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The Other Side of Immigration: Humane, Sensible & Replicable Responses in a Changing Nation

by Susan Eaton

Xenophobia may still grab the headlines and reliably fuel the scorn of conservative talk radio. It may even this year advance more state legislative proposals that would criminalize immigrants, make life difficult for them and make it easier to deport them.

With immigrant enforcement bills passing first in Arizona in 2010 and in Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina, Utah and Indiana in 2011, human and civil rights organizations have had no trouble identifying who and what to fight against. But amid the nativist noise and the legislative rancor, a comparably quiet movement is giving immigrants and their supporters something concrete to fight *for*.

The relatively newly branded, but long-standing "immigrant integration" initiative provides a powerful framework for articulating and implementing humane, constructive and practical alternatives to marginalizing and excluding immigrants. This impulse plays out in programs, policies and practices in communities all across the country, and in most cases, extends to immigrants who are both legally present and not. On the ground examples have taken hold in a wide range of communities across the country.

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A Better Way to Live

In the city of Dalton in north Georgia, local health officials train women from the growing Latino population as *promotoras*. A common public health practice in Latin-American countries, the *promotoras* bring to more Spanish speakers proper care and information, reducing fear and increasing comfort with and access to the American health care system.

Public education officials in Utah have invested in a growing system of dual immersion schools through which native English speakers and the growing number of native Spanish speakers come together to learn in both languages.

In 2000, the then-mayor of Indianapolis, Bart Peterson, faced minimal opposition in development of a cohesive immigrant integration agenda to welcome and assist immigrants from around the world. The programs in operation include policies and training designed to improve public safety in immigrant communities, increase immigrants' access to loans and banks, and establishment of an Immigrant Welcoming Center that provides coordinated services. City officials credit the immigrant integration initiatives with increases in business investment, new international trade relationships, and a reduction in crime. Other city governments that have taken the lead in welcoming and integrating immigrants through English classes, language access, education, training and coordinated services include Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Littleton, Colorado.

The town of Fremont, Nebraska gained notoriety in the Summer of

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2010 when 57% of voters passed an ordinance that made it unlawful to rent apartments or houses to people who are in the country illegally. It also banned the hiring or "harboring" of people without documents. The local ordinance spurred a spate of what have become costly lawsuits. The ordinance has yet to be implemented because the ACLU won a court injunction against the law and local observers doubt it ever will. In the shadow of this national controversy, immigrants from Latin America, Africa and Southeast Asia began meeting with native-born Americans in towns across Nebraska for structured dialogue and social events designed to reduce stereotypes, enhance social cohesion and educate local reporters about the contributions immigrants make in their communities. It is one of dozens of efforts operated at the grassroots level but coordinated in part by the national organization Welcoming America.

"Ordinarily, we'd all be leading entirely separate lives," says Kristen Ostrom, who helped begin the Fremont branch of the organization, Nebraska is Home, with her acquaintance, Maria Ortiz. "We have each other now and we will be a force...for the future. But more importantly, I think, it's our relationships with each other, this sharing, that gives us power. We found a better way to live."

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"A Two-Way Process" That Fills a Gap

The idea behind immigrant integration is simple and best expressed by The Migration Policy Institute, the national leader in immigrant integration research and policy analysis:

"We define integration broadly as the process by which immigrant newcomers achieve economic mobility and social inclusion in the larger society," MPI researchers write. This definition of integration goes much further than assimilation, MPI explains, and implies a "dynamic, two-way process" that involves changes on the part of not just immigrants but also of members of the receiving community." Since 2009, the Migration Policy Institute has recognized the best immigrant integration practices through its annual *E Pluribus Unum* prizes.

The Migration Policy Institute annually awards* E Pluribus Unum *prizes.

It is important to understand the immigrant integration movement as "proactive" as opposed to the largely "reactive" marches and protests in recent years, which usually responded to proposed measures designed to criminalize immigrants. Those highly publicized events enhanced coalition-building and provided important momentum, but the protest architects had yet to articulate a clear on-the-ground alternative to immigrant exclusion. Immigrant integration fills that gap.

