

# RECENT NATURALIZATION AND CITIZENSHIP PROJECTS: LESSONS LEARNED FOR A NATIONAL CITIZENSHIP PROGRAM

Ten of the most recent large-scale citizenship projects illustrate the need for comprehensive naturalization services nationwide. Each project has been implemented by a nonprofit organization supported with funding from the federal or state government or a philanthropic foundation. While all the projects share the goal of naturalizing large numbers of immigrants, each is unique in funding source, populations targeted, range of services provided, and level of immigrant civic participation.

Common to all the projects is their recognition of immigrants' desire to be U.S. citizens and need for specialized naturalization services. The qualitative and quantitative successes of eight are described, as well as the challenges confronted. Recommendations for a national citizenship program, based on lessons learned, conclude each section. The outcomes of the two newest projects are not yet known, but they exemplify critical ongoing efforts.

Also common to all projects is their brief duration because of limited funds, funders' short-term goals, or political intervention. While the initiatives speak to the nation's belief in the importance of citizenship, they also reflect its inconsistent and fragmented approach to citizenship and its failure to maintain a high priority for naturalization and citizenship services.

## Immigration and Naturalization Service – Citizenship USA

Beginning in 1993, the United States experienced a sudden and rapid increase in naturalization applications not seen since the early years of the twentieth century. The rise is attributed to a convergence of unique factors. First, a large number of immigrants who gained Lawful Permanent Resident status through the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 became eligible for naturalization. Second, in 1989 the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) required Lawful Permanent Residents to replace their green cards every ten years, which induced many to consider applying for citizenship

beginning in 1999. Many preferred to pay \$225 for citizenship and the sense of permanency it provided, than pay \$110 to renew the green card. Third, when California's Proposition 187 passed in 1994 during an economic recession, some elected officials focused on undocumented immigrants as a drain on public funds. The proposition thus targeted undocumented immigrants by denying them public services, such as schooling and health care. Although immediately challenged in court and declared unconstitutional, the proposition's passage by 59 percent of California voters gave even Lawful Permanent Residents cause for concern about their future without the security of citizenship. These fears proved well-founded: In 1996 the U.S. Congress passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, also known as the Welfare Reform Act, which placed restrictions on legal immigrants' access to public benefits. These restrictions would usher in a separate, yet almost congruent, surge in naturalization applications starting in 1996.

In fiscal year 1992, the INS received 342,438 naturalization applications. During 1993 the number surged to 521,866 and in 1994 to 543,353.<sup>1</sup> INS could not keep pace, resulting in a pending caseload that increased from 135,652 in 1992 to 481,580 in mid-1995.<sup>2</sup> INS district directors expressed concern that the average processing time of six months was not feasible given the backlog of naturalization applications.

On August 31, 1995, INS Commissioner Doris Meissner announced the Citizenship USA (CUSA) initiative with the goal of reducing processing periods to six months by mid-1996. CUSA efforts targeted five districts with the largest backlogs—Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, Miami, and Chicago. INS launched mass media campaigns promoting naturalization.

Critics of CUSA, including some members of Congress and a few INS district officers, accused the initiative's planners in the White House and INS headquarters of using backlog reduction as a pretense for naturalizing large numbers of likely Democratic voters for the upcoming election in 1996. A later investigation by the Office of Inspector General (OIG) found no evidence that CUSA and its targeted cities were selected for this purpose.

Other criticisms of CUSA and INS were found to be true. Media reports drew attention to INS's inability to cope with accelerated production goals and problems with its internal systems. In September 1996 the Subcommittee on National Security, International Affairs, and Criminal Justice of the House Committee on Government Reform and Oversight convened the first of a series of hearings on CUSA. The subsequent OIG investigation found the integrity of naturalization processing and adjudications to have suffered under the expanded naturalization initiative.

The OIG report criticized INS for: 1) superficially training staff to adjudicate a high volume caseload despite some problematic naturalization cases, 2) failing to ensure that adjudicators had applicants' files in-hand for review while conducting naturalization interviews, 3) using multiple databases that did not automatically share information, 4) using inconsistent methods to deliver the English, U.S. history, and civics tests, 5) failing to provide written guidance, monitoring, and enforcement to community-based organizations, which gave rise to unwarranted practices, particularly in the use of contractor testing centers, 6) failing to provide guidance for determining denials based on "lack of good moral character" grounds, and 7) approving some applicants for citizenship before the FBI had responded to the fingerprint check and confirmed that no criminal history existed.

Even though the numbers involved were extremely small, members of Congress particularly decried the granting of citizenship to a few applicants with prior criminal records that made them ineligible. Congress also bemoaned INS's failure to comply with its demands to use funds from the Examinations Fee Account for backlog reduction. At the same time, congressional staff heard repeated complaints from immigrants in their districts about long delays for interviews and lost applications, further exacerbating relations between INS and Congress.

The investigations resulted in INS instituting naturalization quality procedures in November 1996 and quickly implementing them to address each of the criticisms. INS subsequently corrected all of the problems to the OIG's satisfaction with two exceptions—the lack of standardization by district officers in administering the naturalization test and the lack of uniform guidance when evaluating applicants' "good moral character."

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A NATIONAL CITIZENSHIP PROGRAM

- 1 Any President seeking to promote naturalization must recognize the potential for opposition by political opponents and anti-immigrant groups. To avoid damaging criticism and distracting debates, the administration needs to secure bipartisan congressional support, clearly state its motivations for a national citizenship plan, make its methods transparent, and acquire public and private partnerships for efficient and effective implementation.
- 2 Congress needs to acknowledge the struggles of immigrant consumers seeking fee-based immigration status, including naturalization, and provide strong oversight of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), which inherited these INS functions, to ensure that adjudication of applications is based on timely processing and well-established deadlines without high fee increases.
- 3 Congress needs to authorize USCIS to use its fee account in flexible ways to meet processing deadlines. Such flexibility is especially important when competing priorities occur as a result of new congressional legislation. USCIS's fee account needs to have protection from other Department of Homeland Security (DHS) interests, particularly immigration law enforcement and expanding national security initiatives.
- 4 USCIS must maintain naturalization quality-control procedures and implement internal controls to reevaluate and raise its processing standards to ensure integrity and deliver efficient and effective services.
- 5 USCIS needs to maintain its credibility with Congress in how it uses fees and reprogramming request funds by demonstrating that it has strong internal financial and programmatic controls and accurate reporting mechanisms on results achieved.
- 6 USCIS needs to report accurately to Congress on what it requires in funding to meet any expected surge in naturalization applications under a national citizenship implementation plan, especially if other immigration benefits are expanded through legislation.
- 7 USCIS must establish guidance to its district offices on ways to partner with community-based organizations in: outreach, media campaigns, naturalization training of legal staff and volunteers, application group processing

workshops, off-site adjudication in immigrant-impacted communities more than 100 miles from the district office, naturalization oath ceremonies, and liaison meetings, which should feature an agenda shared by USCIS officers and immigrant-supporting organizations.

## Immigration and Naturalization Service – Naturalization Pilot Project in Southern California

As a record number of naturalization applications were filed in 1995, the INS, under the auspices of the Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, entered into a cooperative agreement with the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. (CLINIC) to conduct a naturalization pilot project in southern California. The project was the first and only one of its kind—utilizing federal discretionary dollars to support charitable legal immigration programs in providing full-service naturalization assistance and partnering with INS to test application-processing innovations.

The pilot project was launched in September 1995 and concluded in December 1996. Funding totaled \$500,000. CLINIC entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with three of its member agencies' legal immigration programs: Catholic Charities of Los Angeles, Catholic Charities of San Diego, and Catholic Charities of Fresno. The three communities were selected based on where the largest number of naturalization-eligible Lawful Permanent Residents lived. The three member agencies were selected because of locale, well-established experience in providing naturalization services, and their certification by the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA) as recognized charitable legal immigration programs that have experienced staff attorneys and BIA-accredited representatives.

The broad goals of the project included: 1) educating immigrants on the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, 2) improving the quality of applications submitted, 3) improving the preparedness of applicants for the citizenship interview, and 4) streamlining the process by assisting INS with pilot processing procedures.

Clear objectives were also set, including: 1) informing potential applicants about the requirements and process of naturalization, 2) developing creative ways of providing information to potential applicants in group sessions, 3) securing community support and organizing events to encourage applicants in the naturalization process, 4) assessing applicants' ability to speak, read, and write English and their general knowledge of U.S. history and government, 5) conducting English and civics classes and coordinating with education programs that offer such services, 6) maintaining accurate records tracking applicants' progress through educational programs,

7) developing innovative ways, with INS approval, of filing naturalization applications using state-of-the-art electronic systems, and 8) providing follow-up education to newly naturalized Americans on citizenship responsibilities.

