

# CHAPTER 7: CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION



## INTRODUCTION

Immigrants in Minnesota reported mixed experiences with community involvement, which includes everything from attending local events and volunteering with community organizations to serving in the government. Immigrant engagement is strongest within their own ethnically based organizations and weakest when it comes to holding decision-making power in government or as leaders of large organizations that serve the broader community. English language classes and volunteering are two highly positive sources of connection to the larger community, but not all immigrants took advantage of those opportunities. One of the primary obstacles to greater immigrant involvement is simply a lack of information about community resources. Additional difficulties arise from different cultural norms or unfamiliarity with the U.S. political and civic systems. In other cases, government and organizations either do not know how to become more inclusive or lack the political will to be more open. In a few cases, active religious discrimination prevents immigrants from fully enjoying their rights.

## HUMAN RIGHTS AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Democracy and representative government depend on participation to ensure sound decision-making, popular support for programs and initiatives, and accountability when rights are violated. Individuals decide whether they want to participate, but everyone must have equal access to the opportunity to participate. Civic involvement can take many forms, many of them protected by human rights. People have the right to participate in government, either directly by holding public office or through representatives chosen in regular elections.<sup>1148</sup> This right not only prohibits interference with voting, it also requires the government to take active steps to ensure that everyone who is entitled to vote is able to do so.<sup>1149</sup>

Similarly, everyone has the right to participate in the cultural life of the community.<sup>1150</sup> This includes both the right to take part in larger society and the right to preserve and enjoy a minority culture, religion, language, or tradition.<sup>1151</sup> Immigrants, both permanent and temporary, have a right to their culture and to maintain ties with their country of origin.<sup>1152</sup> Religion receives special protection

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<sup>1148</sup> International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Art. 25.

<sup>1149</sup> UN Committee on Civil and Political Rights, General Comment No. 25, Participation in Public Affairs and the Right to Vote, ¶¶ 10-12, UN Doc. CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.7 (12 Jul. 1996).

<sup>1150</sup> ICCPR Art. 27.

<sup>1151</sup> UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, General Comment No. 21, Rights of Everyone to Take Part in Cultural Life, ¶ 32, UN Doc. E/C.12/GC/21, (21 Dec. 2009).

<sup>1152</sup> UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, General Comment No. 21, Rights of Everyone to Take Part in Cultural Life, ¶ 34, UN Doc. E/C.12/GC/21, (21 Dec. 2009).

from interference. Governments must respect freedom of religion or belief.<sup>1153</sup> People from minority cultures or religions should be protected from discrimination.<sup>1154</sup>

Other human rights facilitate civic involvement, such as freedom of opinion, assembly, and association.<sup>1155</sup> These rights guarantee that people are able to express themselves publicly and connect with like-minded individuals – necessary prerequisites to taking collective action in a community.<sup>1156</sup>

## RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

“I was ready to sell the building to the East African mosque, but reluctance in the community to live next to a mosque prevented it. There was no problem when I sold to a Latino church.”

Immigrants reported serious human rights violations involving limitations on the practice of their religion, especially restrictions on the construction of mosques and other Islamic religious institutions such as schools. Though Muslims were reportedly the main target of religious discrimination, members of the Jewish community also reported incidents where they were penalized for taking off religious holidays

from school.<sup>1157</sup> Although the Constitution and other federal and state laws prohibit discrimination against religious groups, such opposition sometimes succeeds under the guise of seemingly neutral rules, such as zoning or school calendars.

In several communities around Minnesota, proposed mosques or Islamic centers have triggered community opposition and contentious hearings. According to one school official, “approximately two years ago, Somalis established an East African mosque. They attempted to buy a building from the school district and I was ready to sell, but reluctance in [the community] to live next to a mosque [prevented it]. There was no problem when I sold to a Latino church.”<sup>1158</sup> City governments sometimes respond to community pressure by blocking the creation of Islamic centers and mosques,<sup>1159</sup> a violation of religious freedom. In other cases, local governments have allowed

<sup>1153</sup> ICCPR Art. 18.

<sup>1154</sup> UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, General Comment No. 21, Rights of Everyone to Take Part in Cultural Life, ¶¶ 22, 32-33, UN Doc. E/C.12/GC/21 (21 Dec. 2009).

<sup>1155</sup> ICCPR Arts. 19, 21-22

<sup>1156</sup> UN Committee on Civil and Political Rights, General Comment No. 25, Participation in Public Affairs and the Right to Vote, ¶ 8, UN Doc. CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.7 (12 Jul. 1996).

<sup>1157</sup> Interview 142.

