

September 27, 2023

Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives

Honorable Hakeem Jeffries
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives

Honorable Sam Graves
Chairman
House Transportation & Infrastructure
Committee

Honorable Rick Larsen
Ranking Member
House Transportation & Infrastructure
Committee

Dear Speaker McCarthy, Leader Jeffries, Chairman Graves, and Ranking Member Larsen:

We, the below signed Latino civil rights and advocacy organizations, write to express our strong support of Congressman Jimmy Gomez's legislation that would designate the Los Angeles U.S. Courthouse at 350 W. 1st Street in honor of Felicitas and Gonzalo Mendez. The Mendez's advocacy led to the landmark 1946 case that ended segregation in California schools and paved the way for the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Fittingly, the courthouse sits just blocks from where the historic *Mendez* case was originally decided. The Mendez family, including Felicitas and Gonzalo's children, Sylvia, Gonzalo Jr., and Jerome, also strongly support the renaming of the courthouse to the Felicitas and Gonzalo Mendez United States Courthouse.

Felicitas and Gonzalo Mendez advanced civil rights for all by mobilizing parents in their community to push for an end to segregation in California schools after their daughter Sylvia and her brothers were rejected from attending a whites-only school because of their Mexican appearance and ancestry. In 1946, the Mendez family's efforts led to the landmark decision in *Mendez, et al vs. Westminster School District of Orange County, et al*, steering California to enact legislation that made it the first state to officially desegregate its public schools. The NAACP Legal Defense Fund (LDF), led by Thurgood Marshall at the time, had been developing a legal strategy to end school segregation and wrote an amicus brief in support of *Mendez*. Some of the arguments LDF made in *Mendez* were similar to those that were later made in the landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision seven years later ending school segregation nationwide.

Our public institutions should reflect the rich diversity that represents the history and strength of our nation. However, of the 200+ named United States courthouses across the country, only 20 are named for people of color and 6 are named in honor of a woman. The Felicitas and Gonzalo Mendez United States Courthouse would be the first federal building to be named for a Latina and only the eighth commemorating Hispanic Americans. Given its location in the county with the largest Latino population in the United States, the commemoration of the advocacy of Felicitas and Gonzalo Mendez—who were of Puerto Rican and Mexican heritage, respectively—

by renaming the courthouse honors both the diversity of its population and the critical progress for civil rights.

During National Hispanic Heritage Month, we highlight and celebrate the centuries of Latino contributions to the United States. It is also an opportunity to acknowledge and lift up Latinos' stories to who we are as a people and nation. The history of the desegregation of schools in California and throughout the Southwest is a significant part of the mostly unsung history of our community in this nation and needs to be better known among our fellow Americans. In short, Latino stories are American stories, and they need to be told.

We urge you to pass this bill expeditiously so that the lasting and historic impacts of the Mendez family and the *Mendez v. Westminster* case are permanently and publicly commemorated to inspire Angelenos and all Americans for generations to come.

Sincerely,

Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents (ALAS)
Esperanza United (formerly Casa de Esperanza: National Latin@ Network)
GreenLatinos
Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU)
Hispanic Federation
Hispanic National Bar Association
IDRA
Labor Council for Latin American Advancement
LatinoJustice PRLDEF
Latinos for Education
League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC)
MANA, A National Latina Organization
Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF)
Migrant Legal Action Program
National Hispanic Media Coalition
National Hispanic Medical Association
National Latinx Psychological Association
National Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Association
SER National
The National HEP/CAMP Association
UnidosUS