



Chapter 2:

Civic Engagement

Civic engagement is a fundamental component of immigrant integration. Limited participation in public processes and community life can contribute to, or exacerbate, many of the issues discussed elsewhere in this toolkit. If immigrants are not represented in government agencies or on boards and commissions, and if they do not participate in public processes and decision-making, it means that their priorities and needs may not be addressed, leading to challenges in all areas, from housing and health to education and employment. Engaging immigrants in civic life also means that their ideas and contributions can be heard by the greater community. Most importantly, if immigrants feel unwelcome or unable to participate in public processes, it can lead to isolation from the broader community and contribute to social problems.

This chapter focuses on concrete ways that municipalities can better engage and involve immigrants and make clear to them that their presence in the community is valued and that their input is genuinely desired.

Common Challenges

Municipalities are frequently eager to achieve a higher level of immigrant civic engagement, with immigrants represented on staff, boards, and commissions, and participating at public meetings and events. Yet, it can be very difficult for municipalities to engage immigrants in the community effectively. Common challenges faced by municipalities include the following:

Low participation in municipal government, boards, and commissions by immigrant groups and leaders. Municipalities often have a hard time recruiting immigrants to participate in civic leadership positions. For instance, even when preference for bilingual applicants is explicitly stated in a posting, many municipalities report that few immigrants apply for the positions. With few immigrants in leadership positions, it is even more difficult for municipalities to connect with and engage the broader immigrant community.

Mistrust of government. In some cases, low immigrant participation in civic life stems from different cultural norms and experiences. Many immigrants come from countries where civic engagement and participation is uncommon, discouraged, or even dangerous. In other cases, immigrants may come from countries where government staff and agencies are corrupt and untrustworthy, making immigrants reluctant to get involved. Mistrust might also come from negative experiences in the U.S. and fear of discrimination and targeting.

Municipalities may have multiple or diverse immigrant groups. Many communities are home to various immigrant groups who have different cultural norms and different language needs. This diversity can make the logistical and technical aspects of community engagement—such as developing culturally appropriate outreach strategies for each group, or providing translation or interpretation services for several languages at public meetings—especially challenging for municipalities.



U.S. citizens in a naturalization ceremony at Daley Plaza.

Source: Chicago Tribune.

Strategies to Increase Civic Engagement

What can municipalities do to create more welcoming communities and help address civic engagement challenges? There are a variety of strategies, many of them low-budget and involving strategic partnerships, that can help municipalities foster a more welcoming environment and encourage greater civic participation among immigrant groups.

Know your immigrant community. The first step in creating a welcoming community is knowing who the immigrant community members are. Municipalities should be aware of where the immigrants in their community come from, how recently they immigrated, and what languages they speak. The Notre Dame Institute for Latino Studies developed the “Latino Landscape: A Metro Chicago Guide and Nonprofit Directory” as a resource to build knowledge about the Latino community in the Chicago region.⁴

Communities can also help raise cultural awareness so that all residents are aware of the rich diversity of the community. Hoffman Estates has a volunteer-staffed Cultural Awareness Commission which organizes events such as cultural awareness days and heritage festivals. The Village of Schaumburg has a Sister Cities Commission, which establishes relationships with cities in the countries of origin of some of the Village’s largest immigrant groups. Skokie has an annual Festival of Cultures which celebrates the heritage of their immigrant residents. Municipalities can work with local organizations, churches, and schools to organize festivals and local exhibits to showcase and celebrate the cultures and nationalities represented in the community, and the contribution of immigrants to the greater community.

Send welcome packets to new residents. Welcome packets are a great way to reach out and establish contact with new residents. They are also a very effective way of providing residents with important information regarding the municipality. If possible, the packets should be available in languages other than English. Municipalities should prioritize translation into the most commonly spoken languages in their communities. In the Village of Hoffman Estates, the Clerk’s Office sends all new residents a welcome packet which provides a helpful overview of the Village, including educational resources, recreational resources, police services, fire services, and important regulations. The welcome packet is also available on the Village’s website,⁵ and the Village is currently working on making it available in other languages.

