

Increasing Refugee Civic Participation: A Guide for Getting Started

Purpose of this Guide

The purpose of this guide is to assist organizations that represent, serve, and advocate for refugees¹ to think through various approaches to increasing civic participation in refugee communities, and to choose approaches and strategies that will work best for them. It provides an overview of civic participation definitions, offers example of successful approaches, and identifies barriers to civic participation for refugees. Lastly, it offers suggestions for *where to start*, including questions to ask in planning a civic participation effort.

What is Civic Participation?

If you talk to ten different people, you might get ten different definitions of civic participation. Here are a few examples:

- ✓ “Civic engagement describes how an active citizen participates in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for fellow citizens or to help shape the community’s future.” *Blueprint for the Next Chapter, Civic Ventures, 2005*
- ✓ “Civic participation is the process that draws newcomers into collective problem solving to improve conditions in matters affecting their lives.” *Pursuing Democracy’s Promise: Newcomer Civic Participation in America, Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees, 2004*
- ✓ “...To engage immigrants--naturalized and otherwise--in institutions and processes (e.g., schools, neighborhood associations, county meetings) that affect their lives as well as those of long-term residents of the area.” *Lessons Learned about Civic Participation among Immigrants, Association for the Study and Development of Community, 2002*

At the heart of all of these different definitions is a fairly simple concept--*working together to make things better*. People can work together make things better in many ways. For example, some organizations that promote civic participation focus on *political participation*, including voter registration, voter education activities, and get-out-the-vote campaigns. Other organizations involve people in activities that aim to *improve communities*, such as neighborhood watch groups and community clean ups. Still others focus on *organizing community members* to identify the most critical issues affecting their community, develop their own solutions, and work together to carry them out. This approach, known as *community organizing*, is described in greater detail on page 5.

¹Although this toolkit focuses on *refugee* civic participation specifically, it would also be useful for organizations seeking to increase civic participation among the broader immigrant community.

This guide uses the term *civic participation* to refer to the full range of activities through which individuals, groups, and organizations can work together to improve their common, civic life. This can include everything from participating in a community clean up and volunteering at church, temple, or mosque; to testifying at a public hearing and voting.

People can become involved in civic participation as individuals, as well as through *informal groups*, or *formal organizations*, including:

- ✓ Informal associations (such as funeral associations or hometown associations)
- ✓ Formal nonprofit organizations
- ✓ Neighborhood and block associations
- ✓ Religious and spiritual societies or associations
- ✓ Tenant associations
- ✓ Government boards and commissions
- ✓ Business leagues and trade associations (such as Chambers of Commerce)
- ✓ Labor unions
- ✓ Political associations and political parties
- ✓ Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) or other school-related parent groups
- ✓ Official or public boards, commissions, or citizen advisory groups

Helpful Hint ...

What's civic participation? If refugees get involved in any of the following kinds of activities--that's civic participation!

- Organizing or participating in neighborhood meetings, clean ups, or cultural festivals
- Volunteering with a community-based organization, church, temple, or mosque
- Attending city council meetings or giving testimony at public hearings
- Participating in meetings or forums to discuss community issues
- Writing letters to the editor
- Taking part in rallies, marches, or vigils
- Voting

Who Can Be Involved in Civic Participation Activities?

Anyone and everyone--including citizens, legal permanent residents, refugees, and even undocumented residents--can participate in some form of civic participation. The only exception is *voting for elected officials*--that's an activity that only people who are citizens can engage in. In addition, some government agencies require an individual to be a registered voter in order to serve on a particular official board or commission. Lastly, with some forms of civic participation, people who are citizens and can vote may have more influence than people who are not citizens.

What Does Civic Participation in Refugee Communities Look Like?

Here are just few examples of civic participation among refugee communities:

- ✓ **Hmong Youth Get Out the Vote.** A small group of Hmong youth in St. Paul became upset that many of their high school friends of legal voting age weren't voting because

they thought “their vote wouldn’t count” or just didn’t know enough to vote. They organized a debate at the school, invited elected officials and candidates, and created and distributed educational materials. That year, over 80% of the eligible high school seniors registered and voted in the next election.