CLINIC and its member agencies worked together to conduct extensive outreach through mass media public service announcements, flyers, town hall meetings, presentations at houses of worship, and contacts with English and citizenship teachers. Applications were completed through either individual appointments or group processing application workshops, which are preferred because they maximize community resources for the greatest numerical result. Model instructions for workshops were established and used to train other community groups sponsoring workshop events. Applicants were screened for language ability using preexisting testing tools created by educational centers under contract with INS to conduct off-site naturalization testing. Tracking systems were implemented to record outcomes for reporting purposes and to identify applicants in need of additional services, particularly the elderly, the disabled, and those with limited English proficiency.

In collaboration with community-based organizations, new citizens were offered information and assistance on voter registration, jury duty, and other civic activities, including volunteerism, support of youth education and local schools, community organizing efforts to improve government services, and neighborhood crime watch. New citizens also received information on employment anti-discrimination laws and home ownership opportunities.

The collective results are impressive. In a 16-month period, over 97,000 immigrants in Los Angeles, San Diego, and Fresno received information on naturalization requirements and responsibilities. The three Catholic immigration programs and community partners hosted 211 group processing application workshops, attended by 11,142 Lawful Permanent Residents and resulting in 9,534 filed naturalization applications. (Thousands more immigrants sought to become citizens but were screened out of the pilot project due to insufficient language skills and statutory ineligibilities.) Catholic Charities of San Diego convinced the local Social Security Administration office to take a new step by sending letters promoting naturalization to the elderly and disabled who expected to lose public benefits as a result of the welfare reform laws enacted in 1996.

Of those needing naturalization test preparation, 2,499 people enrolled in English and civics education classes. Community groups helped organize 43 naturalization oath ceremonies. The three Catholic immigration programs documented a naturalization pass rate for their clients that averaged 90 percent, a higher rate than INS's estimated rate of 75 percent for all applicants nationwide.

As part of this unique and productive collaboration, CLINIC's member agencies also assisted INS in pilot testing new application-processing procedures. In one effort, Catholic Charities of Los Angeles, with encouragement from the INS Los Angeles district director, completed naturalization applications electronically using INS-supplied software that produced a two-dimensional bar code containing the data for each application. Once the applications were coded, Catholic Charities of Los Angeles mailed them to the INS California Service Center, where staff scanned the bar code and uploaded the data automatically into INS's "claims" software system. INS studied the results, noting that manually keying application data took five minutes while processing the bar-coded package took only three minutes. In a memo to CLINIC, INS described the bar code process and the collaboration with Catholic Charities of Los Angeles as "an invaluable resource."

The collaboration also allowed INS to test a direct mail procedure that was later adopted nationwide. Previously, staff at INS district offices, where applications were mailed and processed, often complained that they were overburdened by the combination of clerical work, public walk-in queries, and adjudicating a high volume of applications. As part of the pilot program, applications were sent to the California Service Center's large facility, where trained mailroom and data entry clerks could process applications much faster and more accurately. After correcting minor problems, INS determined that direct mail to a service center was a success. Currently, all naturalization applications and some other immigration status applications are sent to the four service centers.

A third collaborative pilot program used INS officers in Fresno to test applicants' English ability and knowledge of civics prior to filing an application. (INS has unofficially suggested to community-based organizations that the majority of naturalization denials are due to English language deficiencies.) Pre-assessment of applicants' English ability and civics knowledge by a trained INS officer benefited immigrants who otherwise would have applied, endured a long wait, been denied, and lost the application fee. Applicants who were likely to be denied were able to improve their chances of passing by attending citizenship classes, while INS had fewer ineligible applicants to process and interview. USCIS and the Office of Citizenship are considering a similar concept of up-front testing as either a voluntary option or a prerequisite for submitting a naturalization application.

In a fourth effort, Catholic Charities in all three cities helped INS conduct naturalization interviews away from its district offices, much to the enthusiasm of community groups. Applicants who were especially appreciative included the elderly and disabled, those living far from the downtown federal building, persons needing professional interpreting by immigration service agencies or free

parking, and those fearful of government offices. INS district offices in other parts of the country had occasionally conducted off-site interviews, but under the pilot project, INS encouraged the district offices to hold interviews and oath ceremonies off-site more routinely. Unfortunately, despite their popularity with clients and community groups, the Los Angeles and San Diego district offices recently ended off-site interviews, citing their lack of efficiency, a concern echoed by USCIS. Although charges of inefficiency remain only anecdotal, off-site interviews are now scheduled around the country in far fewer numbers and with less frequency, due to the lack of USCIS encouragement or instruction.

Concurrent with the pilot project, all three Catholic Charities operated as naturalization testing sites under subcontract to INS-approved contractors. This separate initiative allowed naturalization applicants to go to INS-contracted sites to take English and civics tests and be certified as passing, instead of being tested by an INS officer at the district office. Unfortunately, INS improperly implemented the initiative by failing to stringently define subcontracting eligibility requirements. It permitted contractors to subcontract with unqualified and inexperienced for-profit and noncharitable organizations who were not BIA-recognized. After the media and federal investigators uncovered fraud, INS ended the initiative in 1997. It is important to note that no allegations of impropriety, let alone fraud, were lodged against charitable groups with a mission to serve immigrants. Canceling all the subcontracts, even those with Catholic Charities and other nonprofits that have unblemished reputations, severed an important programmatic relationship with immigrant clients and overshadowed the benefits of the off-site testing initiative.

Ending off-site testing and curtailing off-site interviews exemplify how INS collaboration with community groups eroded after the Citizenship USA campaign ended amid charges of gross incompetence. Neither the now defunct INS nor USCIS have made efforts to reengage the private sector in promoting citizenship and delivering naturalization services based on the positive outcomes of the 1996 pilot project in southern California. Consequently, with the exception of the Office of Refugee Resettlement, the federal government has produced no significant initiative to help make Lawful Permanent Residents citizens of the United States. This failure is an important reason for a national citizenship implementation plan to be adopted and put into action.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A NATIONAL CITIZENSHIP PROGRAM

- 1 USCIS must continue to improve its processing of all immigration benefits applications so that a significant rise in naturalization applications does not produce backlogs beyond the generally accepted six months.
- 2 Congress needs to recognize that USCIS should have full access to its fee account, rather than diverting funds for purposes other than processing applications. It should give USCIS a degree of flexible spending authority to make adjustments in staff and technology resources as surges in various types of applications occur, which historically happens when Congress passes immigration laws without appropriating funds for implementation.
- 3 USCIS needs to make it a priority for the Office of Citizenship to receive grant-making authority from Congress and appropriations sufficient to fund naturalization programs through contracts that are renewable for multiple years.
- 4 USCIS needs to seek congressional monies to select and support BIA-recognized agencies in widely promoting citizenship and providing naturalization services on a level comparable to the INS Pilot Project in southern California.
- 5 The Office of Citizenship needs to work with other federal agencies, particularly the Office of Refugee Resettlement, to identify how their funding can be coordinated and to encourage funding of citizenship programs to community-based organizations.
- 6 USCIS needs to issue guidance to its field office directors to communicate routinely with BIA-recognized agencies and other community-based immigrant service organizations that provide valuable contributions and conduct regularly scheduled meetings on shared agendas.
- 7 USCIS needs to partner with community groups serving the immigrant population and identify how the partnerships can help pilot new government services benefiting its immigrant customers.
- 8 The federal agency awarding naturalization contracts must have sufficient funds and staff resources to conduct on-site monitoring to ensure adherence to the contract and quality services to immigrant customers.
- 9 Charitable immigration programs need to replicate best models of past naturalization projects and look soberly at how past problems arose within federally contracted partnerships.
- 10 USCIS should offer up-front English and civics testing for applicants wishing to assess their capacity to pass the test without having to pay, and possibly lose, the full fee.
- 11 USCIS should encourage its district offices to conduct off-site naturalization interviews, particularly for groups in greatest need, as a means to improve relationships with community service organizations.
- 12 USCIS should encourage community groups to participate in oath of allegiance ceremonies and administrative oath ceremonies in federal buildings.

## The Open Society Institute – Emma Lazarus Fund

On August 22, 1996, Congress passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, more commonly known as the Welfare Reform Act. The act was promoted as a means to bring more welfare recipients into the labor force by changing the rules of eligibility and broadening local government control over work placement incentives. It was also promoted as a way for the federal government to save money by cutting public benefit programs for the poor. A significant piece of the legislation was to deny noncitizens, including millions of current legal immigrants and refugees, public benefits (Medicaid, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, food stamps, and Supplemental Security Income for the elderly and disabled) as of the law's enactment date.

