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State Legislatures

Ann Morse, Program Director, NCSL and
BNAC Program Manager
444 North Capitol Street, N.W., Suite 515
Washington, D.C. 20001 202.624.5400
www.ncsl.org/programs/immig/community_orr.htm

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National Immigration Forum
www.immigrationforum.org 202.347.0040



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Urban Institute
www.urban.org 202.833.7200

Building the
New American Community
Initiative:
A Summary

Building the New American Community Initiative

Background

The 1990s was an extraordinary decade in terms of the number, origins and cultural diversity of migrants who arrived in the United States. Immigration's influence on the social, economic and political institutions of the nation has matched these demographic changes, and there is every indication that refugees and immigrants will continue to be a major force for change in the years to come. The influence of newcomers and their children on local communities, as well as the ways in which communities affect newcomers' integration trajectories, lies at the heart of many social and economic changes in American society.

The foreign born today comprise approximately 11.5 percent of the American population, and most settle in long-established gateway cities like New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston, Miami and Houston. During the 1990s, however, a much greater number of newcomers settled in "non-traditional" states and cities where relatively few migrants have resided since World War II. The three cities at the core of the Building the New American Community Initiative – Portland (OR), Nashville (TN) and Lowell (MA) – are illustrative of places that since the 1980s have attracted record numbers of refugees and immigrants, and today are working to build communities that are inclusive as well as economically, socially and culturally dynamic.

Building the New American Community Initiative

The Building the New American Community (BNAC) Initiative aims to foster the successful integration of refugees and immigrants at a community level. In the absence of a national integration policy, the Initiative is also an experiment in how governments and civil society can co-operate to achieve positive integration outcomes. Coalitions to develop and experiment with integration strategies were formed in Lowell, Nashville and Portland, and assisted by a national team of policy analysts, advocates and researchers from the National Conference of State Legislatures, the National Immigration Forum, the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, The Urban Institute, and the Migration Policy Institute.

This three-year initiative, funded primarily by the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, focused on building relationships among organizations and institutions affiliated with the refugee/immigrant and receiving communities in order to capitalize on existing resources and opportunities, as well as to foster two-way integration. As such, integration is a process that involves an entire community, not just its newest members. It is also a long-term one built on daily two-way interactions between refugees/immigrants and members of the receiving community – in workplaces, schools, neighborhoods, places of worship, shopping malls etc. Integration fundamentally depends on institutions and organizations putting in place the enabling conditions that allow newcomers to achieve economic self-sufficiency and meaningful civic participation.

Four principles underlie the BNAC Initiative's concept of successful integration:

1. New Americans should be involved significantly in decision-making processes;
2. Integration is a two-way process that implicates and benefits both new Americans and receiving community members;
3. Coalitions are among the vehicles that can foster effective and meaningful collaborations in order to tackle the numerous challenges and opportunities associated with socio-economic, cultural and demographic change. These involve public-private partnerships that reach across levels of government and include a broad array of non-governmental organizations, as well as institutions and individuals from many different segments of society; and
4. Resources should be devoted to integration-focused interventions, as well as coalition building and training opportunities, which lead to systemic change.

The Lowell, Nashville and Portland demonstration sites developed multiple-issue integration agendas, and each coalition was compelled as a consequence to build a diverse membership from the outset. This meant that while coalitions had a core of refugee- and immigrant-serving organizations (mutual assistance associations (MAAs), community-based organizations, resettlement agencies), they also included representatives of various government departments and agencies (state, county and city), business associations, faith-based organizations, and neighborhood and social service providers. Over time, as the integration agendas were developed and activities initiated, new refugee, immigrant, and receiving-community groups joined the coalitions, while some founding members withdrew. In most sites, however, a broad representation and involvement was achieved.

Action Agendas: The Local Qualities of Integration

Each demonstration site developed its own particular set of issues and projects that guided coalition activities.

- In Lowell considerable attention was given to civic engagement, namely encouraging naturalized citizens to vote in municipal, state and federal elections and organizing candidate forums. The One Lowell Coalition also developed a focus on youth and adult education programs, especially with respect to learning English and encouraging parental involvement in the school system.
- From the outset the Chamber of Commerce was an important member of the Nashville Coalition, and consequently activities in Nashville had a workforce and business development orientation, in addition to family- and refugee-community strengthening activities.
- Portland concentrated on building the internal capacity and structures of the African and Slavic/Ukrainian communities, as well as services for school-aged youth and their families, civic engagement with municipal and state agencies and public officials, neighborhood socio-economic development, and cross-cultural communication.

The sites did have a number of issues in common, such as civic engagement programs and a desire to raise awareness among local and state legislators of the contributions made by newcomers to social, economic and political life in each community. But the number of issues particular to each site also highlights the local qualities of integration – that it is a process which is highly responsive to local economic conditions and opportunities, as well as contingent upon long-established “ways of doing things” that structure the everyday qualities of social, political and cultural participation. These entrenched behaviors frequently are resistant to change and may pose the greatest challenges to achieving newcomer inclusion.

Main Findings and Policy Implications

Coalitions as Vectors for Integration: Integration occurs over a long timeframe and it was necessary for the coalitions to refine, if not redefine, their missions and structures. BNAC local demonstration site partners were acutely aware of changing national and community priorities in the wake of 9/11 and spent substantial time revisiting their core mission.