- ✓ **Vietnamese Parents Organize a Parent-Teacher Association.** A young Vietnamese man observed that his younger brothers and their Vietnamese American friends were graduating from high school with little understanding of their options for financial aid, college, or work. Upset that these students were being allowed to fall through the cracks of the school system, he worked with Vietnamese parents to form a Vietnamese American Parent-Teacher Association (PTA). The Vietnamese PTA approached the principal with immediate requests and provided a network of people who had college experience to help the students with college applications and identifying other options after high school.
- ✓ **Lao Community Organizes for Public Safety.** On March 25, 1999, an accident at a Chevron oil refinery in Richmond, California created dangerous fumes that filled the air. County officials took some steps to inform the local residents, but failed to provide adequate information to its large, limited-English proficient Lao community. A local grassroots organization, the Laotian Organizing Project, brought together the diverse Laotian ethnic groups in the area to build their leadership skills and then organize a campaign--led by community residents--demanding that local and state officials create a multilingual emergency phone-alert system. After several months of postcard drives, phone calls, and meetings, the campaign won the changes it sought to the county’s previously English-only emergency phone alert system.
- ✓ **Diverse Group of Refugees and Immigrants Organize Neighborhood College.** In the suburbs of a major urban area, a diverse group of refugees and immigrants came together to encourage their communities to become more involved in local government. The group worked with the county government to organize a *neighborhood college*. It introduced refugees and immigrants to the county government, including how the various boards and commissions that serve as vehicles for community input and participation work. The purpose was to demystify the process and invite participation.

Why is it Important for Refugees to Be Involved in Civic Participation?

Many refugees are very active in the civic life of their own ethnic community. Informal social, civic, political, and economic associations flourish in many refugee communities. For example, Washington, D.C. is home to a Lao Funeral Association, a Vietnamese Senior Association, an Ethiopian business association, and a Somali soccer league. This kind of civic participation is very important to refugee communities--such associations and the activities they sponsor serve as vehicles for mutual assistance or self help and build a sense of community.

However, refugees also need to participate in *mainstream*² civic structures. The decisions and actions of mainstream groups, organizations, and institutions--from government agencies to tenant associations, business leagues, and neighborhood groups--affect the lives and livelihoods of all Americans, including refugees.

Refugees themselves are best able and most willing to represent their own needs and stand up for their own rights. Refugees need to be at the table, as part both of the decision-making process and the watch-dog advocacy and community groups that seek to influence decision makers. Those who are not yet citizens and cannot vote may find that other forms of civic participation are the best way to make their voices heard. People who do not yet have a vote can at least have a voice!

What Are the Barriers to Civic Participation for Refugees?

Refugee communities face many barriers to civic participation in their new homeland. Some common themes that your organization may need to address to have a successful civic participation effort include:

- ✓ **Fear of involvement.** Many refugees come from countries where it is dangerous to challenge government officials and policies. In fact, many refugees are in the U.S. because of their civic activities in their country of origin. When they come to the U.S., those fears do not automatically disappear. Refugees may still believe that making their voice heard may lead to trouble with authorities or prevent them from being approved for citizenship. One way to address these concerns is to invite a local government official to talk to refugee groups about their right to participate in civic life.
- ✓ **Limited knowledge of "the system."** Another barrier to civic participation--especially participation with mainstream civic structures--is limited knowledge of how those structures work here in the U.S. Refugees may not understand *how* to get involved, or may think they don't have the knowledge and skills necessary to participate. Lastly, refugees may not see how civic participation can benefit their families and communities.
- ✓ **Lack of time.** Many refugees hold more than one job, work long hours, and have family responsibilities. They simply may not have time to dedicate to ongoing civic participation. The experience of organizations that have successfully engaged refugees in civic participation suggests that once refugees see that they *can* get involved and *can* make a difference--that they have both something to contribute and something to gain--they'll make the time.
- ✓ **Limited-English proficiency.** Language barriers are a real issue (you can't meet with a mayor if you can't talk to him or her), but there are always ways around them. All

² We use the term *mainstream* to refer to organizations and institutions that are *not* led for and by members of refugee and immigrant communities. Further, although they may provide services to these communities, these organizations and institutions are often not familiar with the needs and experiences of refugee and immigrant communities.

refugee communities, even recently-arrived ones, have at least some members who are bilingual and can interpret. Part of your job in supporting refugee civic participation is to ensure that language *is not* a barrier and that refugees don't think they can't participate because they can't speak English.