Although the Welfare Reform Act was presented to the public as a way to improve the welfare system and lead more people into jobs and self-sufficiency, it became a vehicle for restrictive immigration legislation and a means of cutting the federal budget by punishing immigrants who were mostly elderly and disabled and unable to work. Even though most studies indicate that immigrant families, other than refugees, do not use public benefits at a higher rate than native-born families, the law sought to remove low-income noncitizens, even the working poor, from the rolls of those receiving medical assistance and food stamps. The law eliminated coverage for millions of poor immigrants and was projected to save \$53.4 billion over the first six years, with 44 percent of the savings coming from the denial of benefits to noncitizen, legal immigrants.<sup>3</sup>

While many decried the welfare reform law and its anti-immigrant stance, no reaction was as striking as that of billionaire, immigrant philanthropist George Soros. Shocked and dismayed by Congress's discrimination against poor immigrants, Soros donated \$50 million of his private assets to his foundation, the Open Society Institute (OSI). He instructed OSI to establish a fund to disburse the \$50 million to charitable organizations that would reestablish public benefits eligibility for legal immigrants by promoting citizenship and delivering naturalization services, including outreach, legal representation, and English language and naturalization test preparation courses. Additionally, the monies went to advocacy organizations focused on immigrants and public welfare.

The campaign was named the Emma Lazarus Fund (ELF), in recognition of the Jewish American poet whose words are inscribed at the base of the Statue of Liberty:

*Give me your tired, your poor  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!*

In addition to spotlighting the unjust impact of welfare reform on lawful immigrants and refugees, Soros's donation emboldened the immigrant and public welfare advocacy communities. Quickly, charitable organizations set to the task of reaching the most vulnerable immigrants and completing their naturalization applications. ELF-funded advocacy groups and public policy centers were crucial in bringing hardship cases to the attention of Congress, including urgent messages from constituents asking for benefit restoration. Reports appeared in the media of immigrants committing suicide in fear of losing their homes, losing medical care, or going hungry. Many of the immigrants were political refugees who were brought to the United States on humanitarian grounds and had already suffered great personal loss and trauma.

Beginning in early 1997, ELF specifically supported organizations to: 1) target immigrants requiring naturalization for benefits reinstatement, 2) train more community service workers on the need for citizenship and the basic naturalization requirements, 3) conduct naturalization law training for legal practitioners, 4) advise the INS on improving its services to naturalization applicants, and 5) engage in legislative advocacy to restore welfare benefits and appropriate much-needed funds to the INS to improve its weak application-processing systems.

The fund determined that the most efficient mechanism to achieve Soros's goals was a re-granting strategy both to national organizations that had large and geographically dispersed networks of direct service providers and to community foundations that give directly to local groups. It made approximately \$13 million available to community foundations, which were encouraged to disperse matching funds, and \$9 million to national and regional service organizations.<sup>4</sup> The largest single grant was made to CLINIC for \$3 million, which supported 56 Catholic charitable immigration programs in 25 states in submitting 43,000 naturalization applications for immigrants who were most at risk. Other entities benefiting included national pro-immigrant policy and advocacy organizations, state immigration coalitions, ethnic-based legal defense funds, ethnic-based mutual assistance associations, refugee resettlement agencies, and farm worker support organizations. By the end of 1999, OSI reported that its grantees had assisted over 500,000 immigrants to begin the naturalization process.<sup>5</sup>

OSI considered its re-granting strategy a great success because resources were delivered quickly and efficiently over a large territory to diverse, yet complimentary, organizations. For example, the Council of Jewish Federations distributed funds to 14 communities, National Council of La Raza to 27 affiliate locations, International Rescue Committee to nine refugee resettlement sites that filed 4,495 applications, and A Territory Resource to 20 groups in five states. One regional network, the Northern California Citizenship Project, funded smaller, less experienced organizations, in addition to well-established, BIA-accredited agencies.

The Emma Lazarus project confronted a number of obstacles. First, it was launched as a response to the negative consequences of harsh legislation that caused confusion and panic in the immigrant community and in the face of a backlash among anti-immigrant groups suspicious of immigrants' motives for choosing citizenship at that time. Second, the United States had not engaged in a naturalization campaign of such a magnitude, and the charitable legal immigration service infrastructure was challenged to accommodate the rising demand for naturalization assistance while maintaining large, complex caseloads for other immigration needs. Third, community groups with similar interests in immigrants but distinct services needed to build coalitions in a crisis mode. Fourth, the INS, still under investigation for its ill-planned Citizenship USA initiative, was using fragmented and outmoded computer and processing systems for a naturalization backlog of over 1.7 million applications, causing an average applicant to wait over two years for citizenship status. Fifth, during the rush for naturalization by the poor, INS announced a fee increase from \$95 to \$225, effective October 1998.

Nevertheless, the impact of ELF was profound. Congress backtracked and in the Balanced Budget Act of 1997 restored disability and health benefits to legal immigrants who were in the country and receiving benefits at the time of the initial welfare reform legislation. Many states that were impacted by immigration allocated supplemental funding to offset federal cuts hurting the most vulnerable.

During the initiative, the immigrant community received unprecedented levels of citizenship information and assistance. Charitable organizations expanded their service capacities with more trained staff serving record numbers of naturalization applicants. Coalitions were established to join nonprofit organizations through training, advocacy meetings, and conferences. Joint government and private working groups were set up, including the unique INS and Community-Based Organization Disability Working Group. Legal and benefits experts writing on naturalization broadened the knowledge of policymakers and direct service providers (see CLINIC's *Citizenship At Risk: New Obstacles to Naturalization* and Citizenship Now Collaborative's *Democracy on Hold: How the Citizenship Process is Failing Immigrants and Our Nation.*) National

and local philanthropies provided matching dollars to OSI support at historic levels for immigrant services. The Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement declared naturalization services a categorical social service and funded programs to assist refugees losing benefits. Government agencies like the Social Security Administration, Agriculture Department, INS, and local welfare offices responded more effectively to the concerns of the immigrant and immigrant-advocacy community through meetings with shared agendas. Thanks in great part to the outreach efforts of the National Immigration Forum and local agencies, the media carried more positive stories about immigrant contributions, values, and family bonds, in addition to their economic struggles after losing public benefits.

ELF is a unique experience in American social history. The best the United States has performed in promoting citizenship and delivering naturalization services in over 100 years was based upon one individual's generous response to the harsh decision by Congress to deny benefits to the foreign-born population. Its strengths were also its limitations: It depended solely on the enormous wealth and anger of one person who controlled a well-endowed and progressive foundation. Without implying any criticism of Soros or OSI, the campaign was short-lived and folded after the crisis subsided but the issues were not yet fully resolved. Although ELF's outcomes are too many to cover fully, lessons learned from this historic effort must be revisited in a national citizenship implementation plan.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A NATIONAL CITIZENSHIP PROGRAM

- 1 Congress needs to fully restore public benefits for immigrants at levels prior to the passage of the Welfare Reform Law of August 22, 1996, in order to de-link citizenship from the receipt of public benefits.
- 2 More champions must be identified and supported in their efforts to ensure that citizenship and naturalization services are the backbone of U.S. immigrant integration policy.
- 3 The federal government must show leadership in setting policies and appropriating sufficient funding to sustain model programs for decades and in proportion to our nation's immigration levels.
- 4 The President, congressional representatives, and state and local officials must join immigrant supporters in outreach to the immigrant community, speaking on the importance of naturalization and citizenship as essential to strengthening our democracy and nation.
- 5 The White House, Congress, and DHS must ensure that USCIS has the capacity to complete naturalization applications and oath of allegiance ceremonies within a

broadly accepted time period without compromising the integrity of the process or tarnishing the solemnity and celebration of the experience.

- 6 Nonprofit organizations that once benefited from ELF must institutionalize naturalization services and civic engagement for the foreign born in their mission statements, programs, and budgets, to highlight the importance of citizenship, the need for greater support, and their capacity to absorb a significant increase in public and private money when available.
- 7 Expanded funding, especially from the government, must recognize the efficient and successful delivery system used by ELF by adopting a re-grant method that targets national networks with numerous and geographically diverse affiliates delivering direct services, augmented by targeted giving to areas and populations that are underserved, lack sufficient service organizations, or pose the greatest need and challenges.
- 8 Key participants in ELF, especially those still engaged in naturalization issues, should reconvene with support from the Open Society Institute to evaluate OSI's and its subgrantees' progress reports for lessons learned, successes, and challenges for future endeavors.

## The James Irvine Foundation — Central Valley Partnership for Citizenship

The James Irvine Foundation funded the Central Valley Partnership (CVP) for Citizenship between 1996 and 2003. A total of \$13 million supported a collaboration of 12 organizations to engage California immigrants in the civic life of their communities, including encouraging them to seek citizenship status.

The CVP project stands in sharp contrast to the predominant naturalization initiatives in immigrant-impacted metropolitan areas. Its activities were spread across a large geographic area in 17 semirural counties and served predominantly low-income Mexican and Hmong farm workers who spoke limited English. These characteristics, and the low rate of naturalization for both ethnic groups, make this project especially worthy of attention, as it speaks to the need for a national citizenship implementation plan to assist those who have the greatest need and the least available services.

