

# The Case for Immigrant Integration

by **Nadia Rubaii-Barrett**

**C**ommunities across the United States and Canada have experienced an influx of immigrants during the past several decades. Although the current economic recession has dampened the rate of new arrivals, there has been no measureable outflow. The national contexts differ significantly in the United States and Canada, but the challenges facing local governments are similar.

The U.S. system is characterized by outdated admissions criteria, lengthy administrative backlogs, and alternately heavy-handed and nonexistent enforcement of border and labor policies. Canada is more explicitly welcoming of immigrants: it has an official policy of multiculturalism and mutual adaptation, and it also is more selective in admissions.

In both countries local government officials are frustrated by a lack of adequate resources from the central government and the logistical challenges of serving diverse immigrant populations. Local government capacity is particularly taxed by new arrivals who come from more varied national origins and cultures than earlier generations, speak a wider range of languages, and are settling in places outside the traditional gateway cities.

The focus of this article is on how professional local government managers can integrate recent immigrants in ways that benefit both immigrants and long-term residents of a community and that can make local service delivery more effective. After providing an overview of immigrant integration and several reasons for pursuing this approach, I share the experiences of a few communities that have engaged in integration.

## Local Policies and Practices in Response to Immigration.

### IMMIGRANT INTEGRATION: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Local governments have applied a range of strategies in order to respond to the challenges of immigration. Some communities have declared themselves sanctuaries for immigrants regardless of their legal status; others have adopted anti-immigrant ordinances with aggressive enforcement provisions and strict penalties for individuals who house or employ undocumented immigrants. Such extreme policies receive the bulk of national media attention, but they are not the norm.

When ICMA conducted a quick online survey in the summer of 2008, fewer than 5 percent of the 517 respondents reported that they had enacted either sanctuary designations or strong anti-immigrant ordinances, whereas 35 percent reported having no local policy response to immigration.

Respondents who reported adopting local policies most commonly did so to provide some local government materials in languages other than English and to refer immigrants to non-profit or religious organizations.

Immigrant integration is not simply the absence of a pro-immigrant or anti-immigrant policy. Doing nothing in response to an influx of immigrants ignores the responsibility of leadership and leaves to chance how the immigrants and the community will fare. Integration involves deliberate action grounded in a belief that immigrants and long-term residents are not competitors in a zero-sum game, and communities do not have to make choices among the goals of public health and safety, economic development, inclusiveness of newcomers, or community cohesion.

A variety of strategies can be used to promote immigrant integration, including community dialogues, festivals and celebrations of diversity, translation services, language instruction, immigrant representation on governing boards, and coordinated outreach efforts. Admittedly, some communities that pursue immigrant integration also adopt a

Local government leaders who responded to an ICMA Quick Survey conducted in the summer of 2008 reported that:

- 55% Provide local government materials in languages other than English.
- 40% Refer immigrants to religious or nonprofit organizations for services.
- 35% Have no designated local policies or practices regarding immigrants.
- 31% Hold community events to promote immigrant contributions to the community and to celebrate diversity.
- 30% Encourage or require local government employees to obtain cultural competencies.
- 19% Require local law enforcement officials to report undocumented persons to federal authorities.
- 12% Require local law enforcement officials to obtain federal training on immigration and customs enforcement (ICE).
- 5% Established day laborer centers.
- 3% Established a local office for immigrant services.
- 3% Adopted English-only policies for local government documents and proceedings.
- 3% Adopted limited ordinances intended to restrict the ability of illegal immigrants to work or live in the community.
- 1% Adopted strong ordinances with penalties for those who employ, house, or otherwise support illegal immigrants in the community.
- 1% Officially adopted a designation as a sanctuary city/county.

sanctuary designation, but this is not a required element of integration; neither does it constitute integration on its own.

The common denominator among integration strategies is that each action is undertaken with the goals of building trust and a sense of belonging, improving the quality of communication, and engaging all residents in community governance. Also, it needs to be recognized that integration is an ongoing process.