<sup>1158</sup> Interview 73; Laura Yuen, *Willmar showing the way to a more diverse Minnesota*, Mar 12, 2012, Minnesota Public Radio, <http://www.mprnews.org/story/2012/03/12/outside-part3-willmar-is-the-future-of-a-more-diverse-minnesota>.

<sup>1159</sup> Interview 122.

centers to move forward despite the opposition.<sup>1160</sup> Even where the city allows the Islamic institution, however, the opposition has a negative impact on Muslim immigrants: “If others were forming a school, would there be a complaint? No. This is very unwelcoming.”<sup>1161</sup>

The Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act imposes a very high standard on governments when land use decisions such as zoning impose a “substantial burden” on the practice of a person’s religion.<sup>1162</sup> Governments must show a “compelling governmental interest” for such a decision and that the decision is the least restrictive means of achieving their goal.<sup>1163</sup> Even a neutral statute that does not on its face discriminate against religious institutions may not be allowed under the Act if it imposes a burden on the exercise of religious freedom without a compelling reason. The Department of Justice is investigating one Minnesota town that denied a permit for an Islamic Center in order to determine whether they violated the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act.<sup>1164</sup> The lone council member to vote in favor of the Islamic Center cited potential lawsuits as the reason for his vote, evidence that the Act has a deterrent effect on religious discrimination in land use decisions.<sup>1165</sup>

## PARTICIPATION IN IMMIGRANT-LED COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Outside of overt religious discrimination, immigrants did not report many problems with participating in their own cultural communities. Participants were motivated by familiarity and a sense of safety. Immigrant-led organizations did face some difficulties accessing the same kind of institutional support as organizations that serve the larger community. Interviewees attributed some of this to ignorance of the rules governing nonprofits on the part of immigrant-led organizations and some to a lack of effort by the larger community to foster immigrant-led organizations.

“The Karen community, they have nine geographic areas. These programs are all volunteer-based, and they are so well-organized.”

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<sup>1160</sup> Interview 18.

<sup>1161</sup> Interview 129.

<sup>1162</sup> 42 U.S.C. §2000cc.

<sup>1163</sup> Vermont Natural Resources Board, “Religious Land Use and Institutionalize Persons Act,” (accessed Mar. 21, 2014), <http://www.nrb.state.vt.us/lup/publications/manual/RLUIPA.pdf>.

<sup>1164</sup> Star Tribune Blog, *Feds launch formal investigation into St. Anthony mosque rejection*, Oct. 29, 2012, Minneapolis Star Tribune, <http://www.startribune.com/local/blogs/176309071.html>.

<sup>1165</sup> Rose French, *St. Anthony City Council rejects Islamic center plan*, Jun. 13, 2012, Minneapolis Star Tribune, <http://www.startribune.com/local/158785005.html>.

Attending events, belonging to religious institutions, and supporting organizations representing their own ethnic, cultural, or religious background were the most common forms of participation for immigrants: “I go to the monastery on a lot of Buddhist holidays. Sometimes we come to a workshop at a church here, to learn to organize the community.”<sup>1166</sup> For undocumented immigrants in particular, events within their own cultural or ethnic group are safe, “familiar and relaxed (no immigration presence, no questions asked).”<sup>1167</sup> This kind of cultural participation includes both annual celebrations as well as highly organized outreach and support services: “The Karen community – it is amazing to me – they have nine sections, geographic areas, and each section has its own youth and women leaders [in addition to the overall leader], and each new arrival gets visited by all three [leaders]. These programs are all volunteer-based, and they are so well-organized.”<sup>1168</sup>

The drive for participation and mutual support within their own cultural group has led to a proliferation of immigrant-led organizations: “Everyone wants to start their own 501(c)(3) – they want to offer all services.”<sup>1169</sup> These groups face challenges fitting into the existing nonprofit model and receiving the same support as institutions that serve the larger community. One person who assists new nonprofits described the problems as first, “the lack of knowledge of what a non-governmental organization is and all the rules that go with that – application, IRS forms, by-laws, etc. The whole process is cumbersome. The second issue is start-up funds. Who is going to fund small immigrant-led organizations? The fact that their board members are not well connected to people of influence yet means that they don’t have relationships with the funding community or donors.”<sup>1170</sup> A member of an immigrant organization described her perception that the larger community was not as supportive of immigrant organizations: “We wanted to rent a church space to use for meetings for a Korean-American group but we were told that it could only be used for church activities. However, they rent the gym to a homeschool group and that is okay. It seems like maybe they just didn’t want the Korean group there.”<sup>1171</sup> Despite serving as the primary point of immigrant community participation and support, immigrant-led organizations do not have the same access to funding and other resources as groups that serve the larger community.

