

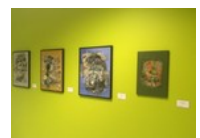
Consulate of Mexico in Fresno pursues multifaceted mission

By Andrea Castillo

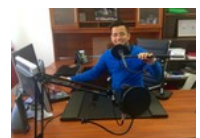


Edgar Olivera, host of the Mexican consulate's weekly radio show, sits inside the in-house recording studio.
ANDREA CASTILLO — THE FRESNO BEE

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- *Consular services have evolved from protection to cultural and educational*
- *Consul Vicente Sanchez Ventura hopes to strengthen trade between Mexico and Fresno*
- *A radio show and art display are part of the consulate's programs*



More than 80 years since its inception, the Consulate of Mexico in Fresno has gone from an agency protecting Mexicans' rights to one that also promotes their culture and supports their educational advancement.



The consulate opened its Fresno branch in February 1931, responding to the needs of the area's growing Latino population. Last month, leaders celebrated their agency's 84th year of operating in Fresno.

In 1977, an estimated 365,000 Mexico citizens who were legal U.S. residents lived in the eight-county service area of the Fresno consulate. Today an estimated 1.5 million Mexican nationals live in that same area, which stretches from Merced to Bakersfield and eastward to Inyo County.

Consul Vicente Sanchez Ventura is well versed in the consulate's history and has a focused vision for its future.

Toward the end of the 19th century, the U.S. needed a bigger labor force, Sanchez Ventura said. Mexicans started migrating north to help build highways and pick crops.

"Consulates were set up because there were many injustices," he said. "The first mission they came to fulfill was the protection of their nationals."

Issuance of passports and identification cards is a form of protection, Sanchez Ventura said. Consulates also still aid in injury compensation, wage recovery and the like.

The Valley's first consul was moved from Fresno to Monterey in March 1933. It moved back to Fresno in 1936.

The San Joaquin Valley's Mexican population grew faster than the consulate could keep up. Until appointments started around 2005, lines could last all day. Sanchez Ventura said people would sometimes sleep outside the office overnight, waiting for services.

Consular services have evolved over the years, he said. Now there are 50 Mexican consulate offices around the U.S., including 10 in California — the most consulates that any country has placed in the U.S.

The list of services is long. [On its website](#), the Mexican consulate in Fresno offers civil registry and notary public services, for example. It also offers support for Mexican nationals who are homeless, seasonal agriculture workers, those who speak indigenous languages, victims of violent crimes and more.

In Fresno, Sanchez Ventura focuses heavily on education. Last year the consulate partnered with the Education and Leadership Foundation of Fresno to give more than [\\$89,000 in scholarships](#) to local college students. They also earmarked nearly \$11,000 to open a "*plaza comunitaria*," or community square, in Fresno later this year. Modeled after one that opened last year in Madera, the plaza in Fresno would help local Mexican-national adults learn to read and write in Spanish or English, finish their Mexican primary education, receive vocational training and get an American GED or enroll in community college.

The consulate sponsors ongoing workshops about Deferred Action, President Barack Obama's deportation reprieve programs, and about the new driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants. Every Tuesday and Wednesday between 9 a.m. and 1 p.m., immigration attorneys offer free legal advice at the consulate.

Between March and October, the consulate makes weekly lunchtime visits to farms to offer workers health checkups and information about consular and social services. It hosts many yearly events, including for Children's Day every April and a zumbathon for health month in October. The office has a "*ventanilla de salud*" or health window, staffed full time with Family Healthcare Network employees for Mexicans who don't have access to medical care.

The office is fitted with a modest recording studio for the consulate's weekly radio show (aired on 1300 AM Saturdays at 7 a.m. and 107.5 FM Sundays at 6:30 a.m.). It also doubles as an art gallery, showing off paintings from well-known Mexican artists.

Sanchez Ventura hopes to establish business partnerships with Tijuana companies in the near future to strengthen trade between the Valley and Mexico. He and the honorary Armenian consul Berj Apkarian plan to work together on bicultural events. One idea is to host a community cooking demonstration of Armenian and Mexican cuisines.

"We want to bring the new vision of Mexico," he said. "The consulate, apart from representing our government here in the Central Valley, has a mission to help Mexican people and promote what people don't know about Mexico."

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