The CVP's three primary objectives were: 1) to provide naturalization application assistance and English language training to immigrants seeking citizenship, 2) to promote active civic participation in the Central Valley, and 3) to enhance the leadership capacity and organizational resources of community organizations to address persistent problems affecting immigrants.

The project attempted to achieve the three objectives by funding 12 California Central Valley community organizations specializing in naturalization services, community organizing, or leadership and institutional development. A secondary objective was to bring these small organizations together into a collaborative network, supported by larger organizations that contributed special expertise. The Immigrant Legal Resource Center supported the service-providing organizations with technical assistance and was credited, along with the participating organizations, for the admirable outcomes in filing naturalization applications.

The collaborative network was unique in that it involved local grassroots organizations that understood the farm worker community, high quality legal service providers, and exceptional community organizers who held elaborate, quarterly meetings to coordinate on shared concerns. The generous funding allowed the groups to pursue their work seriously and generate good joint outcomes. The collaboration ensured that each organization understood and appreciated the impact that others were making as they worked together on broad, shared goals.

To expand access to naturalization application assistance, five of the 12 organizations conducted roving naturalization workshops at least once in each of the 17 counties. The roving workshops brought application assistance to remote communities where legal immigration services were not consistently available to agricultural laborers working long hours. Individual application assistance by appointment was also offered at the five organizations. Importantly, a follow-up study showed that 80 percent of the applicants rated the assistance as “excellent.” According to the Aguirre Group, which evaluated the project at the midway point and released a report in 1999, funding for the CVP project supported the filing of 10,000 naturalization applications. In addition, the evaluators estimated that 3,500 beneficiaries, or minor children, would derive citizenship from a naturalized parent. After controlling for the possibility of duplicated numbers, both the providers and evaluators considered these figures as a success.

The evaluators recommended that similar projects in the future begin with a baseline of eligible Lawful Permanent Residents by zip code to track applicants against the total number of persons eligible to apply. They also suggested that funded organizations follow well-defined service and outcome definitions entered into a central reporting system to avoid reporting or duplication errors. (CLINIC adopted this recommendation for its Florida Refugee Naturalization Project described later in this chapter.)

Because of naturalization processing backlogs in the mid 1990’s, the CVP project had little data on the success rate of applicants who had taken the naturalization examination. According to Aguirre, of those who had reported the

outcome at the midway point, 53 percent passed, while 47 percent had been continued or denied. The national average pass rate at the time was around 75 percent according to INS estimates, but given the target population’s exceptional needs, the success rate was not considered too discouraging, especially since no data was collected on the percentage of those who passed after taking the second, and final, examination. Those who passed were typical of the overall CVP target population, except for their language ability. For those who failed, communicating successfully with the examiner in English was the most common problem noted. This deficiency speaks to the importance of English as a second language (ESL) for naturalization purposes and the benefits of mock-interview practice sessions.

The majority of applicants for citizenship were Mexicans who had acquired Lawful Permanent Resident status as a result of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1996, which provided legalization for eligible undocumented immigrants. Applicants for citizenship had a median household income of \$20,000 and an average household size of 4.9 persons, meaning they lived below or very close to the poverty level. On average, applicants had 4.9 years of formal schooling. Fewer than 20 percent claimed to speak, read, and write English well, while more than 60 percent reported speaking, reading, and writing English poorly. Although the average length of residence in the United States was 25 years, the majority of the immigrants lived in ethnic enclaves with few opportunities to learn English.

It is important, especially for funders and program staff, to note how these rural residents with limited English learned about the importance of citizenship and the availability of naturalization assistance through the project. Evaluators surveyed beneficiaries and discovered that 43 percent learned of the service through a relative, friend, or neighbor, followed by 27 percent from a church, and 14 percent from a radio or TV announcement. Although all of the outreach messages originated from funded project staff, only 7 percent or fewer of beneficiaries heard of the services directly from staff, or through outreach flyers, newspaper articles, or community meetings.

Evaluators also asked applicants why they applied for naturalization. A sizeable number, 47 percent, stated they wanted to preserve their eligibility for benefits, while 25 percent listed the ability to bring in family members. Another 25 percent cited the desire to protect their rights. These responses tellingly reflect the political preoccupations of the time. California’s Proposition 187 and Congress’s welfare reform laws had passed, reducing noncitizen eligibility for public benefits. Also, outreach workers’ expressing concern for the immigrant population’s basic needs may have influenced these reactions. As a comparison, in Illinois’s New Americans Initiative, which

is discussed later in the chapter, immigrants in one survey cited access to better jobs and the right to vote and have equal rights, as their main reasons for wanting citizenship: Only 10 percent were motivated by the need for public benefits.

The CVP project attempted to provide a one-stop center where application assistance and language training could be offered. However, ESL and citizenship instruction were regularly available in only two counties—Fresno and Tulare. Both the funder and evaluator expressed serious concern that the allotted funding was insufficient to meet the language training needs across all 17 counties. Volunteers, some of whom were inexperienced teenagers and young adults, delivered much of the instruction. Although volunteer services are often desirable for cost-effectiveness, the project's evaluators noted that 15 percent of students attending ESL and citizenship classes expressed dissatisfaction with the instructor's limited knowledge of the subject material and lack of skill in delivering the curriculum.

Students surveyed ranked the needed improvements in instruction, requesting more: 1) emphasis on speaking English in class, 2) attention to the 96 naturalization questions, 3) activities promoting reading and writing English, and 4) information on civic issues. These recommendations are notable in that they reflect the desire of poor immigrants with low literacy rates to improve their English skills and their preference for instruction geared toward adults and designed to achieve a specific skill or for a specific purpose.

Not every applicant for naturalization could attend ESL and citizenship classes, especially given the lack of available opportunities. Like the majority of naturalization applicants, many in this project were self-directed in learning English, U.S. history, and civics. Applicants not attending class were surveyed on their chosen methods of preparing for the naturalization test. Eighty-three percent of respondents studied a pamphlet or booklet on the 96 naturalization questions. Some 25 percent accessed audiocassette instruction and 19 percent, videocassette instruction. Coaching from friends (17 percent) slightly outnumbered those who practiced with family members (11 percent).

The evaluators criticized most of the adult public schools' naturalization instruction, citing erratic teacher competency and lack of instruction beyond the 96 naturalization test questions. The high dependency on self-instruction, lack of English and citizenship classes, reliance on semi-trained volunteers, and ineffective instruction in the public schools highlight the need for sufficient English and citizenship instruction, invigorated models of naturalization curricula, and greater teacher competency supported by professional training.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A NATIONAL CITIZENSHIP PROGRAM

- 1 Funders should encourage service delivery organizations to view naturalization services broadly as a form of immigrant integration and to provide educational instruction, immigrant organizing activities, and leadership training. Funding should be ample and sustained enough to cover all these services over the time required to see applicants pass the naturalization test and acquire more life skills.
- 2 Large citizenship projects that cover a wide territory and support multiple service providers require the coordination and training efforts of a specialized organization serving as a fiscal and programmatic reporter, as well as a technical assistance provider.
- 3 Naturalization workshops, particularly roving workshops, should be offered regularly and emphasize accessibility for applicants and high-quality services rather than numbers served.
- 4 Evaluation measures and methods need to be determined prior to project inception to allow for comprehensive reporting of accurate outcomes.
- 5 Particularly for a large consortium project covering a wide territory, a centralized, web-based reporting system with security controls can greatly facilitate data collection for service delivery outcomes an ease evaluation.
- 6 The success rate of naturalization applicants needs to be assessed against national averages and against rates for relevant subgroups with special needs like elders, limited English speakers, rural agricultural workers, refugees and the very poor. Anticipated success rates need to be realistic and take account of the barriers faced by special populations.
- 7 Success rates should include not only persons passing the naturalization test on the first try, but those who pass on the second try and those who reapply and pass. A case management system needs to be used to reduce applicant denials and dropout rates for those who fail after one or more attempts.
- 8 Survey data collection on the effectiveness of outreach, reasons for applying for naturalization, and client satisfaction with services should become the norm for any citizenship project. Outreach workers should be trained on the science of surveys. A volunteer-driven program should survey volunteers for their input and provide ample recognition for their services.
- 9 Funding should favor charitable organizations that provide one-stop services for naturalization application assistance, English language and civics instruction for the citizenship test, pre-interview practice sessions, BIA-accredited legal representation, and post-citizenship integration assistance.

- 10** Funded English and civics education programs for naturalization need to be led by teachers trained in adult education, supported by pedagogical and legal immigration assistance providers. Teachers should have access to curricula that reflect adult learner styles and go beyond the 96 citizenship test questions to the deeper meaning of being an American and an American citizen.