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<sup>1166</sup> Interview 23.

<sup>1167</sup> Interview 133.

<sup>1168</sup> Interview 145.

<sup>1169</sup> Interview 83.

<sup>1170</sup> Interview 135.

<sup>1171</sup> Interview 92.

## PARTICIPATION IN ORGANIZATIONS THAT SERVE THE BROADER COMMUNITY

Participation in groups that serve the broader community is a more mixed experience. Some immigrants reported extremely positive experiences, while others expressed a reluctance to become involved. Leaders of these organizations also reported difficulties with attracting participation from all immigrant groups. In some cases, immigrants felt that organizations were not truly interested in changing their programming to reflect their input and they were being selected more as tokens rather than as full participants. In other cases, some immigrant groups have different cultural norms around punctuality or how to conduct meetings that inhibit participation. Language and immigration status also remain major barriers to full participation.

### VOLUNTEERING

Some immigrants reported positive involvement with organizations that serve the broader community, especially through volunteering: “I do volunteer a lot because I was not able to work for a couple of years. I tried to fill the time by volunteering and that helped me a lot. That was life changing.... Probably [volunteering was] the main reason I was able to be involved with the community, learn more culture, be more accepted. People like when you get involved.”<sup>1172</sup> Another immigrant used her own experience volunteering to advise other new arrivals: “Everyone who invited me to anything, I went, and I volunteered for everything. I tell people, you have to try, you have to go out.”<sup>1173</sup>

### CONNECTION THROUGH ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSES

Immigrants reported that English language (EL) programs were another extremely positive source of connection to the larger community. Because many immigrants arrive in the United States as adults, they are not connected with the school system, even if they lack literacy, education, or language skills. Language in particular is crucial for many to be able to gain employment and fully participate in civic life. The availability of free and low-cost English-language learning programs is one way Minnesota helps immigrants adjust to life here.

Overall, communities reported that free English language classes are available.<sup>1174</sup> However, in some areas, enrollment outstrips available class spaces.<sup>1175</sup> Other factors such as location, time of classes, transportation, and the availability of childcare determined whether or not students were

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<sup>1172</sup> Interview 3

<sup>1173</sup> Interview 93

<sup>1174</sup> Interview 55.

<sup>1175</sup> Interview 72; Interview 74; Interview 78; Interview 82; Interview 137.

able to participate.<sup>1176</sup> For those who do participate in English language classes, it is a place of connection and learning beyond just language.

English language classes were regularly cited as a welcoming place for new immigrants to connect to the community.<sup>1177</sup> One school in Minneapolis generated unanimous praise from its students.<sup>1178</sup> A woman said, “This school is like a second family, a second house. I have had the opportunity to meet people from other countries. My fellow students encourage me, there are good teachers, good students. The teachers and staff here do not just worry about the language, it is about more. They help you with everything. They connect me with resume help, job application help, bus schedules, and stuff. The teachers here are very good and patient.”<sup>1179</sup> Another man described his English language teacher as “like my American mother. She is a very good friend.”<sup>1180</sup> One person remembered the kindness of his middle school English language teacher. He says, “She came to my house and she also asked me to look after her bunnies while she was gone. I was surprised she trusted me so much. She was like an extended family member.”<sup>1181</sup>

Many communities are conveying civic information to immigrants through EL classes.<sup>1182</sup> In one class, the teacher provided a lesson on cleaning products, after learning that one family had been using a drain-cleaning product as body soap because they did not understand the label.<sup>1183</sup> In another case, the EL teacher arranged for a family about to have a baby to tour the hospital ahead of time, to get familiar with the location.<sup>1184</sup>

“My English language teacher is like my American mother. She is a very good friend.”

English language teachers often learn about problems their students are anticipating before anyone else. One teacher related a problem with school buses that was impacting her Hmong students.<sup>1185</sup> “One woman was concerned about the bus not stopping where it was supposed to for the kindergartners. She called me one morning when the bus did not pick up the kids and I told her she should call the principal. I helped her figure out what to say, but I wanted her to do it on her own.

<sup>1176</sup> Interview 110; Interview 137; Interview 145; Conversation 24.

<sup>1177</sup> Conversation 2; Conversation 8.

<sup>1178</sup> Conversation 25.

<sup>1179</sup> Conversation 25.

<sup>1180</sup> Interview 1.

<sup>1181</sup> Interview 35.

<sup>1182</sup> Interview 55; Interview 64; Interview 100.

<sup>1183</sup> Interview 64.

<sup>1184</sup> Interview 55.

<sup>1185</sup> Interview 55.

## CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

She called the principal and explained the situation and the principal came out and met with her and got the bus back to pick the kids up. She felt really good that she got a response.”<sup>1186</sup>

Ensuring funding and resources for EL classes helps immigrants connect and feel part of their new community, as well as providing the necessary language skills to advance and participate in the employment market.

### DISCONNECT WITH LARGER COMMUNITY

Despite the positive experiences of these individuals, most immigrants were not involved in institutions that serve the broader community: “not at all,” according to one service provider.<sup>1187</sup> Immigrants reported wanting to be involved but feeling unable to participate. One woman wanted to participate in the Breast Cancer Walk: “But I did not attend. I wondered ‘Will they welcome me?’”<sup>1188</sup> Leaders of community organizations often expressed frustration at failing to get active participation from diverse immigrant groups and surprise that their efforts are not successful. One director of a multicultural community organization reported, “it’s hard to get board members from [immigrant] groups; only one [immigrant] board member showed up to be elected,”<sup>1189</sup> despite what she felt were concerted outreach efforts.

Immigrants and community members identified ignorance of community resources as a primary reason that immigrants felt unwelcome and did not participate in the broader community.<sup>1190</sup> People in all regions noted the challenges of finding the right resources and recommended a centralized location where newcomers can seek information about basic needs, community involvement, and other services.<sup>1191</sup> Especially for new immigrants who may lack English proficiency, the primary connection to services and resources is often through family members or friends.<sup>1192</sup> While this network is very effective for many, interviewees highlighted the additional challenge for people who lack a friend or family member to help them connect to the systems.<sup>1193</sup>

There is not a consensus on the best way to consolidate and provide resources for immigrants. Some of the challenges are: knowing when new immigrants or residents arrive, coordinating between government and private agencies, funding welcoming or integration initiatives, and communicating to immigrants about what is available. One immigrant noted that, “those who have

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<sup>1186</sup> Interview 55.

<sup>1187</sup> Interview 106.

<sup>1188</sup> Interview 22.

<sup>1189</sup> Interview 93.

<sup>1190</sup> Conversation 7; Conversation 12; Conversation 16; Conversation 19; Conversation 22.

<sup>1191</sup> Conversation 12.

<sup>1192</sup> Conversation 25.

<sup>1193</sup> Conversation 21.



resources are not doing an aggressive operation. They are not reaching out to the right people.”<sup>1194</sup> Another group said, “A committee needs to know when people move in, so the existing resources can reach out to them.”<sup>1195</sup> An outreach worker highlighted the importance of putting information about resources in the places where people go, and where they are “captive.” This agency posts information at the laundromat, the health clinic, and the doctor’s office among others because people are sitting in those places for periods of time. Another service provider suggested that centralizing all service providers would make things easier.<sup>1196</sup> She said this would help alleviate transportation problems and facilitate communication between providers.<sup>1197</sup> One metro-area city reaches out by providing a welcome packet for newcomers, which includes information about community resources, business, and coupons.<sup>1198</sup>

Service providers identified insufficient funding, too few staff, and a lack of bilingual staff as barriers to deeper outreach.<sup>1199</sup> One community had a well-regarded welcoming organization that helped connect immigrants with resources and educate community residents.<sup>1200</sup> It unfortunately closed, partially due to a lack of stable funding and also because the larger community was not fully invested in its success.<sup>1201</sup>

### BARRIERS TO FULL INCLUSION

Immigrants offer several reasons why they may not participate in organizations that serve the broader community even when they are aware of the opportunities. One of the most commonly mentioned reasons was a sense that the organizations are not interested in adapting themselves to the desires of immigrants, either in terms of priorities or practices. One activist described his church: “Like many well-established white Anglo organizations, people are nice and friendly and all true, but it is all on their terms.”<sup>1202</sup> Another pointed out that many organizations “want immigrants to do it their way,”<sup>1203</sup> continuing their programming as they have always done it. An immigrant

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<sup>1194</sup> Interview 129.

<sup>1195</sup> Conversation 21.

<sup>1196</sup> Interview 81, Conversation 22.

<sup>1197</sup> Interview 81.

<sup>1198</sup> Conversation 9.

<sup>1199</sup> Conversation 24.

<sup>1200</sup> Taryn Arbeiter, Maria Ward and Professor Katherine Tegtmeyer Pak, *After the Welcome Center: Renewing Conversations about Immigration & Diversity*, St. Olaf College, Department of Political Science, August 23, 2011, [http://wp.stolaf.edu/ace/files/2013/11/CURI\\_Immigration\\_Welcome\\_Center.pdf](http://wp.stolaf.edu/ace/files/2013/11/CURI_Immigration_Welcome_Center.pdf).