### THE 10,000-POUND GORILLA IN THE ROOM

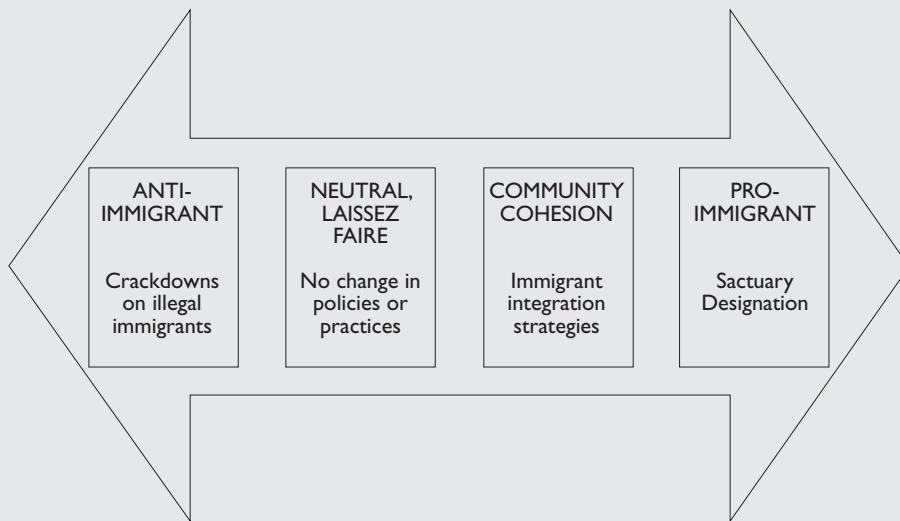
Any discussion of immigration policies inevitably generates some controversy about undocumented or illegal immigrants, who are estimated to number around 12 million in the United States and 200,000 in Canada. An individual's immigration status cannot be determined unobtrusively, and efforts to use skin color, language abilities, or other indicators as proxy measures generally result in discrimi-

natory treatment of some legal immigrants and citizens.

More important for local governments, the complex web of relationships and interdependencies among legal and undocumented populations makes distinctions counterproductive. Families and households often include immigrants with differing legal statuses, and policies targeted to illegal immigrants generate fear and distrust among legal immigrants as well.

A broad and inclusive definition of immigrants is not a foreign concept to many local leaders. Among those who responded to the ICMA's 2008 survey, a majority indicated a belief that a community should be receptive to all contributing members regardless of their immigration status, nearly 65 percent reported that a vast majority of all immigrants are contributing members of the community, and nearly half acknowledged that local industries would have difficulty filling low-wage jobs without illegal immigrants. Fewer than 20 percent of respondents stated

## Continuum of Responses to Immigrants.



that they believed that local governments had any role to play in trying to stop illegal immigration.

### FOCUSING ON WHAT LOCAL GOVERNMENTS CAN INFLUENCE

In both our personal and professional lives, we can find good advice in the often cited prayer that asks for “the serenity to accept the things [we] cannot change, the courage to change the things [we] can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” Local government officials have no control over how many immigrants enter the country (legally or otherwise) or which ones settle in their towns, villages, cities, or counties.

What local administrators can influence, however, is the extent to which immigrants are isolated or integrated—socially, economically, and politically—in their communities. Rather than expend time, energy, and money in costly and often futile efforts to control the flow or settlement patterns of immigrants, local leaders can often be more effective if they invest in integrating those immigrants who are in the community.

Similarly, local officials have no control over whether their communities will change as a result of the arrival of immigrants. Change is inevitable. The meeting point between a community and new immigrants

need not be halfway; immigrants will likely adapt considerably more than the communities they enter, but everyone will change. Rather than resist change or allow it to occur in an unplanned or emotionally charged manner, local leaders can facilitate constructive interactions and mutual adaptation in ways that promote community cohesion.

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### THE RATIONALE FOR IMMIGRANT INTEGRATION

Both the United States and Canada have long histories of immigration and national identities that espouse pride in the tradition of giving people ample opportunity to work hard and participate in social and civic life. When immigrants are isolated from the community, their ability to contribute to the community is

impaired. The fear of detection, detention, and deportation felt by undocumented immigrants (as well as some legal immigrants) makes them subject to exploitation in working and living arrangements, a condition that harms the broader social fabric of the community.

