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WELCOMING
AMERICA

BUILDING A NATION OF NEIGHBORS

Engaging Local Leaders to Foster Welcoming Communities

This is the third in a four-part series of articles that explores what Welcoming America and other national- and local-level thought leaders and practitioners have learned about engaging long-term members of receiving communities in order to advance immigrant inclusion and build stronger, more cohesive communities. Released in conjunction with Welcoming America's 10-year anniversary, this [social cohesion series](#) updates the 2011 Receiving Communities Toolkit. The series examines how to build cohesive communities in an era of migration and change—with a focus on innovations in leadership engagement, contact building, and positive communications—to foster greater belonging for all.

Introduction

Over the last decade, our work in communities has underscored time and again that the single greatest change lever to building welcoming communities is leadership.

Leaders help set the tone for welcome and belonging in the community. Often that's a positive tone, one that recognizes the value and contributions of all residents. Conversely, it can be negative, and one based in fear, exclusion, and intolerance. While the national rhetoric around immigration remains toxic, at the local level community leaders tend to be far more open and welcoming. They are also pragmatic and understand their communities work best when everyone feels like they belong and can contribute to their greatest potential. These leaders recognize that the vibrancy and success of our cities, towns, and neighborhoods depend on our social cohesion, a shared vision of the future, and embracing a spirit of what is possible when we all work together. Strengthening the well-being and prosperity of all residents and what connects us as neighbors and Americans is more critical today than ever. Reinforcing those bonds requires leadership engagement, positive communications, and building [meaningful contact](#) across difference, all topics of this social cohesion series.

WHO ARE THE COMMUNITY LEADERS?

Engaging local, trusted leaders from different backgrounds in efforts to build bridges and advance inclusion, equity, and belonging adds significant credibility, strength, and impact to welcoming efforts. Finding those who are respected, bring unique perspectives, and represent a range of political views can only be beneficial. This includes engaging leaders across

race, ethnicity, and generations to be key champions for bringing people together and advancing an inclusion agenda. Continuing to assess the landscape and cultivate new voices and new energy to participate in steering committees, programs, events, and policy development, and to serve as spokespeople, can be a long-term and time-intensive effort but one that is well worth the investment.

Who are effective leaders for this work? The answer will vary community by community and will depend on the target audience. A few possibilities include:

- **Faith leaders** – Many faith leaders are dismayed by what they see as a moral crisis in our nation’s divides and want to build bridges across religions and other lines of difference. Most are deeply disturbed by hateful rhetoric and hate crimes. Faith leaders also have tremendous reach in communities, and they can be a force for bringing people together who may not typically connect with each other. They have the ear of those from diverse backgrounds. [Auburn Seminary’s](#) research showcases the role faith leaders have played in a number of welcoming efforts.
- **Local government leaders** – Local government leaders in Offices of Immigrant Affairs, Community Engagement, and so many other agencies serve as an important antidote to a negative national narrative that tends to reinforce divisions and exclusion in these times. When asked who belongs in their city, they provide answers that are inclusive. Elected officials including mayors, county executives, and city and county council members have the bully pulpit, and they can speak and write positively about inclusion wherever they go. That helps change the conversation. Welcoming America has upwards of [100 local governments](#) in its membership, many of which have created cross-sector welcoming plans and are putting in place local policies, programs, and partnerships to fuel inclusion. Those that meet the highest bar are increasingly becoming [Certified Welcoming](#).
- **School leaders** – Forward-thinking educators ranging from superintendents, school board members, principals, and teachers want to see all children succeed, and they recognize the relationships between academic success, family well-being, and connections to the community and belonging. Most school leaders understand the importance of fostering a welcoming school environment and a broader welcoming community. Schools are a perfect venue for welcoming activities

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Engaging State Legislators

Ann Morse of the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) has worked with state-level policymakers on both sides of the political aisle for decades through the [Immigration Task Force](#). She shares some advice for connecting with state lawmakers on immigration and immigrant integration:

- **The best time to work with legislators is before the session starts.** Know your audience: Consider their life experience and connect with them based on that. What are their interests? Attach an immigrant component to their interest area, but don’t necessarily start with trying to engage them on immigration.
- **New legislators are fertile ground for relationship building.** Provide them with trustworthy, nonpartisan resources and with connections to good partners, such as employers.
- **The vast majority of concerns around immigration come from state legislators in districts with few immigrants.** It may be that a lack of exposure and meaningful relationships with newcomers make fear or scapegoating more likely.
- **Experiential opportunities show most promise to broaden legislators’ perspectives.** Rather than relying on them to read a report, take legislators out to see the community. For instance, many state legislators may have never met a Muslim. NCSL was able to arrange a visit so legislators could tour a predominantly Muslim community and break bread with community members. It was a success, and there were no political party differences in the conversations.

and events that bring people together and should be deeply engaged in welcoming work. One promising example of engaging school leaders is *All for All* in Pittsburgh, which helps teachers develop their role as key champions for inclusive schools and communities by working to remove barriers to student success, improve educational practices, and conduct innovative action research projects.

- **Museum leaders** – Museums of all types—including art museums, children’s museums, historical houses, science centers, and zoos—can bridge divides in communities, fill gaps in cultural awareness, and challenge visitors to take on new perspectives. Museums committed to serving their communities teach us to celebrate cultural difference, facilitate a sense of individual and collective identity, empower through knowledge, and nurture an understanding of our connections to the world and each other. A series of panel discussions titled *Being Somali: Stories from Humans of Minneapolis* is just one of many impressive examples of how museum-community partnerships can build greater understanding and empathy.
- **Residents** – Communities work best when neighbors of different backgrounds are civically engaged and help shape a shared future. Successful welcoming initiatives both rely on diverse resident engagement and help fuel deeper grassroots involvement in communities. Helping residents of all backgrounds connect to opportunities to influence the array of issues that directly impact them, such as education, health, and community development, is important for a healthy and vibrant community. It’s not enough to host focus groups or town hall meetings to gather input. People need a seat at the decision-making table. Programs such as Nashville’s *MyCity Academy* are one way to start to build resident participation and foster longer-term engagement.

