

WELCOMING  
AMERICA



▲ *Building a Nation of Neighbors*

# The Role of Consular Programs in Fostering Welcoming Communities



As newcomers settle in American towns and cities, receptive communities are essential to ensuring that immigrants can reach their full potential. Consular programs and initiatives can play a vital leadership role in local communities, by not only supporting immigrant families directly, but also by helping long-time residents – “receiving communities” – to understand and welcome their new neighbors.

This report offers examples and ideas for communities to explore for partnering with consular offices to jointly ensure the long-term success of newcomers and foster more positive relationships and welcoming climates in U.S. communities.

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## Introduction

Over the last 20 years, cities and towns across America have witnessed significant demographic changes as a result of immigration. Many immigrants are now making their homes in places without a history of ethnic and linguistic diversity, increasing the possibilities of misunderstanding, fear and divisions within these communities. Change on this scale is never easy, not for immigrants themselves, and certainly not for the communities asked to accept newcomers whose language or culture they may not fully understand.

More than ever, there is an important role for consulates of foreign countries to play in not only supporting immigrants directly, but also in reaching out to everyday Americans to help them understand the changes happening in their communities. Receiving communities – the places, along with their residents, in which newcomers settle – must be adequately engaged before they are able to embrace immigrants. They need to understand who their new neighbors are and why they have arrived to join them. In addition to efforts that have traditionally focused primarily on immigrants, many communities are also partnering with consulates and their diaspora-oriented programs to help everyday Americans understand the contributions made by newcomers, and to begin to build relationships of trust and understanding between longtime residents and their new, immigrant neighbors. In doing so, these efforts help to create a more positive climate for immigrants and their families to live and work in. The result is strong, safe, and inclusive communities that are able to live up to their full social and economic potential.

While immigration is often considered a national issue, it is at the local level - in cities and smaller towns - that programs benefiting immigrants and their long-term integration (such as English language instruction and workforce development programs) can often have the greatest impact. The prevalence of local integration strategies – and, increasingly, comprehensive “welcoming” or “immigrant-friendly plans” - underscores the value of addressing integration at the local level, and seeking opportunities to engage local leaders. Today, many communities are also moving away from divisive rhetoric and creating welcoming agendas that articulate that the presence and integration of newcomers is not a threat, but rather a significant opportunity for a thriving community that can benefit both immigrants and the larger community. The experience and knowledge of consulates and their programs can play a key role as cities and towns seek to more positively engage with immigrant communities.

As the partnership examples in this report suggest, consulates from the countries of origin of newly arrived immigrants can play a particularly critical role in helping to bridge racial and ethnic divides - by bringing key immigrant leaders to the table to foster greater understanding and a broader base of support among receiving communities. Welcoming America’s experience partnering with the Embassy of Mexico and its Consulates in a number of cities and counties, as described below, illustrate the positive impact that consulates can have in

local communities throughout the U.S. These efforts not only create a more positive and welcoming climate, but help to strengthen relationships in the community and build stronger connections between consulates and other leaders who care about making the community a better place for newcomers and all residents.

### **About Welcoming America and the Mexican Embassy Partnership**

Welcoming America is a national, grassroots-driven collaborative that promotes mutual respect and cooperation between foreign-born and U.S.-born Americans. Through a countrywide network of member organizations and partners, Welcoming America works to promote a welcoming atmosphere – community by community – In which immigrants and native born residents can find common ground and shared prosperity. Welcoming America’s work has its history in the award-winning Welcoming Tennessee Initiative, an effort that successfully transformed a hostile anti-immigrant climate in Tennessee, and was the subject of the 2011 PBS documentary, *Welcome to Shelbyville*.

Welcoming America is the first national organization in the U.S. that focuses its efforts exclusively on addressing the fears and concerns that native-born Americans often have in the face of rapid local immigrant growth. Welcoming America supports a national network of affiliates, currently in 20 states. With the help of Welcoming America’s tools and resources, these organizations work to transform their towns and cities into Welcoming communities. Welcoming America also directs the Receiving Communities Initiative, an effort to build and support a movement of individuals and organizations focused on involving longer-term Americans in immigrant integration

The Embassy of Mexico has been working with Welcoming America since 2008 to identify cities where Mexican Consulates may contribute to the conversation for a stronger, more inclusive community, by sharing resources, contacts and convening stakeholders from the Mexican immigrant community. This partnership has developed by taking into consideration the “welcoming” principles and respecting the dynamics of each receiving community.