<sup>1201</sup> Taryn Arbeiter, Maria Ward and Professor Katherine Tegtmeyer Pak, *After the Welcome Center: Renewing Conversations about Immigration & Diversity*, St. Olaf College, Department of Political Science, August 23, 2011, [http://wp.stolaf.edu/ace/files/2013/11/CURI\\_Immigration\\_Welcome\\_Center.pdf](http://wp.stolaf.edu/ace/files/2013/11/CURI_Immigration_Welcome_Center.pdf).

<sup>1202</sup> Interview 122

<sup>1203</sup> Interview 111.

described how her community is always brought to the table too late in the process: “Most time projects don’t work for immigrants because things have already been decided for them.”<sup>1204</sup> One leader of a community diversity effort contrasted two ways of involving immigrant communities, one which is more likely to be successful and the other which can drive people away: “An ally is hand-in-hand, side-by-side as opposed to charity, which is ‘I’m going to do this for you and lead you.’ When you ask people what they want, they say respect and to be asked.”<sup>1205</sup> Immigrants often did not feel they were being asked to participate as allies and equals.

Immigrants’ fear that they are being asked to participate only as a token representative rather than a true participant was intensified in situations where organizations were not very diverse. Multiple people mentioned that, “I get anxiety when I am the only person of color in the room,”<sup>1206</sup> or “If I go to a meeting and I’m the only immigrant or refugee, then I don’t feel included.”<sup>1207</sup> One activist

described her typical experience interacting with an organization that did not have experience with diversity: “[You] feel strange and unwanted because you are a different-looking person. They try to be nice but they overdo it and it makes you feel uncomfortable.”<sup>1208</sup>

Potentially willing participants find themselves the target of repeated solicitations by organizations seeking more diversity, intensifying their feelings of being singled out as representatives of a community rather than on their own merits: “There are a small number of leaders from minority communities who are regularly approached. Everyone calls [this person] when they need the perspective of an African-American woman, for example.”<sup>1209</sup> Once part of a group, they may be asked to speak on behalf of their group. One advocate described his frustration with that experience: “I get a little mad when they say, ‘We need to figure out how to engage the Hispanic population.’ I can’t speak for the whole community.”<sup>1210</sup>

More successful efforts at fostering immigrant involvement focused on bringing together immigrants and long-term residents as equal participants in a joint effort. One suburb created a multi-cultural advisory committee to advise the police department and other government agencies

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<sup>1204</sup> Interview 129.

<sup>1205</sup> Interview 95.

<sup>1206</sup> Interview 78.

<sup>1207</sup> Interview 97.

<sup>1208</sup> Interview 129.

<sup>1209</sup> Interview 95.

<sup>1210</sup> Interview 78.

about how to serve and communicate with the diverse community. The community liaison highlighted the importance of having a meaningful role for the committee: “We do not meet just to have a meeting. Why would we think new Americans have any more time than the rest of us do?”<sup>1211</sup> Members of the committee are recruited from both the long-term resident and new immigrant communities. The community liaison says, “At first we focused only on new Americans for the committee; that was a misstep. You need people who have lived in the community for a long time who can share the changes they have seen, too.”<sup>1212</sup>

Even in situations where organizations that serve the broader community are involving immigrants in meaningful ways that go beyond token representation, different cultural norms about how to run meetings and events can create barriers to participation. Different values placed on time and punctuality by some immigrant groups are a huge barrier to working together. Organizations take different approaches to bridging these differences. One service provider talked about educating immigrants to help them understand the expectations of institutions that serve the broader community: “The U.S. emphasis on schedules and appointment times – people have to learn that it’s a cultural thing and it’s not going to change to a non-time driven system. ... Sometimes we explain the monetary cost, the cost of an interpreter sitting and waiting, for example, and that sometimes resonates more.”<sup>1213</sup> Other groups are successful because the immigrant participants “run meetings in their own way – they are not very institutional. Otherwise people may walk away and not come back.”<sup>1214</sup> Cultural differences extend beyond schedules and punctuality. One service provider described the need for people to learn how to work with different group dynamics, because some “immigrant communities are very passionate and loud in meetings.”<sup>1215</sup>

Language also poses a barrier to participation, one that community groups often do not handle well. One person spoke of her experience attending a community forum in Minneapolis several years ago that had no interpreters: “A large percentage of the participants came from families that speak another language in the home and yet they had no one set up to interpret so I had to do it.”<sup>1216</sup> An immigrant talked about how the churches in her community claimed that they could not hold unified services because Latinos would not participate: “How about bilingual services? Maybe

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<sup>1211</sup> Interview 190

<sup>1212</sup> Interview 190

<sup>1213</sup> Interview 64.