Advocates and practitioners frame immigrant integration as a reflection of a few deeply held American values and common-sense principles:

- One: "Integration" reflects the United States' true, better self as an inclusive, welcoming nation built and enhanced by the contributions of immigrants.
- Two: Integrating immigrants—through education, self-sustaining work and in areas of health and social life—so that they become self-reliant stakeholders who identify with, care about and contribute to their communities helps immigrants and their families but is also in our collective economic and social interest.
- The third argument, advocating for increased opportunities for citizenship, is that a voting, engaged, enfranchised and invested public strengthens democracy and social cohesion at the local, state and national levels.

Setting an Example in Integration Nation

So then, what, exactly would immigrant integration look like in a community, a state legislature or expressed in a federal budget? How would it manifest itself in policy and practice?

In a school where educators are committed to "immigrant integration." counselors and teachers would create a safety net for vulnerable immigrant children and second-generation immigrant children through pre-school programs, after-school programs and the facilitation of multilingualism for all students.

In a community, every adult would have access to English classes and, if necessary, to job-training. People who are still learning English would have access to important information and government services in their native language through translation technology or interpreters. It would be easier to become a naturalized citizen of the United States because community agencies would provide classes that prepare immigrants for their naturalization tests and would also provide assistance with the legal process of becoming a citizen. Local law enforcement practice would encourage immigrants' trust of the police, rather than exacerbate fear of deportation and racial profiling. Immigrants and their families would have a place to go, such as Philadelphia's Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians or the 35-year-old Refugee and Immigrant Cen-

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ter in Salt Lake City, Utah, where new Americans can ask questions, get connected to services and become oriented to the community.

In the economic sphere, credentialing systems would allow immigrants and the larger society to benefit from the skills many immigrants arrive with. Safe working conditions and wage standards and freedom to organize would be in place for all workers. Healthcare institutions would be welcoming and safe, and develop culturally relevant practices for reaching out to immigrant communities. Credit unions, like those in Durham, North Carolina and Albuquerque, New Mexico, would provide safe places for immigrants, both legally present and not, to save money and to benefit from fair lending practices.

On the state level, more elected leaders, such as Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick and Washington Gov. Christine Gregoire, would encourage development of immigration integration agendas and use the "bully pulpit" to express support for immigrant communities, possibly through public welcoming campaigns. Perhaps a state office of "Immigrant Services," of the sort that operates in Illinois, would oversee and advance integration policies and funding and be a focal point for immigrants and their supporters to voice concerns and become engaged with civic life.

On the federal level, legislation would provide a path to citizenship for now undocumented immigrants and for legal permanent residents. The DREAM Act would allow young people who came with their parents to the U.S. without required documents to earn legal residency.

One challenge in development of a broad integration strategy is the inherently local, piecemeal nature of immigrant integration. The United States, unlike some countries that have large shares of immigrants—Israel or Canada, for example—has never engaged in an "immigrant integration" effort. As a result, federal policies and programs related to integration are, as Michael Fix of the Migration Policy Institute characterizes them: "ad hoc, underfunded and skeletal."

However, some state governments have pursued concerted, coherent integration efforts. Five states—Illinois, Washington, Massachusetts, Maryland and New Jersey—have taken the lead in crafting coherent integration agendas. In each, Democratic governors signed executive orders establishing an advisory council or task force on immigrant integration or "incorporation." The plans that resulted from these executive orders are in varying stages of implementation. In every state, efforts have been hampered by budget constraints and in some cases by leadership changes. Even so, these efforts are significant because they represent the first establishment of "immigrant integration" as an affirmative agenda. In so doing, they provide templates for other states.

Integrating immigrants is in our collective economic and social interest.

"We are and we will continue to be a nation that depends and thrives on the contributions of immigrants and refugees," Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick said at a press conference where he expressed full support for the "New Americans Agenda" developed by a diverse committee of advocates, practitioners and government officials. "Our nation and our economy have been at their best when we welcome the ideas and the commitment of newcomers and when we help them integrate into our language and into our society."