Integration directly addresses concerns about the abilities of local governments to effectively and efficiently provide services to immigrant populations. Language barriers are one of the most commonly cited challenges, yet isolation simply delays new language acquisition. Integration provides immigrants with more opportunities to interact with English speakers.

The more that immigrants hear, speak, study, and use the English language, the more quickly they will develop proficiency. Similarly, building trust and fostering a sense of belonging among immigrants makes them more willing to utilize services appropriately and to assist local government officials in doing their jobs. Local officials are understandably wary of increased demands for local services, but sometimes lack of use is more costly in the long run.

When immigrants use community health centers for preventive care, they not only avoid the more costly use of emergency medical services later on, but they also reduce the risk to public health associated with the potential spread of communicable diseases. Similarly, when immigrants trust local police, they will be more willing to report crimes and cooperate with investigations.

Finally, there are economic rationales for integration. Although many local anti-immigrant policies are adopted with the goal of protecting the local economy, they have been repeatedly demonstrated to consume tremendous local resources for implementation, enforcement, and litigation. Anti-immigrant policies are officially directed only at undocumented immigrants, but there is considerable evidence that they have spillover effects on legal immigrants and legitimate businesses.

The local economy often suffers when workers leave, housing units are vacated, and businesses are forced to close. In contrast, an immigrant integration approach draws upon the contributions of all residents to enhance economic development, promote entrepreneurship, and increase community sustainability.

## **STORIES OF IMMIGRANT INTEGRATION**

So, how does immigrant integration work at the local level? There are a number of varied examples to choose from. For the purposes of this article, I limit the discussion to examples dealing with increasing trust in law enforcement and opening lines of communication between the immigrants and the government and long-term residents.

**Community policing and immigrant integration.** Immigrants may be wary of local police officers because of fear of deportation (their own or that of family members), negative experiences with police in their home countries, or language and cultural barriers. Regardless of the underlying cause, distrust complicates the task of law enforcement, making immigrants more reluctant to report crimes, and to serve as witnesses. It also makes them more likely to be targets of criminal activity.

To build trust, local law enforcement officials have tried a variety of approaches. The Chicago Police Department coordinates regular community forums for immigrant groups; Bellingham, Washington, uses special liaisons for ethnic groups; Delray Beach, Florida, established a Haitian Police Academy; Corcoran, California, offers a Spanish-language citizen's police academy; and police in Orange, New Jersey, and Dallas, Texas, help immigrants become citizens.

The experiences of Santa Ana, California, illustrate the benefits of an immigrant integration approach in law enforcement. When the city experienced rapid increases in the numbers of Mexican immigrants and Cambodian refugees, city officials also

observed an increase in gang and drug activity.

Traditional law enforcement methods proved ineffective. The city then shifted to a community-policing approach: in an apartment building they set up a substation staffed with Spanish-speaking officers with access to Cambodian translators; they increased area patrols; and they collaborated with schools, social service agencies, and community organizations. This culturally sensitive and integrative approach resulted in measurable decreases in criminal activity, a stronger sense of community pride among the immigrant population, and improved communication between police and residents.

### **Opening lines of communication.**

Two-way communication is essential to integration efforts. This can be accomplished through several methods. One approach is to include immigrants on advisory boards that inform local government policy. Designated immigrant representatives can be included on an existing advisory board (as in the case of the Health Advisory Board in Contra County, California), a group can be created for a particular immigrant population (the Commission on Latino Affairs in Indianapolis/Marion County, Indiana), or a broad-based immigrant advisory group can be established (Seattle, Washington's Immigrants and Refugees Advisory Board or Vancouver, British Columbia's Immigration Task Force).

Communication can also be established through electronic means. In Toronto, Ontario, a designated immigration and settlement portal provides access to information for immigrants before and after their arrival. The site provides information on what to expect upon arrival and addresses issues of transportation, housing, employment, education, and recreation.