## Office of Refugee Resettlement — Refugee Naturalization Projects

Although welfare reform legislation in 1996 caused hardship for many vulnerable newcomers, it particularly impacted refugees. Congress restricted Supplemental Security Income (SSI) payments to refugees in 1996 by limiting eligibility to five years, which it then extended to a seven-year limit in 1997. The limit could not be exceeded, even if refugees were elderly or became disabled, unless they became U.S. citizens or earned 40 quarters of work hours, roughly the equivalent of a 10-year work history. These restrictions placed a very vulnerable immigrant population at high risk for homelessness and deteriorating health.

Most refugees arrive in the United States with few family members or friends, limited possessions, limited English language skills, and scant knowledge of American life. Sponsoring resettlement agencies encourage and support them to achieve self-sufficiency as soon as possible. However, some refugees have obvious impediments to employment, self-sufficiency, and functional English language ability, including the elderly, the disabled, and single parents who may be widowed because of violent persecution in their native country and have multiple children under school age. Some refugees without these barriers may be employable but require special services to cope with severe emotional and physical trauma resulting from past persecution in their home country, the dangers of flight, or abuse in their country of first asylum.

In 1997, as a response to the welfare reform crisis for refugees, the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) expanded the definition of funded social services to include naturalization assistance. In addition, ORR awarded grants to community-based organizations serving refugees with legal and English language naturalization assistance. It instructed these programs to prioritize services for elderly, disabled, and low-income refugees with five years or less of residency in the United States. State government refugee offices, using ORR funds and their own state funding, also released Requests for Proposals to serve refugees at risk of losing public benefits. A collection of national, state, regional, and local immigrant service organizations acquired a combination of federal and state funding.

ORR's support of naturalization services is the only example of federal funding for citizenship purposes other than the INS's Naturalization Pilot Project in Southern California. Its support is noteworthy because it focused on a smaller, select immigrant population with special needs and provided funding not only for direct services but also for technical assistance to service providers. ORR's funding is also noteworthy in that, unlike INS's one-year pilot project, ORR responded quickly to authorize and expand naturalization services and improve their effectiveness by providing multiyear, multilayered funding that vertically integrated national technical support and local intervention.

In 1997 CLINIC proposed an original initiative to ORR called the African and Middle Eastern Refugee Naturalization Project. As a result of feedback from Catholic-based refugee resettlement agencies, the largest network of refugee resettlement services, CLINIC had learned that African and Middle Eastern refugees were far less connected than other ethnic groups to social and legal service agencies that had staff with native-language skills and expertise in naturalization. CLINIC proposed to target refugees from Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Iraq, Iran, Somalia, and Sudan in five cities through the direct legal services of its member agencies in Arlington, Va.; Dallas, Tex.; Detroit, Mich; San Diego, Calif; and Washington, D.C. Funding to CLINIC and the five agencies totaled \$245,100 for the first year. For the second and third years, ORR gave CLINIC permission to expand the project to four more cities—Seattle, Wash.; Los Angeles, Calif.; Phoenix, Ariz.; and Houston, Tex., at a total of \$350,100 per year.

As noted earlier, other funding sources also provided monies to reach immigrants and refugees at risk of losing benefits. Concurrent with CLINIC's funding, Catholic Charities in Dallas, Los Angeles, San Diego, and Seattle received state or municipal funding for naturalization services. Seattle reimbursed the Catholic program \$200 for every N-600 application filed for children deriving naturalization through a parent. These sources of funding combined with ORR funding through CLINIC produced a vigorous naturalization project with striking results.

The objectives of the project were to: 1) train culturally and linguistically appropriate staff in naturalization and basic immigration law, 2) obtain BIA-accreditation for staff, 3) translate naturalization materials for the first time in dominant African and Middle Eastern languages, 4) conduct extensive outreach where the target populations resided, worked, played, studied, and worshipped, 5) screen applicants for eligibility, 6) complete naturalization applications, 7) provide or make referrals for English language training, and 8) conduct naturalization test preparation courses. These objectives were similar to the INS Pilot

Project and other charitable immigration program efforts but differed in their specialized focus and approach to this underserved, hard-to-reach refugee population.

Special efforts were made to adequately translate materials into Arabic, Amharic, Eritrean, Farsi, Pashtu, and Somali. Outreach staff made contacts with the target population at mosques, churches, ethnic markets, community centers, ESL classes, apartment complexes, taxi companies, and convenience stores. As the majority of the target populations were Muslim, holiday celebrations for Muslims and mosques where people gathered for prayer or to socialize were productive places for outreach. Early in the project, it was evident that refugee communities, and Africans and Middle Easterners in particular, were uninformed or confused about citizenship. Some communities were initially suspicious of the help offered. However, when the motives for helping became clear and citizenship status was achieved, they expressed deep appreciation for the legal competency, linguistic abilities, and persistence shown.

During the three-year project, the nine Catholic immigration programs filed 2,720 naturalization applications. The highest to lowest ranking of applications filed by nationality was: Iraqi, Afghani, Somali, Ethiopian, Iranian, Sudanese, and Eritrean.

Concurrent with ORR's funding of the African and Middle Eastern Refugee Naturalization Project was its funding of the Technical Assistance to Elderly Refugees Project. ORR recognized that voluntary refugee resettlement programs and county-based Area Agencies on Aging required technical assistance to maximize the partnerships ORR had funded to serve elderly refugee integration and naturalization. With \$207,000 for the first year and \$282,000 for the second and third years, CLINIC conducted the technical assistance project. It contracted with the American Society on Aging in San Francisco and the Little Havana Activities and Nutrition Center in Miami, specialists in aging services to minorities and the foreign-born. The goal was to establish programmatic linkages between resettlement and aging agencies and improve both groups' technical knowledge of naturalization.

Together, the three technical assistance organizations: 1) conducted 45 site visits for local training, 2) provided two regional trainings, 3) held ten conference-call trainings, 4) made presentations at 12 national and regional conferences, 5) advised INS on the revision of the Application for Naturalization form, 6) advised INS on the revision of the N-648 disability waiver form, and 7) created a handbook called, *Best Practices for Serving Elderly Refugees*. This project highlights the importance of national technical assistance for community organizations eager to serve immigrants in the naturalization process but

lacking the level of expertise to produce results-based programs, use public funds effectively, and protect immigrants from applying when ineligibilities are present.

As a result of the two ORR projects, CLINIC produced two important publications. Language instructors for elderly learners were the chief audience for *Citizenship for Refugee Elders: Issues and Options in Test Preparation*. Over 500 copies have been distributed, and it remains an important tool in assessing how elders best learn a second language and unfamiliar American history and government content.

The second book, *Citizenship for Us: A Handbook on Naturalization and Citizenship*, was written for immigrants with limited English ability, community service providers assisting in the naturalization process, paralegals, and English and citizenship instructors. The book's ten chapters contain 342 pages spanning the naturalization application process and pay particular attention to the importance of legal representation, advocacy, and an informed applicant. Eighty pages, which are dedicated to preparing for the naturalization test, offer history and civics content, practice questions in multiple formats, and photographs to aid visual retention of important information. The book is in its fourth edition and nearly 1,500 copies have been distributed.

From 2000 to 2003 ORR's earlier program for African and Middle Eastern refugees was expanded to serve all refugees and Cuban and Haitian entrants. Activities provided by CLINIC and ten immigration program member agencies included assistance with naturalization applications and American history and government brush-up classes before the INS interview. In addition, refugee clients received assistance filing applications for Lawful Permanent Resident status, or green cards, a precursor status required for naturalization.

This project, which ORR funded in the amount of \$420,000, helped 5,385 refugees to file naturalization applications and over 7,500 refugees to file adjustment of status applications. Disabled refugees were assisted by working with doctors to complete the disability waiver application for exemption from the English, history, and civics tests. Newly arrived refugees who were separated from spouses and minor children were assisted in completing petitions for family reunification. This project provided more comprehensive immigration services to refugees by assisting them in maintaining their family unity while taking steps through the naturalization process for family security in the United States.

Under this project, the BIA accredited more caseworkers to represent clients in the naturalization application process and interview. This in turn expanded the availability of professional immigration counseling and representation in refugee languages.