Engaging in integration work through a coalition structure also means constantly discovering new institutions, organizations, individuals and practices that influence the experiences of newcomers. In spite of the challenges that the BNAC sites encountered in developing their base membership, each site did incorporate diverse groups, including representatives of the refugee, immigrant and receiving communities, and attempted to develop mechanisms to encourage the participation of new members.

Sound management is an important element for a successful integration coalition. In the three sites, the BNAC coalitions grappled with finding the right management structure – questioning whether their manager should function as a leader or a facilitator or if the management position should be part-time or full-time. Given the range of issues and the challenge of moving many of them forward simultaneously, a full-time, fully funded manager and reasonable management infrastructure are needed to support the activities of a coalition. For coalitions to work well, leaders also must encourage the sharing of authority, recognition and responsibility among all coalition members.

Institutions and Integration: Integration is often gauged by individual socio-economic status or language competency measures, but organizations and institutions set the policy and practice context in which integration occurs. The BNAC Initiative facilitated and/or enhanced the quality of relations between refugee/immigrant and receiving community organizations. By working directly with organizations and institutions as diverse as refugee MAAs, city planning departments and business associations, coalitions saw long-established practices begin to change, as well as the development of stronger responses to the needs of newcomers. Integration requires that the laws, rules, practices and norms of organizations and official institutions, which may have been formulated decades before a new wave of refugee/immigrant settlement arrives in a city, not impede two-way integration. Building knowledge and relationships between organizations, and enabling refugee and immigrant leaders to participate in this building process, was a core focus of BNAC activity that enabled newcomers and long-established residents to capitalize on emerging relationships.

Refugee and Immigrant Leadership: Leadership Skills Development was one of the main activities of the coalitions in all three sites from the inception of the Initiative. To ensure that newcomers have the confidence and skills they require to assert and articulate their respective communities' needs, assets, and concerns successfully, each coalition put significant energy into leadership skills building. The goal was to produce effective leaders by providing them with training on organizational and membership development, as well as on such critical integration issues as access to jobs and social services, promotion of civic engagement, knowledge of refugee/immigrant rights and responsibilities, access to English language training, and youth development and education. The coalitions sought to build strong and stable newcomer organizations as a true reflection of effective refugee/immigrant leadership development.

Civic Engagement: One of the major goals of the BNAC Initiative was to educate policymakers about newcomer communities and their integration experiences in localities, as well as to bring refugee and immigrant voices to the table on a range of policy issues. This has been one of the most successful aspects of the Initiative, with newcomers not only learning about the American electoral system and the importance of voting, but also participating as partners with public agencies in the coalitions. In practical terms, refugee and immigrant organizations played a direct role in crafting policies and programs that directly influence their communities as well as the receiving community. In turn, through trainings and direct interactions, newcomers developed greater confidence and security in communicating with public officials. This also gave many policymakers a better understanding of newcomer communities, the particular challenges faced by refugees/immigrants and their children as they become Americans, and how public policies could facilitate (or impede) productive integration.

Persistent Integration Challenges: There are many integration issues rooted in the particular economic, social and political circumstances of cities. However, the newcomer communities in every BNAC site identified three sets of issues as fundamental to their integration and the social mobility of their children: i) English training, ii) employment/vocational skills, in relation to credential and education attainment recognition and skills upgrading, and iii) youth development opportunities, especially in the educational system. The inability to utilize training acquired abroad because of reluctance on the part of many receiving community institutions, licensing boards and employers to recognize foreign credentials was repeatedly identified as a major barrier to integration.

Likewise, the quality and content of education and opportunities for youth to develop their skills were identified as major integration problems that merit community-wide attention. Included under the youth development umbrella are issues pertaining to English-language training, linguistic limitations that impeded children's ability to develop their skills in subjects such as mathematics and science, an absence of culturally appropriate after-school and recreation programs for girls and boys, and language and cross-cultural communication difficulties encountered by parents when interacting with school systems and teachers.

English training, employment, and youth development integration challenges are generic to each site, but they are also examples of issues that are tailor-made for coalition action. In each site the coalitions took steps to address pieces of these large and complex issues. By facilitating interactions between newcomer and receiving community organizations, Nashville was able to begin unraveling the complexities of the accreditation process for foreign-trained engineers, and Lowell fostered a program that encourages refugee parents to become involved in the school system. Similarly, refugee/immigrant groups played a significant role in shaping Multnomah County's (Portland) School-Aged Policy Framework and the ways services will be provided to youth and their families.

Policy Responses for Integration: The BNAC Initiative highlights the range of social and economic conditions that influence integration opportunities across the country. The history of newcomer settlement in the BNAC sites has tended to be episodic rather than continuous. In addition, relative to large gateway cities, they tend to have less fully developed institutional relationships and networks that facilitate integration. Other cities are in a much stronger position due to a long history of providing settlement services, while still others have much more limited capacity and expertise. If the federal government is to embark on a broad integration program, one of the most salient lessons to be drawn from the BNAC experiment is how the “uneven geography” of refugee and immigrant settlement, as well as the availability and quality of resources within a city, requires innovation in policy development and delivery. Engaging the resources of several levels of government and their agencies, businesses, private organizations and a broad spectrum of community-based partners is an intensive and demanding way to build social policy, but it is one that will be tied to local conditions and needs. It is also one that by its very nature demands a tolerance for variation in policy objectives, program development and delivery across the nation. Such a collaborative, if differentiated, policy approach is absolutely essential in this period of high and highly diverse immigration.