

# The Boston Globe

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 8, 2005

## Lawmaker chided for language remarks

'Only English' riles Latino constituents

By David Abel

GLOBE STAFF

A group of Latino constituents from Worcester say their state representative is discriminating against them because the veteran lawmaker recently told them not to waste his time at a meeting by addressing him in Spanish, which he doesn't understand.

Members of the group Neighbor to Neighbor, which represents low-income residents, said Representative John J. Binienda humiliated them when he told the group member who sought a meeting: "Only English in this meeting. . . . People in America need to speak English. They can't function without speaking English."

The group meets approximately once a year with Binienda. In a phone interview, Binienda explained that he is simply pressed for time and trying to allow the maximum number of people to address him.

The problem, he said, is that many of the Spanish-speaking residents who attend bring someone who speaks English to translate their questions or comments to him. That process, with many residents first stating their questions in Spanish, and then the English-speaking person translating, takes a lot of time. Then, when he responds, it takes more time for the answer to be translated.

Latinos represent about one-tenth of the 40,000 people in Binienda's district — and about 30 people from Neighbor to Neighbor usually attend the meetings.

"Instead of 30 speeches, I hear 60 speeches, 30 in Spanish and 30 in English," said Binienda, who became a state representative in 1986 and became

**LANGUAGE, Page B4**

### ► LANGUAGE

*Continued from Page B1*

chairman of the House Revenue Committee yesterday. "Then I have to respond in English, and the translator has to respond in Spanish. . . . All I said was if the Hispanic could talk to the person, and the translator would just talk to me, I would be able to get to everyone and people wouldn't walk out."

Binienda said he has met with Neighbor to Neighbor for years and considers himself a strong advocate on issues affecting Latinos.

"I have been the biggest sup-

porter of the Latino Institute at Worcester State College, and I just filed a bill for \$15 million of fuel assistance for the most vulnerable, lowest income residents in our community," he said. "It's unfortunate I can't speak Spanish, but I can speak Polish."

The 57-year-old lawmaker has often helped his Latino constituents, members of Neighbor to Neighbor acknowledge, but the group's director, Harris Gruman, said his group seeks to help people speak for themselves and express concerns directly to state leaders.

"It's a very important part of

the communication that people speak for themselves — you can see the emotion, so you get the form and content," Gruman said.

Binienda said he doesn't need to hear the people speak to understand their feelings.

"I think the solution is for him to realize what he did has crossed the line and is discriminatory," Gruman said.

The issue, first reported in the Worcester Telegram & Gazette, arose last month when Erin O'Leary, a Neighbor to Neighbor staff organizer in Worcester, spoke to Binienda about arranging a meet-

ing over the next few weeks, Gruman said.

At first, O'Leary said she was taken aback when Binienda told her he had only a half hour to meet. Then, Gruman said, she was floored when he told her the meeting had to be in English.

Gruman called on Binienda to reconsider his decision and extend the time of their meeting, so his constituents can address the substance of their concerns about issues such as state cuts to dental care, coverage to uninsured residents, affordable housing, and raising the minimum wage.