## Partnership Stories

### Building a New Welcoming Initiative: Welcoming Kansas

Over the last two years, the Mexican Consulate in Kansas City has played a key role in establishing [Welcoming Kansas](#) – one of 22 Welcoming initiatives currently supported through Welcoming America’s national network. As with other affiliated initiatives, Welcoming Kansas uses three core approaches – local leadership development, strategic communications and public engagement – to reduce anxiety about immigration among non-immigrant or other long-time community members, and promote healthy dialogue in local communities.

The process of developing a local initiative began with the consulate inviting key members of the community to hear from Welcoming America's Executive Director, David Lubell, and to share their interests and concerns about how to make Kansas communities more welcoming.



Welcoming Kansas joined with Sunflower and other local partners as part of the *I Am Kansas* campaign, which promotes positive stories about local immigrants.

A diverse coalition of leaders participated in these early conversations and continues to play an active role in the initiative. Early participants included the *American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)*; *Sunflower Community Action – Wichita*; *Catholic Charities of Northeast Kansas*; and *El Centro, Inc.* Membership later broadened to include leaders supportive of immigrants from Wyandotte and Johnson counties, in the Kansas City Metro Area, as well as participation from the State Cultural Center.

The group ultimately identified a lead agency, *Advocates for Immigrant Rights and Reconciliation (AIRR)* to help coordinate the initiative and provide staffing. A steering committee comprised of both immigrants and non-immigrants from diverse sectors of the community was formed, and currently includes leadership from the following organizations:

- Advocates for Immigrant Rights and Reconciliation (AIRR)
- El Centro Inc.
- Jewish Community Relations Bureau/American Jewish Committee;
- Hispanic Ministries - KCKS Diocese;
- Lenexa Police Department;
- Christ the Servant Evangelical Covenant Church;
- Community of Christ Hispanic Ministries;
- Catholic Charities
- Raindrop Turkish House
- Mosaikon Church
- Mexican Consulate

The Consul played an important role by participating actively in the initiative in an organizational capacity and contributing in numerous ways, particularly by making connections to other key players. These relationships have proven essential to ensuring that welcoming immigrants is a priority shared by the whole community. For example, a local chief of police who was passionate about reaching out to immigrants was invited to

participate because of connections to the Mexican consulate. The consulate also worked to help Welcoming Kansas increase its visibility, for example by inviting the initiative to host an information table at consulate-sponsored cultural events. Likewise, the consulate is able to build and strengthen relationships with the community and local leaders through the initiative. Says former Welcoming Kansas Coordinator, Jeff Hill, “The Consulate really understands the mission of the Welcoming initiative, and the Consuls are passionate about this work.”

The Welcoming Kansas initiative has already made significant progress towards reaching its goals of fostering a more positive climate for immigrants and building positive relationships between immigrants and long-time residents. A key focus of the initiative is partnering with the faith community to engage faith leaders and, ultimately, to reach those “in the pews.” The initiative has partnered with local faith organizations to conduct dialogues and presentations, including a special collaboration with the organization Youthworks focused on helping young people and educators understand immigrants and their experiences. Through a collaboration with Sunflower Community Action, Welcoming Kansas also supported a billboard campaign, “I am Kansas,” which is aimed at improving perceptions of and relationships with the Kansas immigrant community, and bringing greater visibility to the work. As an affiliate of Welcoming America, Kansas received ongoing support in developing local strategies and implementing these activities from national office staff.

Welcoming Kansas has also helped public employees build more positive relationships with newcomers and to better understand the changing communities they serve. In 2012, Welcoming Kansas partnered with a local city government staff training program, bringing in immigrants to share their stories and help government officials, including law enforcement, understand their experiences first-hand. The role of the local consulate was instrumental in establishing this important partnership with municipal government.

The Welcoming Kansas case demonstrates how the involvement of consulates can significantly contribute to the credibility of a local effort. The office’s stature in the community, connections with key leaders, and relationships with immigrants, are all important factors for helping local residents successfully work with people who may be ambivalent about newcomers but whose perceptions can be transformed.

