonprofit to expand its operations into Maryland. Last year, the Latin American Youth Center opened a Maryland location. "There is high-income, high-density coming in" to Columbia Heights, said Lori Kaplan, executive director of the youth center. "I don't know who is moving in, but it's likely it won't be the kids and families we work

with.”

*kwilmeth@dcexaminer.com*

*Examiner*