SPOTLIGHT

Aurora Hispanic Heritage Advisory Board

The Aurora Hispanic Heritage Advisory Board (AHHAB) is a non-partisan, community-based panel funded by the City of Aurora. The group organizes events that celebrate Hispanic culture, educates the public on the ways Hispanic residents have shaped Aurora, and seeks to involve diverse voices in the City’s planning processes.

The AHHAB hosts a community breakfast with awards and scholarships for community leaders and students, produces Fiesta de Luces to celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month, and sponsors the “Wall of Memories,” an exhibit on the first Mexican families in Aurora. The AHHAB has also dedicated two streets with honorary names recognizing Hispanic law enforcement officials.

In December 2013, Aurora also announced intentions to create an Indian American Community Outreach Advisory Board, modeled after its Hispanic and African American boards.



Chicago Chinatown at night.
Source: Chicago Chinatown Chamber of Commerce.

⁴ Alejo, Berenice, Institute for Latino Studies, University of Notre Dame
“The Latino Landscape: A Metro Chicago Guide and Non-Profit Directory,” 2008.
http://www.cct.org/sites/cct.org/files/Latino_Landscape.pdf.

⁵ Village of Hoffman Estates, “New Resident Information.”
<http://www.hoffmanestates.com/index.aspx?page=71>.

Conduct or support voter registration drives. Immigrants are increasingly a major political and civic force. According to a 2011 survey conducted by the Pew Hispanic Center, 18 percent of naturalized Hispanic immigrants said they decided to naturalize to acquire civil and legal rights, including the right to vote.⁶

Municipalities should partner with community organizations that organize and conduct nonpartisan voter registration campaigns. The U.S. Hispanic Leadership Institute provides voter registration trainings and materials available in different languages free of charge. The Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights coordinates voter registration campaigns at naturalization ceremonies to educate and encourage new citizens to exercise their constitutional rights. Both organizations offer trained voter registrars available for voter registration drives year round. Municipalities should work with such organizations to leverage resources and information to make sure recent naturalized immigrants have the information needed to register to vote and know where to vote.

Offer relevant training for elected officials and municipal staff. In order to establish a welcoming environment, it is important that elected officials and municipal staff—especially staff who work directly with residents—receive training on how to interact with immigrant groups and understand the basics of the immigration process. Having a working understanding of cultural differences and the immigrant experience lays the groundwork for all successful engagement and integration efforts.

Municipalities should offer diversity training and/or provide staff with educational materials. If funding is limited, consider partnering with nearby municipalities, non-profits, or social service organizations to minimize costs. The Village of Schaumburg distributes a Cultural Sensitivity Manual,⁷ borrowed from the local St. Alexius Medical Center, which contains general information about the cultural, national, ethnic, and religious groups in the community.

SPOTLIGHT

National League of Cities' Civic Engagement and Recent Immigrant Communities Planning Guide

The National League of Cities (NLC) is a member-based organization dedicated to helping city leaders build better communities. NLC's City Solutions and Applied Research section works to provide research and tools to support and transform cities. NLC recently developed a planning guide for local officials and community leaders called Civic Engagement and Recent Immigrant Communities. This guide includes all the resources a community might need to put on a workshop to engage local stakeholders in developing shared priorities surrounding the importance of immigrant integration. This guide provides a sample discussion content and a complete workshop including agenda, note taking forms, and potential handouts for workshop attendees. This guide is available as a PDF for download from the NLC website.⁸

Make time for face-time, and meet people where they are.

One of the best ways to establish a relationship with immigrants and to encourage civic engagement is by meeting people where they are. When municipal staff and elected officials take the time to attend events that are important to immigrants—such as functions and meetings held by schools, churches, or community organizations—municipalities can reach a greater number of people, as well as demonstrate genuine interest in engaging immigrant groups and learning about their goals and priorities. Spending time can be equally, if not more, effective than spending money. When immigrants know municipal staff, they are apt to feel more comfortable coming out to public meetings and becoming more involved in civic life.