How Can Organizations Encourage and Support Refugee Civic Participation?

Organizations--both ethnic community-based organizations (ECBOs) and mainstream organizations that serve refugees--can promote, encourage, and support refugee civic participation in many ways.

If your organization wants to help, here are some ways to start. Your organization can start with general education about civic participation and why it's important. Or, your organization can take a community organizing approach, starting with an issue that community members are concerned about and working with them to develop an action plan. To get started, your organization could consider the following approaches:

- ✓ **Education.** Begin with community education. Possible strategies to educate the community about civic rights and responsibilities include:
 - **"Know Your Rights" Campaigns:** For example, after 9/11, many ECBOs serving Arab and Muslim refugee communities carried out community-wide "know your rights" educational campaigns involving community meetings and workshops designed to provide information about civil rights.
 - **"How the System Works" Workshops:** Sponsor a series of workshops that focus on how different systems work, how to access those systems, and what the rights and responsibilities of individuals are within each system. Workshops could cover the school system, health care system, and/or housing and tenants' rights.
 - **Integrate Civics into ESL Classes:** If you offer English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) classes, consider integrating a civics education component into the class.

Helpful Hint ...

The New England Literacy Resource Center¹ has developed a toolkit for integrating civic participation into English-as-a-Second Language classes. It is available on their website at: <http://www.nelrc.org>

- ✓ **Leadership Development.** Some organizations create structured leadership development programs that focus on building the skills of a small group of community members and then supporting them to take on leadership roles in the community. Leadership programs often involve a series of training workshops around specific issues and skills (such as running meetings and public speaking). Then participants undertake a community project together, develop and carry out an advocacy campaign, or get involved in local boards, commissions, and decision-making or advisory bodies.

- ✓ **Community Organizing.** Community organizing is a long-term approach in which the people affected by an issue are supported in identifying problems and taking action to achieve solutions. It involves bringing people together around a specific common concern or issue, working with them to identify potential solutions and develop an action plan, then mobilizing other affected members of the community to get involved.
- ✓ **Advocacy.** Some organizations advocate for or on behalf of refugees--it's the organization's Board and staff who speak out to ensure that program funds are not cut or that county agencies provide language access. If your organization engages in any type of advocacy, think about how you can involve refugees directly in your advocacy efforts.
- ✓ **Voter Registration and Education.** If the refugee community has been in the U.S. long enough to be achieving citizenship, then registering people to vote and educating them about the importance of voting is a logical place to start.

Helpful Hint ...

The Partnership for Immigrant Leadership and Action (PILA), based in California, has developed several toolkits for carrying out voter registration and education efforts: *Mobilize the Immigrant Vote: Toolkit for Movement Building Electoral Organizing* and *New Citizens Vote: A Curriculum About Voting and Civic Engagement*. You can order copies through PILA's website at: www.immigrantvoice.org/orderonline.html

These strategies and approaches are inter-related. For example, community organizing always involves leadership development. Know Your Rights Campaigns often engage refugees directly in advocacy.

Think about civic participation as a *continuum* of approaches and activities. Some people may be more comfortable getting involved first in their own neighborhood, rather than at the city-wide level. Some may be more inclined to start with an issue or problem affecting their own refugee community, and may later get involved in issues affecting wider immigrant or low-income communities. Some may feel more comfortable with lower-risk activities--such as volunteering or helping with neighborhood clean-up campaigns--then over time, become ready to speak out on policy issues.

Some Questions to Help Your Organization Get Started

This section presents some questions to answer that can help your organization--whether you are a refugee-led CBO, a voluntary agency that resettles refugees, or another nonprofit organization that serves refugees--identify the best approaches and strategies for promoting refugee civic participation in your community.

As a starting point, you need to understand the refugee community's experience with, definitions of, and attitudes toward civic participation. You'll need to talk to people, listen, and try different approaches to see what works best for your community and your organization.

