

In what ways are recent immigrants and other newcomers connected, or disconnected, from the rest of the community?

Key Questions to Ask about How to Engage the Public **QUESTION 6 OF 14**



Supporting Leadership, Volunteerism Among Recent Immigrants

Skokie, Illinois (pop. 66,400)
Contact: Ann Tennes, director of marketing and communications, (847) 933-8234 or ann.tennes@skokie.org

The Village of Skokie uses a number of programs and events to connect with recent immigrant communities, supporting leadership and volunteerism as well as involvement in public decision-making. Skokie's International Leadership Academy helps participants take on a greater community leadership role through volunteerism, service on a board or commission, or running for an elected position. Since 1991, the village has also been organizing the annual Skokie Festival of Cultures, a two-day outdoor event. The festival, which is supported by the Illinois Art Council and other smaller organizations, is an award-winning event that has attracted more than 380,000 visitors over the years.

In 2008, the village released a Directory of Immigrant Services with information on area services and programs for the international community. The village also supports the Niles Township ELL Parent Center, where students and their parents can get support with literacy and English as a Second Language classes along with a wide variety of other services and programs. For more see NLC's *Municipal Innovations in Immigrant Integration: 20 Cities, 20 Good Practices* (See Appendix).

Integrating newcomers can be a challenge and a great opportunity for any city. When the new arrivals are immigrants from a very different culture, the challenges and opportunities can be particularly significant. But any kind of dramatic shift in the population will have consequences. The relationship between newcomers and long-time residents can have a major impact on a city's political climate, school system, public services and level of economic prosperity.

Many local officials who reach out to recent immigrant communities also see this work as an essential public responsibility that comes with serving in elected office. Many also feel that working proactively to integrate newcomers can: help educate people about their rights and responsibilities; educate government about the needs, goals, and traditions of immigrant groups; help resolve tensions between different sets of people in the community; support newcomers to help solve public problems; and provide opportunities for new leaders to emerge.

MORE SPECIFIC QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT NEWCOMERS TO THE COMMUNITY:

- How is the population of your city changing? What are the patterns of immigration affecting your city?
- In what parts of the community are these changes most evident?
- Do you have data on the levels of participation and engagement of newcomers, especially recent immigrant communities?
- Do you have data on the economic conditions of recent immigrant communities?
- How significant are the language barriers in your city?
- What are the main community or cultural groups serving recent immigrant groups?
- How effective are these groups at reaching out to newer immigrants, representing their interests and engaging them in decision-making or problem-solving?
- Is there any formal or informal structure that connects immigrant communities to one another?
- How well are recent immigrants and more long-term residents working together?

POTENTIAL NEXT STEPS:

- Begin gathering data systematically on recent immigrant communities.
- Convene leaders of recent immigrant groups to find out more about their perceptions of the community, and their ideas for how to increase engagement.
- Consult NLC's *Civic Engagement and Recent Immigrant Communities* for more suggestions. (See Appendix)