Assist immigrants in understanding local government better.

The Illinois State Bar Association pays close attention to the issue of immigration in Illinois and has a referral network of attorneys who have expertise in immigration issues.⁹ Likewise, the Chicago Bar Foundation¹⁰ and Illinois Legal Aid Online¹¹ may be good resources both for municipal attorneys who could use support on immigrant issues, and for immigrants who may need assistance but don't have financial resources. Check to see if organizations could offer pro-bono legal clinics, consultations, information, or referral services at municipal events.

6 Taylor, Paul et al., The Pew Research Center, "An Awakened Giant: The Hispanic Electorate is Likely to Double by 2030," November 14, 2012. <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2012/11/14/an-awakened-giant-the-hispanic-electorate-is-likely-to-double-by-2030/>.

7 Goldberg, Edward M., Alexian Brothers Health System, "Cultural Sensitivity Manual" 2007. http://www.alexianbrothershealth.org/upload/docs/St.%20Alexius%20Medical%20Center/cultural_sensitivity.pdf.

8 Leighninger, Matt and Mann, Bonnie C., The National League of Cities, "Civic Engagement and Recent Immigrant Communities: A Planning Guide for Local Officials and Other Community Leaders." <http://www.nlc.org/Documents/Find%20City%20Solutions/Research%20Innovation/Governance-Civic/discussion-guide-civic-engagement-immigrants-gid-jun10-pdf.pdf>.

9 Chagal, Deborah Glaser, Illinois Bar Association, "Immigration and Pro Bono." <http://www.isba.org/probono/immigrationandprobono>.

10 Chicago Bar Foundation. <http://chicagobarfoundation.org/>.

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Develop relationships with consulates. Working with local consulates can help municipal staff connect immigrants with resources and services that the municipality itself may not be able to provide, and build trust with immigrant groups. While most consulates are located in the City of Chicago, some consulates, like the Mexican Consulate, offer remote consults via telephone or internet or will travel to municipalities in the Chicago metropolitan area. Working with consulates can also help municipalities gain important knowledge of the cultural context immigrants are coming from and become familiar with some of their legal norms and alternate forms of identification, such as the Consular Identification Card. This can empower staff to field questions and more effectively direct immigrants to resources.

Support naturalization. According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, “naturalization is the process by which U.S. citizenship is granted to a foreign citizen or national after he or she fulfills the requirements established by Congress in the Immigration and Nationality Act.”¹³ Municipalities can offer citizenship classes and workshops or provide information on organizations offering similar services. Citizenship classes and workshops not only help immigrants prepare for naturalization, but they also help foster civic engagement. Municipalities can show that they welcome immigrants and are eager to integrate them into community life by offering or actively promoting these opportunities and by celebrating new citizens in naturalization ceremonies, as the City of Chicago does.

Henry Hyde Resource Center

The Village of Addison’s Henry Hyde Resource Center has an open-door policy that makes opportunities accessible to different parts of the Village. The Center offers computer literacy classes and partners with High School District 88’s community liaison to address immigrant issues and host citizenship, ESL, and GED classes in Spanish. The Addison Police Department has a satellite office located at the Center to assist local residents by providing free car seats and safety seat checks, as well as selling Village parking stickers, among other services. Crime Prevention Officers work actively with the After School Program and camps on a daily basis.

The Center also partners with the DuPage County Health Department to offer health presentations, dental check-ups, and health screenings. An annual Village Community Picnic is held at the Center to acquaint community residents with staff from the various Village Departments, including the Police Department, Fire Department, Park District, and the Public Library.