<sup>1214</sup> Interview 128.

<sup>1215</sup> Interview 64.

<sup>1216</sup> Interview 110.

they will participate.”<sup>1217</sup> Smaller language communities have an even more difficult time: “Russians aren’t included in the mainstream. Their language isn’t available.”<sup>1218</sup>

Immigration status can also play a role in inhibiting immigrant participation in organizations that serve the broader community. One organization described how their effort to attract a more diverse pool of volunteers has run into difficulties because undocumented immigrants are afraid to give out their personal information: “We have forms to fill out to become volunteers and that can frighten people. We no longer make copies of IDs. We explain the process to people and they do not come back. We don’t know how to get around the need for a liability waiver and contact information.”<sup>1219</sup>

### PARTICIPATION IN THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

Immigrant participation in politics and government has a mixed record as well. The political system presents some of the same barriers to participation that interviewees cited to explain low participation in non-governmental organizations that serve the larger community, including: lack of familiarity with the system; cultural differences in behavior on boards and committees; discomfort with being the only minority present; and language and status barriers.

People from all over the state bemoaned the lack of diverse representation in local government and services. One representative example came from a suburban city: “There was a big city meeting and they were doing city employee recognitions. I was standing in the room with [my colleague] in the back and I don’t honestly think there was one non-white person in that entire room besides us and it was packed. Police, fire, parks and rec, maintenance, and a lot of city people.”<sup>1220</sup> Even in the most diverse cities in the state, “most [employees] are white, English language-only speakers. There is no diversity in leadership.”<sup>1221</sup>

The lack of political representation at the local level is particularly troubling because it inhibits people from getting the services they need and further reduces participation. One service provider explained: “We need all citizens to be engaged in political life, because that’s where the power is and immigrants most often aren’t involved, so they can’t influence it.”<sup>1222</sup>

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<sup>1217</sup> Interview 99.

<sup>1218</sup> Interview 142.

<sup>1219</sup> Interview 67.

<sup>1220</sup> Interview 108.

<sup>1221</sup> Interview 128.

<sup>1222</sup> Interview 106.

**BEST PRACTICE: DIVERSIFYING CITY SERVICES**

In one city, to recruit and retain multi-cultural officers, the department supports bilingual and multi-cultural cadets by paying for their schooling while they work part-time for the department.<sup>1223</sup> These cadets have a conditional offer of employment upon graduation, and the department is increasingly reflective of the city population.<sup>1224</sup>

Low rates of voting by immigrant communities contributes to the lack of immigrants in elected office and may add to a sense that elected officials are not responsive to immigrant concerns. According to one service provider, “when people are not part of the voting population, their values are not heard and valued. For 15 years, Somalis weren’t heard, but now [that they are voting], attention is being paid to them.”<sup>1225</sup> Newer immigrant communities or ones with substantial populations that cannot become citizens because of legal status are particularly disadvantaged because voting in Minnesota is restricted to citizens, even for local offices like school board.<sup>1226</sup> Even after becoming citizens, immigrants do not vote at the same rates as native-born citizens,<sup>1227</sup> perhaps because they are less familiar with the political system: “Immigrants and refugees are often coming from non-democratic countries. Kids learn about the democratic process and U.S. culture in schools, but there is nothing for adults. We should help the older generation learn about the democratic process and give them opportunities for involvement.”<sup>1228</sup>

Immigrants not only vote at lower rates, they are also less likely to serve as an elected official. Many individuals reported that no immigrants have ever held elected office in their municipality, despite the presence of a large community.<sup>1229</sup> In one example, immigrants did run for office but lacked the qualifications to be elected: “Around ten years ago, two

“For 15 years, Somalis weren’t heard, but now that they are voting, attention is being paid to them.”

<sup>1223</sup> Interview 190.

<sup>1224</sup> Interview 190.

<sup>1225</sup> Interview 119.

<sup>1226</sup> Ron Hayduk, “Immigrant Voting,” (accessed Mar. 21, 2014), <http://ronhayduk.com/immigrant-voting/> (Seven municipalities in the United States (Chicago and six towns in Maryland) allow noncitizen voting in local elections.) Office of the Minnesota Secretary of State, “Voter Information: How to Register,” (accessed Mar. 21, 2014), <http://www.sos.state.mn.us/index.aspx?page=1766>. (Minnesota rules on voter eligibility).

<sup>1227</sup> Sarah R. Crissey and Thom File. “Voting Behavior of Naturalized Citizens: 1996-2010” U.S. Census Bureau Social, Economic and Housing Statistics Division, [http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/publications/other/Voting\\_Behavior\\_of\\_Naturalized\\_Citizens.pdf](http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/publications/other/Voting_Behavior_of_Naturalized_Citizens.pdf).