Why Now? The Immigrant Integration Imperative

Experts offer four reasons why the traditional "hands off" approach to immigrant integration is no longer sensible.

First and most obviously is the substantial share composed of the immigrant population and their children. About 12% of the nation's population —or about 36.7 million people—are foreign-born, according to the U.S. Census. Another 33 million—or 11% of the population—are children of at least one foreign-born parent. Thus, 1 in 5 people in the United States is either a first- or second-generation immigrant. The foreign-born population is growing at a far faster rate than the native-born population. (From 2000-2008, the immigrant population increased by 22%, while the native-born population increased by just 6.3%.)

Second, over the last 20 years, immigrants have begun settling in new areas of the country (the South in particular) and in new types of communities, including smaller cities, rural areas and suburbs. These places tend not to be well-equipped to incorporate immigrants and have little experience with immigrants from Latin America, whose experiences and cultures differ from earlier European immigrants.

Third, historians explain that during previous major migration waves, integration was achieved by what the Migration Policy Institute terms "mediating" institutions, which no longer have a strong a presence in our society. This included large manufacturing companies, unions that welcomed immigrants into their ranks, and political party "machines" that vied for membership. Now, if anyone assists immigrants, it is usually small and underfunded community-based organizations, churches and schools. More funding would certainly increase these organizations' effectiveness. However, experts also stress that such organizations do not have capacity or skills to accomplish the enormous, multi-faceted task of immigrant integration without coordination and guidance at other levels.

Finally, the "status" of immigrants has changed, with a larger share of the whole "undocumented" or "unauthorized" immigrants, who are vulnerable to deportation and exploita-

tion and thus forced into a second-class membership. Undocumented "status" alone prevents people from integrating as full members of a community, except, of course, through their labor. This has negative implications not only for the undocumented but for growing numbers of children. The Pew Hispanic Center finds that of the 10.2 million undocumented immigrants in the United States, nearly half are parents of minor children. A parent's vulnerability and disenfranchisement makes these U.S. citizen children highly vulnerable, too, for a host of reasons. In the worst case, separation from a deported parent obviously negatively affects child well-being in numerous ways, as does persistent anxiety about the possibility of that separation.

Surveying immigrant integration initiatives across a country as vast and varied as ours, it becomes clear that people come to support such policies and programs and practices for a variety of reasons. Some of these reasons may be moral, even spiritual, and others grow from common-sense economics. And though commonly it is progressive organizations that advance an immigrant integration agenda, its foot-soldiers in local communities are typically non-ideological people who have traditionally kept low profiles. They often include business leaders, directors of English as a Second Language centers, mayors, practical-minded bureaucrats, elected leaders in government and heads of non-profits. Perhaps this is why the movement —or, more accurately, the practice of immigrant integration—manages to find support from both liberal and conservative thinkers and academics. Immigrant integration advocates and practitioners come from a wide variety of fields and political persuasions but speak in unison about shared fate. They stick to a basic message: Economic prosperity and the integrity of our democracy depends upon immigrants finding their own success and in their committing to their communities and to the United States over the long term. ❑

Selected Resources

Immigrant Welcome Center – Indianapolis
http://www.immigrantwelcomecenter.org/

The Migration Policy Institute – Immigrant Integration
www.migrationpolicy.org

The National League of Cities
http://www.nlc.org/find-city-solutions/research-innovation/immigrant-integration

National Network for Immigrant & Refugee Rights
Contact PRRAC Bd member Cathi Tactaquin, ctactaquin@nnirr.org

National Partnership for New Americans & National Immigrant Integration Conference
http://www.integrationconference.org/new-americans-partnership/

New Americans Agenda – Massachusetts
http://www.miracoalition.org/en/policy/integration/naa

The Opportunity Agenda – "Framing the Immigration Debate"
http://opportunityagenda.org/framing_immigration_debateIll

Welcoming America
www.welcomingamerica.org

Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians
http://www.welcomingcenter.org/

Further Reading

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A. Singer, S. Hardwick & C. Brettell, eds., *Twenty-First-Century Gateways: Immigrant Incorporation in Suburban America* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2008).

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