Evanston’s Parent Leadership Institute¹²

The City of Evanston, in partnership with School District 65, coordinates a leadership program in Spanish for bilingual parents. The program runs two to three times a year, and each session brings parents together to meet on a weekly basis for two hours over a nine week period covering various topics relating to leadership, education, and the community as a whole. The program enriches parents’ knowledge and understanding of the community in which they live and gives an opportunity to voice their issues and concerns to municipal government officials. Each session ends with a graduation ceremony where the mayor recognizes participants’ accomplishments. Graduates are encouraged to take the next step and become involved in the City’s decision making process by volunteering for a board or commission. This program supports the recommendation to promote diversity and understanding of cultural differences to establish social cohesion.

¹¹ Illinois Legal Aid Online. <http://www.illinoislegalaonline.org/index.php>.

¹² City of Evanston: News Categories, “Mayor Congratulates District 65 Parents of Inaugural Bilingual Program,” June 13, 2012. <http://www.cityofevanston.org/news/2012/06/mayor-congratulates-district-65-parents-of-inaugural-bilingual-program/12>.

¹³ U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, Department of Homeland Security, “Citizenship Through Naturalization,” January 22, 2013. <http://www.uscis.gov/us-citizenship/citizenship-through-naturalization>.

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Working with consulates

The City of Evanston opens City Hall to the Mexican Consulate's Consulado Movil for three days, at which time people of Mexican descent can obtain Matriculas (Consular Identification Cards), Mexican passports, and other services. Evanston also works with Federación Del Medio Oeste De Los Estados Unidos (FEDEJAL), a non profit that works with immigrants from the Mexican state of Jalisco to promote cultural exchange, foster leadership, improve educational health outcomes, and assist small businesses.

The Village of Bensenville is home to a large Guatemalan population and has collaborated with the Guatemalan Consulate in Chicago on a number of initiatives. The Village met with the consulate to discuss new programs aimed to help Bensenville's immigrant community as well as discuss efforts to build trust between the immigrant community and the Police Department. The partnership between the Village and the consulate helped bring a health fair to a Bensenville church at which dentists, doctors, and a variety of clinics provided free services to residents who lacked health insurance. Approximately 600 people attended the event. The Village has also worked with the Mexican, Guatemalan, Salvadorian, and Uruguayan consulates to speak to Hispanic residents on labor laws and rights. Representatives from the Illinois Attorney General's Office, Illinois Department of Labor, and the United States Department of Labor also attended the event.

City of Chicago naturalization ceremonies¹⁴

As part of Chicago's New Americans Initiative, the Mayor's Office has hosted five ceremonies to recognize and honor immigrants who complete the naturalization process and receive citizenship certificates. The ceremonies garner attention from the media and are sometimes held around the time of holidays like July 4th. Over the course of five years, Chicago will assist over 10,000 immigrants in becoming citizens. The Initiative provides resources at local libraries, encourages individuals to independently begin the naturalization process, and helps citizens become active participants in civic life.

Organize community-building activities and spaces.

In many cases, the most effective way to engage immigrants is by fostering a sense of community. Block parties, street fairs and festivals, and community gardens can all help bring different groups together and help immigrants feel more integrated. For instance, the Village of Skokie has sponsored "Know Your Neighbor Weeks," during which residents are encouraged to invite their neighbors over for coffee in their homes. The Village provided host "kits" that included invitations, conversation starters, a small world map, and coupons to local bakeries. If immigrants have relationships with neighbors, other residents, and municipal staff they are more likely to feel comfortable attending and participating in public workshops and meetings.

Develop relationships with key leaders and organizations in an effort to build local leadership.

A great way to connect and establish more trust with immigrant groups is to reach out to and work with local community leaders and organizations serving the immigrant community. These leaders can help encourage people in their communities to participate in public meetings and events. One way to do this could be to create an immigrant advisory council that meets regularly to discuss relevant issues that the municipality has recently experienced or brings community issues to the municipality.