<sup>1228</sup> Interview 143.

<sup>1229</sup> Interview 64; Interview 97.

or three immigrants ran for the school board all at the same time. The candidates did not really have the knowledge or language skills to be effective. It came through at the public forum and no one was elected.”<sup>1230</sup> In other cases, potential immigrant representatives may be reluctant to run because, according to one activist, they “are nervous about the commitment because they would get a lot of calls as the ‘diverse’ person, as well as getting lots of calls from their own community for help with everything.”<sup>1231</sup>

Recently, immigrant candidates have had more success winning elections, through some combination of increased voter turnout in immigrant communities and structural changes to

“The word ‘political’ is already intimidating to most. They stay away because they may not know how to participate and they would be afraid to participate.”

election processes. In Minneapolis, three immigrant candidates were elected to city council after a number of electoral changes, including redistricting and ranked choice voting, both of which may have contributed to the new diversity in city government.

Outside of voting and running for office, immigrants can also participate in the political process by holding unelected positions on government boards and commissions. Here, too, immigrants are not well represented. One immigrant reported on her city’s efforts: “The human relations commission has one Latino. They are not very involved, not very organized....This is the city’s attempt at outreach, there is no other attempt.”<sup>1232</sup> In some cases, the law prevents a deliberate effort to increase board and commission diversity: “Decisions are made by the mayor and council. The law prohibits choosing candidates for the commissions based on race, which makes it very difficult. You can’t even indicate race on the application.”<sup>1233</sup> Even though this law may have been passed with an intention to prohibit racism and facilitate minority participation, it now has the opposite effect.

In other cities, simple policy changes have made it easier for a diverse group of people to become involved in boards and commissions. One government official described how his city changed its process for filling commission vacancies: “We used to fill openings on city commissions as they arose, but it was hard to do adequate publicity each time and so only people in the know would apply. We centralized it to one time during the year and offered a diverse range of positions. The effect has been pretty subtle but it increased the number of applicants.”<sup>1234</sup>

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<sup>1230</sup> Interview 64.

<sup>1231</sup> Interview 64.

<sup>1232</sup> Interview 86.

<sup>1233</sup> Interview 128.

<sup>1234</sup> Interview 58.

Even in places where there are no obvious barriers to participation, immigrants may feel uncomfortable engaging in a process they do not understand or one that is unfamiliar. One service provider explained, “in regards to political meetings: the word ‘political’ is already intimidating to most. It means ‘authority.’ They stay away because they may not know how to participate and they would be afraid to participate. They also don’t think that these meetings are intended for them.”<sup>1235</sup> Another activist attributed some of the confusion to the informality of the political system in her city: “They have a perception of certain things that aren’t true, that things aren’t accessible. If you want to talk to the mayor, you just walk in and talk to him, but they feel they can’t. I think people bring preconceived notions of how things are done from their own cultures and they don’t know how things are done here...I tell people they can just go talk to people in government, and people find it a very strange notion, because that’s not the way things were done at home.”<sup>1236</sup>

Some groups have tried to address that discomfort with deliberate steps to bring immigrants into contact with the political process so that they understand the system and are able to meaningfully participate. Minneapolis created a Latino Taskforce and provided support through the Neighborhood and Community Relations Department so that it could engage with the government. One city employee explained, “We’ve started to connect Taskforce members with the city government so they can understand its structure. ... My goal is to create a pipeline through the Latino Taskforce, have them learn about the city so they are better equipped [to serve on commissions and boards]. Other taskforces [for under-represented groups] will be modeled on the Latino Taskforce.”<sup>1237</sup>

Non-governmental organizations can play a similar role. One union described how they help members become advocates: “We try to teach them to get involved in the city council, bring them to meetings. It is an educational process. ...It is extremely inspiring to see the progress. Members started getting used to what they were doing, making phone calls.”<sup>1238</sup> A community service organization is using a similar process to try to cultivate more diverse leadership in their community: “There’s a broad community effort toward more integrated leadership, including boards. We have done leadership training to help both groups better understand. ... We bring together established leaders with emerging leaders, especially immigrants and refugees, in informal settings with free-flowing conversation.”<sup>1239</sup>

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<sup>1235</sup> Interview 133.

<sup>1236</sup> Interview 93.

<sup>1237</sup> Interview 128.

<sup>1238</sup> Interview 118.

<sup>1239</sup> Interview 64.

