

Ten Ideas to Encourage Immigrant Engagement

California's population is changing and local officials know that this presents both opportunities and challenges for their communities. Effective and inclusive public engagement can contribute to stronger communities and more effective local governance. The following ideas may help local officials more successfully engage immigrant residents.

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1. KNOW YOUR CHANGING COMMUNITY

Using the latest census data can be useful but be aware that the rapidly changing demographics of many communities may outpace this information. Immigrant organizations and leaders, school administrators, ethnic media, local clergy, and others can be a great resource. They can help identify your new residents' countries of origin, the languages spoken, the print and electronic media of choice, where immigrant children attend school and the pressing issues of concern to these communities.

Having information about age, education, literacy and the number of years in the United States may also

be helpful. Remember that overgeneralizing about a community can make it more difficult to develop effective plans and processes. It is said that there is no such thing as the “general public” and there is probably not a “general immigrant public” in your community. Understanding the common as well as the distinguishing features of immigrant residents will help lay a foundation for effective outreach and participation strategies.

2. BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH KEY LEADERS AND ORGANIZATIONS

Communicate with immigrant community leaders and organizations early on in order to build relationships, learn about these communities, and convey your interest in involving immigrant residents in the civic and political life of the larger community. Develop and maintain a list of these individuals and organizations, be alert to opportunities to visit with them, engage them in local events and activities, and stay in touch with them on a regular basis.

3. IDENTIFY ISSUES THAT IMMIGRANTS CARE ABOUT

Through personal conversations, surveys and meetings with local organizations, identify issues of concern to immigrant communities and be prepared to include these topics in community conversations and other public engagement activities. You can also begin with discussions and civic participation *within* immigrant communities if the need is identified. This can provide vehicles for participation and leadership development by those who might not otherwise get involved. Demonstrate how civic participation can help newcomers address their priorities and achieve their dreams.

4. OVERCOME LANGUAGE BARRIERS

Public engagement efforts should seek to ensure that every participant: is prepared to take part, will be understood, and will understand what others are saying. If possible, outreach and background materials should be translated as appropriate for your communities, and translation equipment and services should be available. Outreach for public engagement events should include mention of the translation services if available. Ensure that the translation of materials is done by native speakers or by individuals completely fluent so that translations will be understood by readers. When conducting polls and surveys, it is best to ask questions in a resident’s first language when possible. Face-to-face, radio and other non-written communications will help you reach people with varying literacy levels.

5. USE EFFECTIVE MEDIA AND OUTREACH STRATEGIES

Make immigrant-oriented local and regional print and electronic media an integral component of your communication strategy. Develop relationships with these media outlets, provide them access to information and to local officials, send them news, notices and job listings, and engage them as partners in developing effective outreach to generate broader public involvement. Distribute information about an upcoming public engagement activity to appropriate communities, service or business organizations, schools, congregations, etc. Ask leaders of these groups to include special solicitations to their immigrant members and to follow up and support those that are interested in attending.

6. MAKE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT ACCESSIBLE, ENJOYABLE AND REWARDING

Make public meeting locations accessible to immigrant communities by holding them in neighborhoods where immigrant residents live, close to public transportation or provide transportation assistance if appropriate. Safe and welcoming locations may include public schools, community centers, congregations, and residences of their community leaders. In scheduling meeting times, consider work, family, cultural and religious obligations. Provide onsite childcare and make culturally appropriate arrangements that include dietary preferences and entertainment. Be cautious of assumptions and generalizations, and ask immigrant residents what times, locations and settings would work best for them.

7. MAKE MEETING PROCESSES AND MATERIALS APPROPRIATE

When planning a public engagement event, meet with trusted and knowledgeable leaders and organizations and seek their input on recruitment and meeting processes. Be aware that relationships and perceived relative status and roles among those in the room may, in some cases, have an impact on readiness and confidence to participate. Working in small groups may often be the best approach. Have trusted community members help communicate the goals and process for the meeting, the role of participating public agencies, and how public input will impact the decision making process. All materials should be straightforward and translated as appropriate. Expressing appreciation and respect works for everybody.

8. BUILD LEADERSHIP CAPACITY OF NEWCOMERS

Provide training and leadership opportunities for immigrant groups including: citizen academies, English language classes, leadership training, and appointments to local boards and commissions. As appropriate for your community, consider leadership academies or trainings that are directed to particular communities and held in residents' native language or in translation. Attend meetings of immigrant-related organizations to inform them about civic engagement opportunities. Look for mutually beneficial partnerships involving a local agency and immigrant organizations. Create a plan for leadership development that will make follow through more likely.

9. ENHANCE STAFF CAPACITY FOR SUCCESSFUL IMMIGRANT ENGAGEMENT

Skilled local agency staff that have the time and ability to develop relationships with appropriate community organizations can help create and manage successful long-term immigrant engagement and integration efforts. Develop opportunities for staff to learn about the history, culture and other dynamics and needs of local immigrant residents. Build these capacities into staff hiring and training as appropriate.

10. PLAN COLLABORATIVELY, THINK LONG TERM AS YOU GO

A long-term plan with multiple strategies is more likely to result in significant outcomes. Be prepared to learn and adapt as you go. Involve immigrant-related organizations and/or leaders trusted by immigrant communities in planning, implementing and evaluating your immigrant civic engagement efforts. Find the right people and places to make this happen. Celebrate your successes.

About the Institute for Local Government

This tip sheet is a service of the Institute for Local Government (ILG) whose mission is to promote good government at the local level with practical, impartial and easy-to-use resources for California communities. ILG is the nonprofit 501(c)(3) research and education affiliate of the League of California Cities, the California State Association of Counties and the California Special Districts Association.

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