Each Web page includes an Inquiries/Feedback link to allow the user to ask questions or comment on the site. Web sites targeted to immigrants also help convey a welcoming message. The town of Morden, Manitoba, uses its Web site to attract immigrants. The

# ICMA

## **Calendar of Events**

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### **UPCOMING EVENTS:**

**May 5-9** 2009 CCHPO Performance Improvement Conference, Omni Hotel, Charlottesville, VA

**May 6-9** ICMA Gettysburg Leadership Institute, Gettysburg, PA

**May 12** FOCUS: Pre-conference Workshop at the TLG Conference, Corpus, Christ, TX

**May 13-15** Transforming Local Government Conference: Imagine Innovation, Corpus Christi, TX

**May 15** Deadline for Leadership ICMA Applications, Class of 2011

**May 27** Web Workshop: FOCUS 1:00 p.m.-5:00 p.m. EDT

**May 24-27** LGMA (Local Government Managers Australia) National Congress Darwin Convention Centre, Darwin, Northern Territory, Australia

**June 1-3** CAMA (Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators) Conference, Whistler, British Columbia, Canada

**July 1** Deadline for Credentialed Manager Applications

**August 15** ELDP Class of Fall 2011—Deadline for Applications

**September 13-16** ICMA's 2009 Annual Conference, Montréal, Québec, Canada

Web site markets the town as a clean, safe, pleasant place for immigrants to settle, work, and raise children.

Lines of communication must be established with residents as well as government officials. Stereotypes and mistrust often stem from lack of information and limited interaction. In the absence of deliberate local government efforts, immigrants and long-term residents may pass each other regularly on the streets and in shops but never really engage.

With initial support from the nonprofit Colorado Trust and the Colorado Municipal League, several communities across the state have hosted meetings that bring together immigrants and longtime residents with the goal of fostering trust and understanding. Boulder County, Colorado, has facilitated Dialogue Groups, Dialogue Days, and Action and Celebration Forums. Longmont, Colorado, hosted Quesadillas and Conversations; and Littleton, Colorado, has held Community Conversations.

In each of these contexts, immigrants and longtime residents were

brought together to talk informally about their cultures, traditions, and experiences, sometimes with a specific goal of recommending changes to local policies and practices, and other times simply to foster mutual understanding. Participants in these sessions—immigrants, citizens, and government officials—report having learned as much about themselves as they did about the others, gaining an increased sense of empathy and understanding and feeling a greater sense of community and shared interests.

### CONSIDER THE POSITIVES

Immigrant populations place additional demands on local governments, but they also have the potential to enhance the economic and social vitality of a community. Given an opportunity to be full members of a community, immigrants can contribute their labor, energy, and diversity in positive ways.

The challenge for local leaders is to lead the discourse away from the emotionally charged rhetoric that often characterizes the immigration

issue and ensure that policies support the universal priorities of local governments, namely public health and safety, economic development, and community cohesion. Communities that have pursued immigrant integration have observed increased levels of citizen satisfaction and pride in the community.

As President Barack Obama articulated in his inaugural speech, we need “to extend opportunity to every willing heart—not out of charity but because it is the surest route to our common good.” By recognizing the potential for diversity to be a community asset and acting strategically to realize that potential, communities that engage in effective integration of immigrant populations can become stronger—economically, socially, and civically. **PM**

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## PM Teaching Resources

### Go Teach a Course!

ICMA's Advisory Board on Graduate Education urges members to share their experience by serving as adjunct faculty at a local university, and its members have helped ICMA develop resources for managers who want to go back to the classroom.

### How Do I Get Started?

Here are ways that managers can engage with MPA or MPP programs:

1. Approach one of the schools in your area and express an interest in teaching. The National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) maintains a list of member schools with accredited graduate public administration programs on its Web site. For other colleges in your area not on this list, you could check with the political science department about undergraduate offerings in local government or public administration and whether the department has a graduate program in public administration.
2. Or, if you'd like to learn a little more before contacting a school, you can turn to several ICMA resources. You can join ICMA's forum for adjunct faculty, located at ICMA's Web site [forums.icma.org](http://forums.icma.org). You can also download ICMA's publication *Managers as Teachers: A Practitioner's Guide to Teaching Public Administration* at [icma.org/nextgen](http://icma.org/nextgen) under “Teaching Resources.”
3. Each year at the ICMA Annual Conference, ABGE hosts a discussion session for managers who teach or for those who would like to teach. Watch for information in the conference program.
4. If you have taught a course in the past, send your syllabus to [nextgen@icma.org](mailto:nextgen@icma.org), and it will be posted on the ICMA Web site for others who are interested in teaching similar courses.