

**Immigrant and Refugee Community Engagement Project
Summary Report
January 2007**

Background:

As part of the City of Seattle's Race and Social Justice Initiative, Mayor Greg Nickels wants to strengthen how City government serves immigrant and refugee communities living in Seattle. To learn more about the concerns and needs of residents in these communities, in May 2006 the City hired Bonnie Olson from Emerging Design Consulting and her consultant team to design and carry out a community engagement project.

The consultants used group and individual interviews to gather opinions on a wide range of topics including existing knowledge of City services, ways to improve City services, and general issues of concern and challenges within specific immigrant/refugee communities.

The consultants selected immigrant and refugee communities for the project based on the size of their population within Seattle and/or their relatively short amount of time in the United States. The diversity and number of participants interviewed make the key findings significant and valuable as the City develops its immigrants and refugees action plan. The selected groups include:

- Asian and Pacific Islander (Vietnam, China, Cambodia, the Philippines, and Samoa);
- Latino (Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, Colombia, and El Salvador);
- East African (Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, and Somalia); and
- Middle Eastern (Iraq and Jordan).

The project reached 260 people – 161 through group interviews and 99 through individual interviews. General community members represented two-thirds of participants and the remaining participants were community leaders/providers (i.e., immigrants and refugees associated with small, emerging organizations or who work in the human services field).

Summary of Key Findings:

Several common themes, focusing on broad and general issues (as opposed to issues with specific services), emerged from the focus groups and individual interviews. Key findings include:

- ***Language and cultural barriers limit access to services and civic participation, and slow cultural adjustment***
Immigrants and refugees identify a number of problems or challenges related to language barriers:
 - They may not know what services exist because information about services is not available in their first language, or if available, the quality of the translation and/or interpretation is poor.
 - Forms and processes regarding services are unfamiliar, complex, and/or difficult to navigate. Consequently, many immigrants and refugees require language

assistance. Many participants believe that such assistance is best provided by bilingual/bicultural staff from agencies and/or community liaisons because these individuals know their language and culture.

Immigrants and refugees also identify a number of problems or challenges related to cultural barriers:

- Widespread desire exists for education and training on various systems and processes in the United States, such as public schools, adult education, employment, and government and politics. Without such support, many find it difficult to adjust to American culture.
 - Immigrants and refugees seek services and programs that reflect their cultural values and perspectives and help them maintain family unity. Some parks programs, for example, serve specific age groups, but do not serve the family as a whole.
 - Community members believe that mainstream organizations lack “cultural competence” because, in part, they sometimes do not have staff who speak the language or who understand the culture of the people trying to access the organizations’ services and programs.
- ***Immigrants and refugees seek greater outside investment in their community assets***
Organizations providing services to immigrant and refugee communities want more outside investment in their grassroots organizations. Community members believe that these organizations can best define their needs, and then design and deliver appropriate services. However, these organizations have difficulty competing with larger, more established agencies, particularly in the area of human services, because providers must fill out a lot of paperwork. Organizations serving immigrant and refugee communities want the City streamline to its application process, reduce the amount of paperwork, and consider community knowledge, trust, and relationships more when awarding money.
 - ***Immigrant and refugee communities welcome more interaction with City officials***
Participants would like more engaged community outreach and involvement from City officials and offer this formula: inform, educate, invite involvement, allow community decisions and votes, and work with community-appointed representatives. They encourage City officials to learn about community needs and to inquire about what does and does not work.
 - ***Experiences accessing City services vary***
The most frequently cited City services used by immigrants and refugees include parks, libraries, utilities, and police and fire services. The quality of an experience depends on access. For example, Latinos view parks, police, and fire in a positive way because these services are provided or open to all. Parking and library services, however, are viewed less favorably because some immigrants and refugees do not understand the information provided, there is a lack of resources, and/or they cannot get help in their language.

- ***Strengthened coordination around immigrant and refugee issues can enhance access***
Participants would like City departments to better coordinate the way they serve immigrant and refugee communities. Improved coordination could include a single point of contact at the City. Participants also support the idea of an advisory group and propose that its members be selected by the community.

In addition to these broad concerns, the community engagement project uncovered a number of unmet service needs for specific populations (though some overlap exists):

Latino immigrants and refugees:

- medical/health care
- jobs/training
- English as a second language
- child care
- education
- protection of civil rights
- immigration/legal services

Asian and Pacific Islander immigrants and refugees:

- culturally appropriate services
- jobs/training
- housing
- assistance with utilities bills
- legal services

African immigrants and refugees:

- housing
- jobs/training
- after-school activities for youth as needed

Middle Eastern immigrants and refugees:

- adult education
- financial assistance
- jobs
- English as a second language
- transportation
- protection of civil rights
- health care

Next Steps:

City staff are developing an immigrants and refugees action plan. The results from the community engagement interviews generally support the direction of the draft action plan and provide some new issues for consideration. When completed, the plan will outline specific actions for the City to take to strengthen how it serves immigrant and refugee communities. The plan currently has sections dealing with access to services, work force and economic development, protection of civil rights, and providing social services for youth, seniors and women. City staff expect to complete their revision of the action plan by March 2007.