Municipalities can also build local leadership capacity through appointments to local boards or commissions or by offering training and leadership opportunities for immigrant groups. Municipalities can also organize citizen academies—educational opportunities that teach local residents about how city operations and departments, such as police and fire departments, work. Citizen academies can help immigrants feel empowered to reach out to public agencies when issues arise and to get more actively involved by participating in meetings and events or even serving as volunteers. Staff should attend meetings of immigrant-related organizations to publicize opportunities and explain how to get involved.

¹⁴ City of Chicago, Office of the Mayor, "Mayor Emanuel Hosts Naturalization Ceremony at the Chicago Cultural Center," July 3, 2013. http://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/mayor/press_room/press_releases/2013/july_2013/mayor_emanuel_hostsnaturalizationceremonyatthechicagoculturalcen.html.

Make public engagement accessible. It is important to choose sites that are welcoming, safe, and transportation-accessible and to choose dates and times when many people can participate. Rather than hold meetings in public agency office buildings, which may be intimidating, consider using public schools, community centers, churches, or parks.

A critical component to making public engagement accessible is to make public meetings and materials appropriate for immigrant participants. Solicit input from leaders and organizations in determining recruitment approaches and best models of engagement. Before meetings, ensure that there is common understanding about the goals and processes of the meeting. Show respect for community leaders and their role in the meeting by formally thanking local immigrant leaders or offering them an opportunity to be a part of the agenda. It is also important to clarify up-front how further communication between the municipality and participants will occur. In order to help ensure a successful, productive meeting, consider pre-testing meeting materials with a focus group.¹⁵

Municipalities should ensure that outreach and other meeting materials are available in other languages and mention if there will be translation services available at an event. Outreach strategies may need to vary depending on which immigrant groups a municipality is trying to engage. For instance, for some immigrant communities, phone calls or door-to-door knocking may be much more effective than emails. Just because a resident's first language isn't English doesn't mean that their community isn't digitally engaged. Social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, are also good ways of connecting with immigrant groups. See the Language Access chapter for more strategies on overcoming language barriers.

Traditional ethnic media outlets—such as radio stations or newspapers—may also be effective outreach tools. Establish long-term relationships and mutual trust with ethnic media. Ask immigrant leaders about popular local and regional print and electronic media outlets that target immigrants. One way to build a relationship is to send hiring notices, information about municipal services, events and programs, and general municipal news to ethnic media sources and invite them to press conferences and local events.

Sometimes an effective way to increase participation is by providing small incentives. If possible, provide food (from multiple cultures) and childcare. In some cases, entertainment that highlights ethnic traditions can also be an effective way of encouraging participation. Municipalities might want to consider holding raffles or offering donated gift certificates for participation in long meetings. Incentives may not need to be material and can take the form of recognition or certificates of participation.

A final strategy to encourage participation at public meetings is to speak directly to the issues that local immigrant communities care about. To encourage more participation, incorporate immigrants' priority issues into public meeting agendas whenever possible.¹⁶ By including local immigrants' concerns in meeting agendas, municipalities can show that they are committed to inclusion. Determine what issues are important enough to immigrants and their families to encourage higher levels of participation. Municipalities can identify the highest priority issues by conducting surveys, interviews, or focus groups of leaders and residents.

SPOTLIGHT

Aurora award ceremonies

The City of Aurora regularly honors residents with dedicated scholarships and awards for students and community leaders. Three annual breakfast events for Aurora's Hispanic and African American advisory boards and its Hispanic pioneers—the city's earliest Hispanic leaders in the arts, education, and other fields—highlight residents' achievements, combat negative stereotypes, and build social cohesion. Aurora also works with community groups to ensure inclusivity in all the honors it bestows. Immigrants have been well represented as parade grand marshals and in naming honorary streets.

¹⁵ Keidan, Greg, The Institute for Local Government, "A Local Official's Guide to Immigrant Civic Engagement," 2008. <http://www.ca-ilg.org/local-officials-guide-immigrant-civic-engagement>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