### Community Conversations in Kansas

For those with doubts or fears about the presence of immigrants in their community, there are relatively few opportunities to listen to the stories of local immigrants or to engage in meaningful dialogue about who newcomers are or their reasons for coming to the community.

Thanks to the support of the Mexican Consulate, in 2012, Welcoming Kansas and its dedicated committee and coordinator organized weekly events in partnership with the national youth organization, Youthworks. The facilitated conversations with more than 60 young people a week focused on addressing misperceptions and creating more empathy and understanding between immigrants and non-immigrants.

Participants reported that their understanding of immigration and immigrants has broadened and deepened. One participating teacher shared how the event transformed how she thought about her immigrant students and the challenges they face, “*making humanity and not legality the central issue.*” Participants have also expressed:

*It was "valuable to listen firsthand" to immigrant stories and to "hear from someone who actually experienced it."*

*"I realized that personally I have been much more focused on the 'rule breaking' aspect [of immigration], rather than the people involved."*

## Promoting Current Initiatives: Welcoming Michigan and Welcoming Utah

In addition to playing a leadership role in establishing Welcoming initiatives, consulates can help to support ongoing local efforts and activities aimed at engaging receiving communities, in many cases as an extension of activities directly targeting diaspora communities and immigrants themselves.

For example, the Mexican Consulate in Detroit has an excellent working relationship with [Welcoming Michigan](#), which is led by the Michigan Immigrant Rights Center (MIRC). As an affiliate of Welcoming America, Welcoming Michigan works to support Michigan's receiving community members in creating communities where immigrants can fully integrate into their adopted hometowns. In its short history, Welcoming Michigan has already made headlines for its efforts to create a more positive climate for immigrants,

including through a broad-scale communications campaign promoting shared values and the economic contributions of immigrants. In 2012, Michigan Governor Rick Snyder issued a proclamation supporting the initiative and the value of creating inclusive communities across the state, stating that "We must create welcoming communities that leverage the full potential of all who live there, capitalizing on diverse perspectives, cultures and talents for knowledge, creativity and innovation to thrive." Welcoming Michigan uses a number of community-based strategies that range from a billboard campaign to intercultural events, immigration 101 presentations, and dialogues.

The Mexican Consulate has a longstanding relationship with MIRC on community education programs and services offered directly to immigrants. A partnership focused on the Welcoming initiative is a natural extension of this relationship, focused not on immigrants themselves, but on the broader community and long-time residents of Michigan. The consulate enthusiastically supports Welcoming Michigan by helping to publicize the work and disseminate the information and positive messages shared by the initiative through consulate programs and relationships.

In Utah, the [Welcoming Utah](#) initiative is led by *Comunidades Unidas/Communities United*, which has collaborated with the Mexican Consulate in Salt Lake City to help immigrants feel more welcomed and to help them access critical health services through the Ventanilla de Salud program.

The Ventanilla de Salud (VDS) Program is a bi-national public private effort between Mexico and the United States which focuses on bridging the gap between immigrants and the general population in terms of access to health care and health education. The program works towards this goal by partnering with different local health organizations to provide immigrant populations illness prevention services. The VDS is located inside the Mexican Consulate's office and serves over 200 people on a daily basis, traveling from all over the state of



Above: Welcoming Michigan billboards highlight the positive contributions of local immigrants.



Highlighting the positive views of everyday Americans towards immigrants is an important element of the Welcoming Michigan initiative. Above, a Michigan resident shares why he cares about immigrants.

Utah and western Wyoming. While at the consulate, clients can visit the booth to receive a wide variety of services including health information, diagnostic tests, health referrals, and information about public benefits.

While this work provides a vital service to the immigrant population, with a direct public health benefit for all residents, there is still a significant need to foster greater understanding and a more positive climate so that immigrants in Utah can truly thrive. Welcoming Utah, with the support of various community partners, hosts dialogues and activities that allow new and long-time Utahans opportunities to share their stories and to talk about immigration within a humane context. The Mexican Consulate in Salt Lake City is aware of the potential that welcoming work has to advance integration for the immigrant communities it serves, and is therefore helping to promote the initiative, as well as exploring opportunities to collaborate with the Welcoming Utah Initiative. Welcoming Utah also uses positive communication strategies to promote awareness of the contributions that immigrants make to Utah and the different ways that new residents strengthen the community and the cultural fabric. Recently, the city council of Salt Lake City passed a [Welcoming resolution](#) in support of the initiative and emphasized importance of all residents doing their part to reach out to and welcome all who live in and visit the city.