Finally, ORR funding, combined with private funding, allowed CLINIC to sponsor an Immigrant and Refugee Citizenship and Empowerment Conference. Both naturalization experts and immigrant community organizers attended the two-day event. People from these two distinct yet overlapping disciplines trained each other on how to help immigrants and refugees seek citizenship status and how to promote civic engagement activities that positively impact immigrant and low-income communities. This cross-training model continues to be used and is vital to protect newcomers from being marginalized because of their race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, immigration status, or income level.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A NATIONAL CITIZENSHIP PROGRAM

- 1 ORR should emphasize to Congress that refugees seek citizenship at a rate three times higher than immigrants and benefit greatly from citizenship, rather than refugee, status.
- 2 ORR needs to request more funding from Congress for discretionary programs that support legal immigration assistance to refugees seeking family unity, adjustment of status, and citizenship. In turn, ORR should seek proposals for creative citizenship services.
- 3 ORR funding for citizenship services needs to support charitable legal immigration programs recognized by the BIA. Funding should be primarily directed to charitable programs that are experienced in direct legal immigration services and have access to training and technical assistance through membership in a national support organization. ORR's current practice of using state refugee offices as fiscal and reporting agents for federal funds reduces the money available for charitable programs, because of high state administrative costs, with no benefit of built-in training and technical support. This funding structure splits national and local program capacity and fosters dependence on a second layer of government oversight.
- 4 ORR funding needs to expand to include vertically integrated, in-house citizenship programs that provide outreach, prescreening, application assistance, level 1-4 English training, citizenship classes, pre-interview "brush-up" classes, and post-citizenship civic engagement opportunities. Added to these client-focused services is the capacity of local and national charitable organizations to work with USCIS's national and district offices and the Office of Citizenship (OoC) to ensure a strong private-public partnership.
- 5 ORR should fund technical assistance for local citizenship programs by an experienced immigration legal service provider that knows the full spectrum of refugee and naturalization issues.
- 6 ORR should use conference and consultation opportunities to conduct legal immigration training for resettlement and state government staff, focusing on immigration services that promote family unity, integration, and citizenship. Although it regularly offered such training in the late 1990's, it has stopped in recent years.
- 7 ORR and OoC directors, or appointed designees, should form a working group to identify ways to maximize their missions towards citizenship for refugees and ensure national coverage without overlooking the special needs of refugees resettled in nontraditional, immigrant-impacted communities. Joint ventures could include dissemination of citizenship materials, translation of materials into refugee-based languages, joint symposiums and training, and joint or coordinated funding.

## State of Florida – Refugee Naturalization Project

In 2000 the Florida Department of Children and Families' Office of Refugee Services released a Request for Proposals to provide naturalization services to refugees and Cuban and Haitian entrants. Funds for these services were originally provided by the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement and redesignated as state funds for distribution to nonprofit organizations. Two bidders, including CLINIC, were awarded contracts, which spanned 18 months, from April 1, 2001 to September 30, 2002. When the second bidder's contract was revoked in the first year, its funding and caseload were added to CLINIC's contract.

CLINIC's project is notable for its statewide coverage of refugee communities and inclusion of two networks—six Catholic legal immigration programs and two Lutheran social services programs. These agencies included Catholic Charities of Miami, West Palm Beach, Fort Myers, Saint Petersburg, Orlando, and Pensacola and Lutheran Social Services of Northeast Florida in Jacksonville and (under sub-subcontract to Catholic Charities of Saint Petersburg) Lutheran Family Services of Tampa. Each agency was selected for its BIA-recognition status, staff of attorneys or BIA-accredited representatives, experience with naturalization legal services, and strong connection to refugee communities as a federally and state-funded refugee resettlement program.

The Florida project is also noteworthy because its requirements differed significantly from other federal and state naturalization proposal requests. In addition to statewide coverage, the requirements included: prioritiza-

tion of three target populations according to their risk of losing public benefits without naturalization, fixed price legal and nonlegal services, English language and civics instruction, projected numerical goals by service and agency, monthly reporting of numerical achievements against projected goals, numerical reporting using a website-linked Oracle database, monthly reimbursement, and flexibility to change numerical goals and shift monies among agencies, based on the level of demand for services. In addition, the potential for a second contract was announced, dependent on available funds and meeting the first contract's numerical goals.

CLINIC and immigration directors from the eight participating agencies convened in advance of the proposal to estimate actual costs, determining a fixed reimbursement price for each listed service. The following reimbursement rates were proposed and accepted by the state: intake and assessment—\$180, Lawful Permanent Resident application (I-485)—\$360, Application for Naturalization (N-400)—\$360, Application for Naturalization for an elderly refugee (also N-400)—\$450, disability waiver (N-648)—\$450, English literacy instruction per enrollment—\$60, English conversation instruction per enrollment—\$60, naturalization test preparation per enrollment—\$65, and interpreter services—\$65. Participating agencies received a \$60 bonus for documenting adjustment of status and naturalizations granted. No fees were taken for state-funded services. CLINIC's services were contracted for cost reimbursement as opposed to fixed price since it did not deliver direct services but rather fiscal and programmatic oversight, such as training, administrative support, and advocacy with the INS central and district offices.

The project proved enormously successful. Target goals were surpassed each quarter by most agencies, necessitating the transfer of service units and budgeted dollars between agencies since the state was unable to add more funds to the first year's contract. Before the end of the 18-month contract, all eight programs had met their numerical goals but were forced to scale down services while awaiting the renewal of the second contract and a replenishment of funds. The first contract brought in over \$3,200,000 in reimbursements from the state for fixed-price services.

The state asked CLINIC to submit a 24-month, noncompetitive extension proposal for the same services in the same communities based on the success of the first 18 months and the continued need for naturalization services for at-risk refugees. It added one additional service, assistance with fee waver applications, for \$100. Taking into consideration past performance and numbers of refugees in each community, including refugees listed as potentially losing SSI and Medicaid, CLINIC proposed a more ambitious project for fixed-priced services, totaling \$7,750,639. CLINIC's member agency in Pensacola chose not to partic-

ipate. Funding was insufficient for Catholic Charities of Saint Petersburg to continue subcontracting with Lutheran Family Services of Tampa, although the demand for services remained sufficiently high. At the behest of the state to expand literacy services in Miami, Catholic Charities of Miami subcontracted with the Pierre Toussaint Center to provide English and test preparation instruction to Haitian refugees. The state awarded CLINIC a two-year contract, but for significantly less money than requested—\$4,152,634.

Results of the project in the first 12 months of the two-year contract proved that the listed services were in great demand, particularly legal assistance with applications for Lawful Permanent Resident status and naturalization, and English and test preparation instruction. These services and corresponding fixed priced funds were gradually increased by decreasing other services. Like the first 18-month contract, demand for services exceeded the total projected for each quarter, again producing a funding shortfall for the year. Services were scaled back only temporarily in anticipation of the second 12-month contract.

Regrettably, citing the contract's "convenience clause," Florida's Department of Children and Families' Office of Refugee Services sent CLINIC a letter stating it would not renew the contract for the final 12 months and canceling the project in 30 days, as of September 30, 2003. Refugee Services officials subsequently revealed that the office did not have the funds to renew the project because of the state's severe budget shortfall. State officials would not explain why funding was cut rather than reduced.

The Florida project, which had expanded rapidly over 30 months, folded abruptly following the state's 30-day notification. The project was too large for any single agency to absorb without discretionary funds or other naturalization grants. Legal representatives and teachers were laid off, placing a tremendous strain on participating agencies that had active legal cases and students still in the classroom. Some services were extended where possible but only for a short time. In addition to the loss of anticipated revenue and trained colleagues, the sudden cancellation of funding and services hurt the agencies' reputations with the refugee clients they served, who could not understand how this highly sought after program with noticeable success rates could be de-funded.

During the two funded contracts, between April 1, 2001 and September 30, 2003, CLINIC's participating agencies completed: 7,588 intakes, 4,906 Lawful Permanent Resident applications, 1,097 naturalization applications, 249 elderly naturalization applications, 169 disability waiver applications, 131 fee waiver applications, 8,814 hours of literacy instruction, 3,679 hours of conversational instruction, and 3,408 hours of test preparation instruction. Despite the increased numbers, the passing rate for

applications for Lawful Permanent Resident status and naturalization remained above 90 percent due to the quality of intake, eligibility screening, and supportive services. However, the project's truncated contract period and INS's processing delays for adjustment of status, naturalization interviews, and oath ceremonies meant that only 587 Lawful Permanent Resident and 229 naturalization applications were granted within the project period.

Implications of the Florida Refugee Naturalization Project are significant for a national citizenship program. The project is an example of how states assumed financial and programmatic responsibility for congressional action barring noncitizen refugees from accessing public services after reaching a seven-year limit. It also shows the great demand for citizenship services, a demand that exceeded the expectations of a consortium of eight agencies and could not be fulfilled without supplemental funding, which was nonexistent. The project also demonstrates how demand for services builds momentum with each month as immigrants and refugees take part in the long preparation and educational process and are motivated by the successful outcomes of their peers. The state's project design shows how a full menu of legal and nonlegal services is best combined to support naturalization goals. Its use of benchmarks, fixed-price reimbursement, incentives, and flexible allocation of funds among services and communities helped achieve and document desired results. The Oracle database allowed the state to use its restricted website link to analyze service unit data by client for all its subcontractors statewide, offering a wealth of statistical results for future program priorities and funding.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A NATIONAL CITIZENSHIP PROGRAM

- 1 In order to ensure that smaller, less urban immigrant communities have equal access to services, funding for naturalization services should be statewide, rather than focused on a few urban areas.
- 2 Funders should encourage collaboration and partnerships among different service networks to maximize geographic coverage.
- 3 Large-scale naturalization projects should combine a full menu of both legal and nonlegal services to support their goals.
- 4 Large-scale naturalization projects should be designed with built-in flexibility to change numerical goals and shift monies between partner agencies, based on the demand for services.
- 5 Contractors funding naturalization services need to plan carefully and ensure sufficient funds to avoid disruptions in service if service goals are reached before the end of a contract year.