One positive improvement in political participation in the last year has been an increase in immigrant advocacy, especially at the state level. One activist noted, “The 2013 Minnesota legislative session was the most successful in terms of advocacy from the Latino group.... So for the organized grassroots Latino community, it was a great year and I think it’s the beginning.”<sup>1240</sup> He attributed the shift to an increased openness on the part of the political system: “The national tenor around immigration has changed. Really, up to this year, what we were fighting at the state capitol was one group in power being anti-immigrant. This was the first year people felt no danger.”<sup>1241</sup> New organizations such as Mesa Latina and Minneapolis’ Latino Taskforce took advantage of the opportunity. Another activist credited support from the city of Minneapolis in helping boost the success of the advocacy efforts: “We had the Intergovernmental Relations department to help with the lobbying effort. Minneapolis is the only city in Minnesota that intentionally hires people to engage with the community and lobby with the community so the community can achieve their goals.”<sup>1242</sup> The combination of leadership by immigrant activists and strong support from a coalition of allies created an effective advocacy movement that led to the passage of the long-awaited Minnesota Prosperity Act, which helps undocumented youth attend Minnesota colleges and universities.<sup>1243</sup>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding: Muslim immigrants face discrimination limiting their religious practice, especially in land use decisions.

### Recommendation

- City councils should abide by the requirements of the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act and avoid land use decisions that limit the religious practices of Muslim immigrants and other religious groups.
- Educate the broader community on religious tolerance, combating the myths and misinformation about Islam and other minority religions that fuel discrimination.

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<sup>1240</sup> Interview 121.

<sup>1241</sup> Interview 121.

<sup>1242</sup> Interview 128.

<sup>1243</sup> Interview 184.



Finding: Immigrant-led, ethnically based organizations see strong participation from immigrants and refugees, but lack the resources and support to fully serve their constituents.

### Recommendations

- Funders should ensure broad dissemination of their programs and priorities so that immigrant-led organizations that may not be well established or connected to the funding community can access funding and technical support.
- Government agencies and institutions with resources for small organizations, such as free space or low-cost technology assistance, should increase outreach so that immigrant-led organizations know what help is available.
- Encourage partnerships between new immigrant-led and established organizations to gain more input from immigrants in programs that affect the broader community, while providing capacity building, technical assistance, and shared resources to help immigrant-led organizations become more effective.

Finding: Immigrants are not always aware of community resources and opportunities for engagement with the larger community.

### Recommendations

- Use existing forums to reach immigrant communities, such as English language classes, immigrant churches, grocery stores, and other trusted institutions.
- Centralize information about community resources so that it is easy for immigrants to find what they need, using methods such as telephone hotlines, online referral services, and community connector organizations.
- Adequately fund organizations that serve as connectors between immigrant communities and existing public institutions so that they can serve as linguistic and cultural navigators for everyone who needs assistance.
- Government agencies with significant public contact, such as child protection, housing inspectors, and residential regulation enforcement (e.g. shoveling and mowing), should conduct community orientation and listening sessions. These should be in collaboration with community groups, and focus on both educating new arrivals about laws and common violations, as well as hearing from immigrants about problems and concerns.

Finding: Immigrants feel that organizations serving the broader community do not reflect their priorities, encourage their leadership, accommodate their cultural norms, or assist them in overcoming language barriers, which limits their participation.

### Recommendations

- Organizations should encourage volunteering and other engagement that values immigrant expertise.
- Use forms of outreach and communication that place a strong emphasis on forming personal relationships as a way to bring immigrants into existing community institutions.
- Actively solicit input from all constituents to help shape the priorities and processes of organizations that serve the broader community.
- Organizations should evaluate potential barriers to immigrant involvement and consider changes to accommodate cultural differences, where practical.
- Recognize the need for integrated organizations that include newcomers and long-term residents working in partnership.
- Provide language services where possible to facilitate involvement by all members of the community.
- Avoid asking for Social Security numbers or U.S.-issued identification from potential participants. Keep confidential any personal information about volunteers and other participants, especially regarding immigration status.

Finding: Immigrants are not well represented in the political system, whether as elected officials, government employees, appointees, or members of boards and commissions.

### Recommendations

- Municipalities may need to re-examine electoral districts and voting processes to promote a more representative government that reflects the demographic shifts caused by immigration.
- Public and private organizations should provide widely available civic education for adults on voting, running for office, and holding appointed positions.
- Political parties should think about ways to leverage immigrant communities as volunteers, activists, and candidates.

- Local governments should consider changing how appointed positions are publicized and filled to attract a more diverse pool of applicants, for instance by centralizing all applications or conducting targeted outreach to achieve diversity goals.
- Local governments and community institutions should help immigrants build the capacity and personal connections to be involved in politics and government through citizen academies, leadership trainings, or other outreach programs.