Questions to ask about the refugee community:

1. How does the refugee community you serve define civic participation?
2. What was their experience with civic participation in their home country?
3. What are their experiences with and attitudes toward civic participation here in the U.S.?
4. What are vehicles for civic participation within their own ethnic community here in the U.S.? (Examples might include: places of worship, professional associations, cultural groups, home town associations, political parties, councils of elders, or clan structures)
5. How are refugees involved with mainstream institutions and organizations?
6. What are some important issues affecting refugees that could serve as a focal point for civic participation? For example:
 - a. Are parents concerned about how their children are doing in school but feel disconnected from the school system?
 - b. Are families being denied access to a particular program or service?
 - c. Are people concerned about a lack of affordable housing? Access to health care? Good jobs?
7. What are the most significant barriers to civic participation for refugees?
8. What assets--skills, experience, or resources--do refugees have that could be applied to and beneficial to civic participation activities?

Questions to ask about your own organization:

1. What is our organization's prior experience with civic participation? What have we done and what have we learned?
2. Do we have staff with knowledge, skills, and/or experience that could be tapped to begin a civic participation effort?
3. Could we begin to incorporate civic participation into work we are currently doing or programs we are already running?
4. Or, do we want to create a new civic participation program? If so, what would it look like? Where would it fit in the organization? How would we fund it?

Questions to ask about the broader community:

1. Can we learn from other organizations in our community? For example, are there other immigrant organizations that have been successful in increasing the civic participation of their community and would be willing to share ideas and lessons learned?
2. Could we collaborate with another organization to develop a civic participation effort?
3. What opportunities exist for refugees to get involved in civic participation? For example, is there a local newcomer or immigrant task force? Local citizen advisory boards that would welcome refugee participation?
4. What existing resources can we tap to support the development of a civic participation effort? For example, is there a school or university that could help with research? Are there people who could provide leadership training?
5. Can we tap national organizations working on issues affecting the refugee community for information and assistance?

Next Steps

Use this document as a starting point. Share it with others in your organization to spark ideas and generate discussion. You may want to consider organizing an *ad hoc planning committee or task force* to develop your organization's refugee civic participation efforts. Invite members of your organization's Board and staff, representatives of the refugee community you serve, and individuals who might be interested in volunteering to serve on the committee. The committee could be charged with exploring the questions listed above, researching other models in your geographic community, talking to refugees, and developing a plan.

Helpful Hint ...

To learn more about the refugee community's interests in and experiences with civic participation, the ad hoc planning committee or task force could hold a *focus group*. A focus group is a carefully planned discussion among a small group of people (typically 8-12) that is facilitated by a trained moderator. The facilitator or moderator uses a pre-determined set of questions to guide the discussion and assure that desired topics and questions are addressed.

Your first steps may vary, depending on your organization's starting point. For example:

- ✓ If your organization has primarily focused on social services, you may want to first spend some time enhancing your own knowledge about civic participation strategies and approaches. Talk to refugees about their experiences with and interests in civic participation, both within their own ethnic community and in the community at large. Learn more about what other organizations have done or are doing to support civic participation and begin to think about how you might adapt those approaches.
- ✓ Perhaps your organization has *some* experience with civic participation--you helped mobilize refugees to attend an important city council meeting about proposed funding cuts to services for low-income families or you've done outreach to encourage people to become citizens and register to vote. Think how about how you might turn these activities into a sustained program or effort. For example, maybe a handful of refugees testified at those hearings and would be interested in a leadership development program. Maybe your efforts to encourage citizenship and voter registration could be expanded into a broader civic education program to include community workshops.
- ✓ Maybe you are already aware of an issue affecting refugees in your community. Perhaps families you serve say that refugee families are being evicted by a developer who is selling an apartment building. This could provide an opportunity for organizing refugees to form a tenant association or take some other collective action.

Above all, think about how you can build on your existing programs and activities, the concerns and interests of refugees, and the skills and experience of individual community members. You may find that the different refugee communities you serve already have structures for civic participation but don't define them as such. Take time to learn about and build on these existing structures for participation. Most of the components for civic participation may already be there, and you need only to provide guidance. Remember that there is no one right way to increase refugee civic participation. It's OK to start small, try different approaches, and learn as you go.