- 6 Funders should give grantees sufficient notice of funding level changes to avoid an abrupt loss of anticipated revenue, which forces layoffs of trained staff and sudden cancellation of services to clients.
- 7 Naturalization project funders should utilize a database to collect individual client data and analyze services by all their grantees, as the database will offer a wealth of statistical results for future program and funding priorities.

## State of Illinois – New Americans Initiative

In 2003 immigrant advocates prompted the Illinois General Assembly to form the Joint Legislative Taskforce on Immigrants and Refugees to identify barriers to immigrant integration and other challenges faced by the state's foreign-born population. A hearing on civic engagement identified the lack of current, accurate information about naturalization and services supporting naturalization as the most significant barrier to immigrant civic participation. On April 21, 2004, Gov. Rod Blagojevich announced his support for the New Americans Initiative (NAI), with \$3 million of funding in his proposed budget. Funding was directed to the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) and granted to the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (ICIRR).

ICIRR, a major proponent of the governor's initiative, undertook a feasibility plan for delivery of public information and direct services. It collected data on the number of Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs) statewide who were eligible to naturalize, their place of birth, year of entry, and English proficiency. It also created maps reflecting the concentration and dispersion of LPRs in Chicago neighborhoods, suburbs, and other state locations.

Recent Census data showed that 58.34 percent (197,732) of the state's LPR population were from Latin America, 20.04 percent (67,930) from Europe, 19.76 percent (66,985) from Asia, and 1.86 percent (6,300) from Africa. Immigrants with the highest rate of naturalization were from Europe (51.5 percent) and Asia (48.70 percent), while Africans (38.6 percent) had a lower rate. The lowest rate of naturalization—27.6 percent—was for immigrants from Latin America, a majority of whom were from Mexico.

IDHS and ICIRR prepared a Request for Proposals for subgrantees to provide direct services, and ICIRR received 35 proposals requesting \$6,489,969, compared to the total of \$2,350,000 designated for direct services. Recommendations for funding priorities were made through a consultative process with government officials and members of a citizen advisory panel comprised of nonprofit representatives not seeking funding from the Initiative. The first cut of selected proposals was based on

merit, the second on geographic priorities, and the third on the size of the population to be served among the ethnic groups eligible for naturalization. For the first year of funding, from July 2004 to June 2005, NAI supported 11 collaborations involving 51 organizations. Each organization within a collaborative provided one or more of the following specialized services: outreach, civics education, or legal assistance and representation for naturalization applicants. Twelve organizations were funded for outreach only.

A separate Request for Proposals was also launched to secure outreach assistance. Scofield Communications won the competitive bid to provide ICIRR and the NAI collaborations with strategic communication planning, message development, television and radio production, outreach print materials, event planning, and oversight of survey research on immigrant opinions of the naturalization process and citizenship. Shortly before large group processing application workshops were held throughout Chicago, two 60-second television spots and a 30-second radio spot by Scofield were aired. Also expanding outreach was ICIRR's toll free number for people seeking information on eligibility requirements, documents necessary to complete an application, application workshop schedules, and a list of NAI organizations in their neighborhood.

Once selected for funding, organizations sent staff to attend a series of meetings and trainings. At the meetings, staff coordinated the service delivery plan across collaboratives and territories, implemented shared statistical reporting procedures using a web-based database, and collected outreach materials. Training focused on demographic research results, outreach methods guided by target population demographics, naturalization law, the naturalization group application workshop model, and volunteer recruitment and training methods. CLINIC's Midwest field attorney in Chicago played a central role in providing naturalization training to outreach and legal staff.

To support the English language needs of the target population, NAI offered 43 classes in Chicago neighborhoods, suburbs, and other cities across the state. Classes were scheduled for maximum convenience and held in the mornings, afternoons, early evenings, and weekends. Most were offered for one to two hours twice a week in the early evenings and on weekends. At the end of NAI's first year, 445 students had finished citizenship classes, 2,114 students were enrolled, and 548 were on waiting lists lasting a few weeks. Around 150 had dropped out.

The centerpiece of NAI was a cluster of naturalization group application workshops held on the same day, February 26, 2005, and attracting approximately 1,100 people. Over 400 trained volunteers and 100 NAI staff provided logistical and application assistance. Through extensive media coverage, Scofield Communications raised

public awareness about subsequent workshops. Two more "mega" workshops in six locations across the state resulted in 1,478 applications prepared. Each of the three large workshops had a 1:3 volunteer-to-applicant ratio. A series of local workshops and individual appointments added to the first-year total of 2,879 applications completed. At the naturalization interview, 48 applicants were determined to require legal representation because of the complexity of their cases.

Because of the time required for USCIS to schedule interviews, NAI could report only a small number of outcomes on applications filed. By the end of the first year, 241 applicants had been scheduled for interviews, 74 had passed, 67 were scheduled for a swearing-in ceremony, and 35 were sworn in as U.S. citizens. These numbers reflect the need for naturalization programs to be funded over multiple years to assist as many persons as possible but to also track as many outcomes as possible over the time required to complete the naturalization process.

Considerable demographic data was gathered on the immigrants responding to workshops and other outreach efforts. Nationality, education level, English language skills, and income were of special interest, as they are strong variables influencing the rate of naturalization. Of the immigrants reached, 46 percent were Mexican, 14 percent were South Korean, and 9 percent were Chinese from the People's Republic of China. Poles, Indians, Vietnamese, Pakistanis, Guatemalans, and Bosnians trailed at 2 percent each.

Data on education attained either in the native country or the United States showed that 23 percent had fewer than six years of formal education, 51 percent had completed between seven and 12 years, 10 percent had completed a General Equivalency Degree, and 16 percent had acquired a two-year college degree or higher.

When asked to rate their skills in speaking, reading, and writing English, 16 percent of respondents reported knowing English "Not at All," 42 percent said, "Not Very Well," and another 42 percent answered, "Well."

Most of the immigrants contacted held low-wage jobs. Half of the people directly assisted in the project earned low wages: 23 percent earned less than \$801 per month and 26 percent between \$801 and \$1,301. Middle wage earners were 35 percent of the total, while only 16 percent of those assisted earned a monthly income of \$2,701 or higher. This data reflects the importance of publicly funded naturalization programs reaching low-income immigrants otherwise underserved or uninitiated in the naturalization process, to avoid perpetuating lower naturalization rates for the poor.

NAI staff also reported the same barriers to citizenship as cited in nationwide studies. The top five barriers were: 1) lack of English skills, 2) unfamiliarity with naturalization requirements and the benefits of citizenship, 3) fear of failing the naturalization exam, 4) fear of government immigration officers, and 5) the high cost of the naturalization application fee.

NAI conducted further research on why immigrants desired U.S. citizenship. The most common reason was to access better jobs, followed by the right to vote and have equal rights with other citizens. Only 10 percent listed the need for public benefits as a main motivator for citizenship. Reflecting the need for naturalization assistance, 80 percent felt that applying for citizenship was either very or somewhat difficult.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A NATIONAL CITIZENSHIP PROGRAM

- 1 Private funders need to support advocacy for national and state citizenship projects in order to get them widely disseminated and understood by legislators and the public, and to create a coalition to move the initiatives through Congress or state legislatures.
- 2 In recognition that the need for naturalization information and services is the most significant barrier to immigrant civic participation, funders should support not only immigrant civic engagement but also naturalization outreach and application assistance.
- 3 In the absence of comprehensive service providers, funding for a national citizenship program should support a mix of organizations with complementary strengths.
- 4 Funding priority for a national citizenship program should be given to BIA-accredited agencies and those seeking accreditation, with benchmarks to ensure accreditation status is accomplished.
- 5 Capacity-building grants should be time-limited and have benchmarks to increase outreach, legal service, education, and training capacity.
- 6 In planning for services, large-scale naturalization projects should utilize data on the number of Lawful Permanent Residents eligible for naturalization, their characteristics, and their geographic concentration and dispersion.
- 7 To ensure a strong start, the pre-implementation phase of a national citizenship program requires: clear goals, objectives, roles, and responsibilities; a planning meeting; a community meeting to understand general expectations for the project; an advisory council to create the Request for Proposals, which should be broadly disseminated; sufficient turnaround time, perhaps 12 weeks, to submit a proposal; database design, construction, and testing; and market testing of messaging for print and broadcast media, posters, and slogans.
- 8 Messaging, outreach, and services for a large-scale naturalization initiative need to take into consideration the large numbers of Latino Lawful Permanent Residents, their various ethnic backgrounds, and their low rate of naturalization.
- 9 Service providers in a national citizenship program should work in partnership and be accountable to one another.
- 10 A national citizenship program should require citizenship group application workshops but allow local flexibility on the size and number of workshops.
- 11 The database for a national citizenship program should contain meaningful information that contributes to the naturalization process, maintains confidentiality, and ensures that people do not fall through cracks. The database should be structured to block access and data entry by nonauthorized users.
- 12 In the first year, a national citizenship program should be evaluated on its outreach and contacts rather than the number of applications filed.