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Boise’s Multipronged Approach to Engaging Diverse Leaders

Despite active anti-immigrant groups in the state, Idaho is home to a robust refugee resettlement program that has garnered national attention and accolades. In Boise, **Neighbors United** is a cross-sector effort that brings together stakeholders from across the city to implement a welcoming plan, a blueprint for promoting inclusion in the area. And while Twin Falls, Idaho, became infamous in some circles for a high-profile wave of anti-refugee backlash, that city too has worked together to turn the tide towards inclusion. What’s the secret to successful welcoming work in these cities? One notable component has been the engagement of a wide range of local leaders in their efforts. Some of these leaders include:

- **Refugee leaders.** To help amplify refugee voices, an innovative refugee speakers’ bureau was developed. A local non-profit, Story Story Night, helps Boise residents from all backgrounds learn narrative techniques and how to hone and share their stories in a compelling way, and participants go on to share at events in libraries, businesses, schools, and festivals. Each event typically features two to three refugee storytellers and a moderator (Boise Mayor David Bieter served as a moderator at one event). Most storytellers focus on their life in Boise and share for 12 to 15 minutes. Refugees are developing strong speaking skills and taking on greater leadership roles across the city.
- **The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.** When the Church put out the call from their Salt Lake City headquarters to help refugees, it activated a robust volunteer base across the region. These new volunteers are tapped to extend a helping hand towards their refugee neighbors and share with their social networks more about why this is important.
- **State legislators.** Two years ago, local refugee resettlement efforts implemented an annual plan to help legislators get to know refugees. While policymakers from towns across Idaho without refugees are far more skeptical, there has been an ongoing and intentional effort to connect legislators to refugees, hosting breakfasts and events that even detractors have attended. Idaho has had three anti-sharia law bills introduced in recent years, making refugee supporters recognize the need to be proactive. Says retired Idaho State Refugee Coordinator Jan Reeves, “Introducing legislators to refugees makes a huge difference. Staying silent means not making your case, which is greatly detrimental.”

- **Business community** – Chambers of Commerce increasingly understand the important economic role that immigrants play and the business imperative for equitable and inclusive communities. Many are becoming engaged in immigrant integration locally, recognizing the business case for attracting and retaining a diverse and talented workforce. Many Chambers and business coalitions have been active in creating welcoming plans in their areas, including places such as [Salt Lake County](#), [Northwest Arkansas](#), and [Greater Kansas City](#). Local business owners, including immigrant and refugee business owners, make persuasive arguments around inclusive workforce and economic development efforts.
- **Public safety** – Everyone wants to live in a safe environment, and when public safety officials proactively build trust and share the importance of neighbors helping neighbors, those efforts go a long way. In [Princeton, New Jersey](#), local leaders focused significantly on helping build trust between the police and the immigrant community. While there were initial fears, once the police started helping people address wage theft by personally visiting employers to collect lost wages, it was a huge boost to confidence, and people began reporting crimes in greater numbers, leading to a safer community for all.

Recommendations for Leadership Engagement

Leaders must prioritize the important task of bridge building and inclusion, and they should serve as positive role models for advancing this kind of work in their own institutions, as well as across the community. While this role may not be specified in the typical job description, it must become recognized that leaders set the tone and model the kind of behavior that is needed to create cohesive communities where everyone can thrive and belong.

Developing a proactive approach to engaging diverse leaders in the community should be a priority and will help ensure that welcoming work will continue to build momentum and achieve longer-term sustainability. We conclude with recommendations for successful local leadership engagement:

- **Don't forget the importance of the basics of relationship development.** Set time aside to build and sustain relationships with key leaders in your community. It takes time to get to know your local leaders and for them to get to know your work. Be a good partner to local leaders by using their time wisely and following through with your commitments.
- **Bring leaders together to create a welcoming plan or strategy.** One common way to engage new and existing partners is to bring leaders together to craft a welcoming plan for the community. Over the course of about a year, leaders have the opportunity to learn from others about the gaps and strengths in current local policy and programming around inclusion. By developing a shared road map for advancing welcoming, they learn more about their important role and key action steps they can take.
- **Help all leaders understand who typically sits at decision-making tables and the value and urgency of supporting a wider array of individuals to play a greater role in community decision-making.** Too often, the same people are tapped for engagement and decision-making, and many with important perspectives and life experiences are left out. Continuing to reach out to and bring in new voices to sit at these tables, including immigrants and more recent arrivals who typically aren't engaged, is critical for nurturing leadership that truly reflects the community. This means continuing to examine who is sitting on commissions and boards and how those from diverse racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds are encouraged to participate and lead in democratic spaces.
- **Invest in leadership development that intentionally bridges diverse communities.** Leaders of all backgrounds need to continue to learn about the wide array of community member experiences. Activities that engage leaders should focus on helping them learn from and actively engage with residents from diverse backgrounds.
- **Plan for and address leadership transitions.** Community leaders change over time. Elected officials may lose reelection or face term limits. Other leaders may relocate, retire, or change their affiliations, making investing in building relationships with a wide range of local leaders from different backgrounds so important. As your community continues to change and grow, finding new talent will help ensure your work stays robust, current, and meaningful.

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