### Sponsoring Events to Foster Understanding: Minnesota

In 2011, the Mexican Consulate in Saint Paul brought together the Minnesota-based organization Advocates for Human Rights and Welcoming America to host a screening of the film *Welcome to Shelbyville* and a roundtable featuring representatives of local community and immigrant organizations. The Consulate joined efforts with The Advocates for Human Rights in order to host representatives of the Mexican, Somali, Ecuadorian, Hmong, and Minnesota communities, in this screening. After the screening, representatives of The Advocates of Human Rights, the Russian and Somali Communities and the Consul of Mexico participated in an open dialogue, moderated by Julia Nekessa Opoti, a woman from Kenya and host to a radio program addressing migratory, cultural and diversity issues. The film and conversation explored ways to foster more positive relationships between the native-born and newcomers.

Subsequently, the Mexican Consulate participated in the Peace, Power and Unity conference with the First Universalist Church of Minneapolis and The Family Partnership. The Consulate organized a workshop on “Fostering mutual understanding through culture,” with another presentation of the film. The film was followed by a roundtable with speakers representing the diverse immigrant community, which allowed participants to hear first-hand from local immigrants and to reflect on how to foster a more positive climate.

The discussion focused on promoting mutual respect, support, and cooperation, as well as exploring new approaches to integration based on the importance of diversity as an element of positive growth. The experiences of many immigrants, refugees, and U.S. nationals, many of migrant origin, who attended the event were key to enriching the conversations about demographic change, and prompting community-building and problem-solving.

This format has been replicated several times in different venues, as well as with different audiences. The Consulate of Mexico in Saint Paul has been working together with The Advocates for Human Rights around the common interest of making Minnesota a welcoming state toward migration. These efforts had been supported through One Voice Minnesota (OVM), an initiative of individuals, organizations, groups, and institutions across Minnesota that are interested in helping their communities thrive.

## Conclusion

Foreign consulates, as leading actors that maintain direct contact with immigrant communities and remain a trusted resource for them, can play a vital role in building bridges with receiving community leaders and institutions. Through their consular assistance programs and prominent stature in the local community, consulates of countries of origin can facilitate immigrant integration and foster dialogue, particularly in partnership with other community leaders.

Consulates interested in promoting welcoming communities are encouraged to take one or more of these specific next steps:

- **Disseminate the Friends of Welcoming resource** and interactive website produced by Welcoming America as a first step in sharing the “welcoming” principles and values with possible immigrant leadership interested in the initiative. You can learn more at <http://www.welcomingamerica.org/friends>.
- **Partner with an existing local Welcoming initiative**, which currently are active in 21 states. To find out whether there is an affiliate in your state, visit <http://www.welcomingamerica.org/about-us/our-affiliates>.
- **Sponsor or co-sponsor local events and activities** using the Receiving Communities framework and tools – visit [www.receivingcommunities.org](http://www.receivingcommunities.org) to download a copy of the Receiving Communities Toolkit, or visit the interactive website Friends of Welcoming ([www.friendsofwelcoming.org](http://www.friendsofwelcoming.org)) for activities that your community can do to create a more positive community climate.

For example, communities and consulates can partner to organize a joint volunteer service project that brings together immigrants and long-time residents to give back to the community; host intercultural events among consular offices; host a dialogue or film screening; collect Welcoming pledges, or even pass a Welcoming resolution or plan in your community.

- **Develop a new community Welcoming initiative**, by partnering with an existing affiliate in your state, or by working with Welcoming America to create a local leadership committee and to develop strategies appropriate to your community. Contact Welcoming America at [info@welcomingamerica.org](mailto:info@welcomingamerica.org) to learn more.

Finally, communities that are committed to embrace newcomers should consider partnering with the consulates of the countries of the majority of the immigrant population. Because of their mandate to serve and protect their nationals abroad, they can help bridge the gap of cultural misunderstandings that can occur with the newly arrived. Together, consulates and receiving communities will nurture the wellspring of the bonds that should tie communities together in a welcoming spirit.