## U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants – Citizenship AmeriCorps Project

The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) is a national voluntary organization that addresses the policy and service requirements of people worldwide in forced or voluntary migration. It is affiliated with a network of local agencies serving the resettlement needs of refugees with the goal of assisting them to become self-sufficient and full participants in community life.

USCRI recognizes citizenship as a significant achievement in immigrant integration. Challenges for immigrants in the naturalization process include learning a new language, preparing for the test, paying high application fees, and navigating the federal bureaucracy. Another challenge is transforming citizenship into civic engagement.

In the fall of 2004 USCRI launched the Citizenship AmeriCorps Project, which emphasizes immigrant integration as a two-way process between foreign and native-born community members. The project aimed to place AmeriCorps members in selected communities around the country, where they would promote community involvement with immigrants in the naturalization process. (AmeriCorps is a network of national service programs under the Corporation for National and Community Service that engages more than 50,000 Americans each year in intensive volunteer service to meet critical needs in education, public safety, health, and the environment.)

During the first year of the program, the 32 AmeriCorps paid volunteers, known as members, ranged in age from 19 to 71, but the majority were young, recent college graduates. Their race and ethnicity reflected the diversity of the U.S. immigrant population. Approximately half were U.S. citizens and half were Lawful Permanent Residents.

Members were recruited to work at 12 community service organizations that serve the social service and integration needs of immigrants and refugees. Each worked a minimum of 1,700 hours during the year and received a stipend of \$10,600, basic health insurance, and an educational award of \$4,275 upon completion of service. Each service organization contributed to the program with a \$3,000 match per member. All members were assigned to a supervisor, some of whom were attorneys or BIA-accredited representatives.

As part of the ongoing citizenship project, members are active on an individual level and communitywide. They promote immigrant civic engagement through the naturalization process by: conducting public outreach campaigns for greater awareness of citizenship responsibilities and rights, increasing access to English language and civics classes for higher pass rates on the citizenship test, recruiting volunteers as tutors to help immigrants overcome individual barriers to studying in a foreign language, and identifying creative activities to infuse the naturalization process with meaning about U.S. values to promote immigrant self-identification as Americans.

AmeriCorps members involved in the project manage citizenship study centers, which offer one-on-one tutoring by community volunteers. They also assist with the preparation of citizenship applications, mock interviews, and disability and fee waivers. They work closely with community outreach officers from the USCIS Office of Citizenship in order to enhance their knowledge and obtain program materials. Special events showcase their work in the immigrant community and encourage immigrants to use their services, which are offered without fees. Members take clients to community and neighborhood meetings to observe how Americans resolve community concerns. At several sites, members appear on ethnic radio programs or write newspaper articles in the language of the immigrant community about the importance of citizenship and how to accomplish that goal.

Most citizenship study centers have placed a special emphasis on the elderly, who have often given up hope of citizenship and, at the same time, are in danger of losing benefits on which they depend. In addition, members help immigrants become empowered as they learn their rights and how their rights will increase with citizenship.

In the spirit of building community support, members recruited 251 volunteers who worked 4,867 hours, primarily in tutoring, in the citizenship study centers. It has been fairly easy to recruit and maintain volunteer tutors since they work one-on-one with an applicant from the time the applicant comes in until he or she completes the naturalization ceremony. Not all volunteers feel comfortable being ESL teachers, but tutoring can be far easier and sometimes more rewarding on a personal basis since tutors are able to participate (and celebrate) at each step of the way.

In the project's first year, members assisted 2,725 people. Of this number, 740 became U.S. citizens, while 1,090 are expected to become citizens in 2006. The number of people assisted is greater than originally projected but the number achieving citizenship status is less because of government delays in processing applications. A large majority of members ending their year of service reported having a very positive experience. USCRI is now sharing the lessons learned and best practices of the first year with new AmeriCorps members. Seven of the original members have chosen to stay for an additional year.

The President's 2007 budget proposed the elimination or significant reduction of 141 government programs, including the \$48.5 million for AmeriCorps. However, the Citizenship AmeriCorps Program is expected to survive.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A NATIONAL CITIZENSHIP PROGRAM

- 1 Volunteers should be an important component of a communitywide citizenship project, especially when the project has many time-consuming activities that are difficult to fulfill by overworked, professional staff.
- 2 In order for volunteers to work best, activities should be well defined, time-limited, and have specific achievable and rewarding outcomes.
- 3 Volunteer programs need to acknowledge the limitations of each volunteer and not impose duties that greatly exceed skill or comfort level.
- 4 Volunteer-supported citizenship programs should have strong supervision and technical support, particularly in the specialized areas of providing legal immigration information and language instruction.
- 5 Volunteer programs serving the foreign-born in the naturalization process need to emphasize the two-way street of multicultural service learning. Having American-born U.S. citizens work as volunteers in the immigrant community furthers the understanding of both groups. The American-born have a richer appreciation of immigrants and all they have endured, while immigrants learn about the larger community and how easy it can be to communicate and become friendly with someone of an entirely different background.

- 6 Citizenship programs should provide one-on-one opportunities for native and foreign-born persons to share the experience leading to and beyond the naturalization oath ceremony, as this will make the programs richer and far more enduring.
- 7 Citizenship programs with volunteers who are not comfortable being ESL teachers should encourage them to tutor an applicant one-on-one, since the close relationship with the applicant can be very rewarding for the volunteer and result in better volunteer retention.

## The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation – American Dream Fund

The American Dream Fund began in the fall of 2005 as a local immigrant integration endeavor of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. Managed by Public Interest Projects, the fund's total of \$6 million supports immigrants and refugees in improving their living conditions and communities. Its multi-year grants range from \$10,000 to \$25,000 per year for general and civic engagement activities by 29 immigrant-focused organizations in 14 communities where the foundation has long-standing commitments. The communities include: Biloxi, Miss.; Boulder, Colo.; Charlotte, N.C.; Columbia, S.C.; Detroit, Mich; Fort Wayne, Ind.; Lexington, Ky.; Long Beach, Calif., Miami-Dade/Broward, Fla.; Palm Beach, Fla.; Philadelphia, Penn.; San Jose, Calif.; St. Paul, Minn.; and Wichita, Kans.

Each grantee is engaged in a combination of citizenship-related services. Approved activity categories include: assistance with the naturalization process, preparing immigrants for citizenship, organizing immigrants to address systemic barriers to integration, organizing nonpartisan voter education and get-out-the-vote campaigns, developing adult and youth leadership opportunities, and building community relationships across race, ethnicity, and immigration status. The fund also encourages local participating organizations to work with national immigrant advocacy networks on shared advocacy campaigns, planning, communication strategies, and events.

The fund will release results of the first year's outcomes at the end of 2006.

## Office of Refugee Resettlement – Technical Assistance Request for Proposals to Promote Citizenship and Civic Participation

On April 12, 2006, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) issued seven Requests for Proposals for national technical assistance. One priority area identifies technical assistance on citizenship and civic participation for state-administered refugee service providers, ethnic-based mutual assistance associations, voluntary agencies, and other refugee service providers. The purpose is to help refugee service providers: 1) increase services helping refugees become U.S. citizens, 2) advocate on behalf of refugees with federal and state agencies, 3) access national resources on naturalization and citizenship issues, and 4) promote civic participation among refugee communities.

Over the past decade ORR has funded an array of technical assistance providers in English language training, refugee outreach services, vocational training, job placement, and small business development. This federal technical assistance grant is unique for combining naturalization and civic participation activities, including administrative advocacy.

The announcement offers a budget of up to \$200,000 for one year with the potential for renewal, for a total project period of three years. The award was made to Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. in September 2006.

- 1 Department of Homeland Security. "Table 20, Petitions for Naturalizations Filed, Persons Naturalized, and Petitions for Naturalizations Denied: Fiscal Years 1907 to 2005" in *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* (1995).
- 2 Wasem, R.E. Congressional Research Service Report for Congress No. 98-190. "Naturalization Trends, Issues, and Legislation" (June 24, 1998).
- 3 National Immigration Law Center. "Alien Eligibility for Public Benefits" in *1998-99 Annual Handbook* (Los Angeles, CA: NILC, 1998).
- 4 Hing, B.O. "The Emma Lazarus Effect: A Case Study in Philanthropic Revitalization of the Immigrant Rights Community," *Georgetown Immigration Law Journal* (Fall 2000).
- 5 Ibid.