



# San Antonio Alamo Area Local Legislative Updates

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## **Dolores Huerta: “Si Se Puede!”**

*“Every moment is an organizing opportunity, every person a potential activist, every minute a chance to change the world.”*

Born in New Mexico in April 10, 1930, she has spent her life fighting to improve the standard of living for farm workers and battled discrimination. Huerta co-founded the nation’s largest farm workers union and was the first woman in U.S. history to organize and lobby on behalf of migrant workers.

Labor organizing, politics, and humanitarianism were part of Dolores Huerta’s life from the beginning. Her father, Juan Ferández, was a union activist who successfully ran for a seat in the New Mexico legislature in 1938. At the age of three, her parents divorced and she moved with her mother and siblings to Stockton, California. According to Dolores, her mother’s independence and entrepreneurial spirit was one of the primary reasons she became a feminist. Dolores’ mother Alicia was known for her kindness and compassion towards others. She eventually ran a small hotel where many of her customers were low-wage workers, whose fees were often waived out of her kindness for the less fortunate. Alicia encouraged the cultural diversity that was a natural part of Dolores’ upbringing in Stockton. The agricultural community where they lived was made up of Mexican, Filipino, African-American, Japanese and

Before she was a labor organizer, Dolores Huerta got a teaching certificate at the University of Pacific’s Delta College in Stockton. But her time in front of the classroom was difficult for her to bear: Her students routinely arrived with empty stomachs and bare feet. Huerta soon left teaching because she felt she could affect more change outside of the classroom. She once explained: “I quit because I couldn’t stand seeing kids come to class hungry and needing shoes. I thought I could do more by organizing farm workers than by trying to teach their hungry children.”

In 1955, Huerta met Cesar Chavez while working at the Stockton Community Service Organization (where Chavez was the Executive Director). In her spare time, she also founded the Agricultural Workers Association and lobbied on behalf of the poor. When it became clear that both she and Chavez shared a passion over farm workers rights, the two left the CSO and in the spring of 1962 and launched the National Farm Workers Association. Dolores’ organizing skills were essential to the growth of this budding organization. The first testament to her lobbying and negotiating talents were demonstrated in securing Aid For Dependent Families (“AFDC”) and disability insurance for farm workers in the State of California in 1963, an unparalleled feat of the times. She was also instrumental in the enactment of the Agricultural Labor Relations Act of 1975. This was the first law of its kind in the United States, granting farm workers in California the right to collectively organize and bargain for better wages and working conditions



During the darkest days of the labor movement, it was common for Latino leaders to say that the government was too powerful and that no matter how hard they fought, farm workers would never receive better working conditions. Huerta and Chavez often heard “No, no se puede!” which means “No, no it can’t be done.” On one occasion, Huerta responded, “Si, **si se puede!**” or “Yes, yes it can be done.” Her words quickly became the rallying cry for farm workers everywhere.

In September 1965, over 5,000 Filipino-American grape-pickers from vineyards in California began a strike in protest of low-wages. A week later, Hispanic farm workers (led by Chavez and Huerta) joined the strike, in a protest that came to be known as the Delano Grape Strike. Huerta helped organize a large-scale boycott of California grapes, sending representatives to cities like Chicago and Boston to expand the boycott by convincing people to buy wine only if it had a union label. By 1970, grape growers agreed to accept contracts which unionized most of the industry, adding 50,000 UFW members — the most ever represented by a union in California agriculture.

At age 58 Dolores suffered a life-threatening assault while protesting against the policies of then presidential candidate George Bush in San Francisco. A baton-wielding officer broke four ribs and shattered her spleen. Public outrage resulted in the San Francisco Police Department changing its policies regarding crowd control and police discipline and Dolores was awarded an out of court settlement. Following a lengthy recovery she took a leave of absence from the union to focus on women’s rights. She traversed the country for two years on behalf of the Feminist Majority’s Feminization of Power: 50/50 by the year 2000 Campaign encouraging Latina’s to run for office. The campaign resulted in a significant increase in the number of women representatives at the local, state and federal levels. She also served as National Chair of the 21st Century Party founded in 1992 on the principles that women make up 52% of the party’s candidates and that officers must reflect the ethnic diversity of the nation.

She was inducted into the California Hall of Fame in March of 2013. She has received numerous awards: among them The Eleanor Roosevelt Humans Rights Award from President Clinton in 1998. The Puffin Foundation’s Award for Creative Citizenship: Labor Leader Award 1984, The Kern County Woman of The Year Award from the California State Legislature, The Ohtli Award from the Mexican Government, The Smithsonian Institution – James Smithson Award, and Nine Honorary Doctorates from Universities throughout the United States. In 2012 President Obama bestowed Dolores with her most prestigious award, The Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian award in the United States. Upon receiving this award Dolores said, “The freedom of association means that people can come together in organization to fight for solutions to the problems they confront in their communities. The great social justice changes in our country have happened when people came together, organized, and took direct action. It is this right that sustains and nurtures our democracy today.

Now, in her mid-eighties, Dolores Huerta continues to work tirelessly developing leaders and advocating for the working poor, women, and children. As founder and president of the Dolores Huerta Foundation, she travels across the country engaging in campaigns and influencing legislation that supports equality and defends civil rights. She often speaks to students and organizations about issues of social justice and public policy. Huerta shows no sign of slowing down and still makes the headlines in her fight for labor equality and civil rights.