

Organizing an Iowa Community Voices Program

A Community Development Program For New Immigrants



What is the Iowa Community Voices Program?

The *Iowa Community Voices* program is a series of educational meetings designed to enhance the civic understanding and leadership skills of minorities and newly arrived immigrants to Iowa. The new residents plan the program's content. The program is conducted in the language of the participants. The program's content typically includes a combination of learning skills about living in the new community, visiting with community leaders about local issues, and addressing issues important to the new residents.

Program Objectives:

1. To introduce the leadership of the established community to the new immigrant residents and open a two-way dialog.
2. To give new minority residents the knowledge and confidence to actively

participate in community, school, and government activities.

3. To help new minority residents make their voices heard in the community, school, and local government.
4. To help participants develop a better understanding of leadership principles.
5. To help participants connect with other new residents and explore the feasibility of joining together in new civic and/or neighborhood organizations.

How it Works

- A local planning committee is organized to develop the agenda, arrange speakers and interpreters, and recruit the participants.
- The program is typically held on 6 to 10 consecutive Saturdays, Sundays, or a specific weekday evening. Each program lasts about two hours.

Steps in Organizing an Iowa Community Voices Program

1. **Meet with local service providers** and local officials to determine if there is sufficient interest and support in pursuing the Iowa Community Voices program.

Ask them if they see opportunities, issues or problems developing as new immigrants arrive in the community.

- Health Department
- Churches
- Mayor and city officials
- Major employers of immigrants
- Social service agencies
- School officials
- Extension Service
- Professionals of minority background

2. **Talk with new immigrant residents** to see if they are interested in becoming involved in the program.

- It is very important to slowly develop a personal relationship with new immigrant residents before saying, “We are here to help you.”
- One of the best places to meet with new immigrants is after a religious service. For example, many churches have a Spanish-language service. Bring some cookies and juice and meet with the churchgoers after the church service. Introduce yourself and informally visit with everyone. Develop a

relationship. Other good places to informally talk with new immigrant residents are: minority or immigrant-operated retail stores, community centers, ethnic festivals or celebrations, and sporting events. (Soccer matches are particularly appropriate.)

- After you have established an informal relationship and know several people by name, invite them to attend a meeting to discuss issues affecting their families in their new community. Ask them what problems they are having living in their new community. What would make life easier for them?

3. If you are getting a positive response to your inquiries to new immigrant residents, **form a planning committee**. Ask for volunteers to plan an educational program around the issues they have identified. The planning committee should be composed primarily of people from your target audience, not service providers and members of the established community. It should consist of six to eight members. (Rule of thumb: 75 percent of the planning committee members should speak the language of the target audience.) Choose a time and place to meet that is convenient and “comfortable” for all of the planning committee members. Avoid meeting in government buildings. For many new residents, anything that remotely resembles “government” is suspect.

4. Please refer to Iowa State University Extension bulletin PM 1951b, *Iowa Community Voices Planning Worksheets* for details on how to plan the overall program.

Keys to Success

- Provide transportation when possible.
- Provide childcare.
- Have something to eat. Food breaks down barriers and gets people to talk.
- Remember that the Iowa Community Voices program is a two-way street. The new residents learn and the established community learns.
- Don't have too many speakers. You need plenty of time for two-way dialog. Don't lecture at the participants.
- All promotional materials and session materials must be in the language of the participants.
- Don't force people to "sign-up" for the program. Many people will be reluctant to provide personal information like their address or phone number. Make sure no one is put on the spot during any of the sessions about her/his migration status in this country. Ask the presenters, especially law enforcement officials, to be sensitive about asking for personal information or inquiring about immigration status. Assure participants that their confidentiality will be preserved.
- Form a "calling committee" to make phone calls to remind participants of the meetings. This will keep attendance high.
- Here in the U.S. we are accustomed to starting a meeting "on time." This is not the custom in many other countries and cultures. Meetings typically begin (and

end) 30 minutes "late," because that is when people will arrive. There is a saying, "The meeting starts when everyone gets there and ends when everyone leaves." Be sure to allow for a half-hour of "slippage."

Recruiting Participants

- A personal invitation works best. Offer to provide transportation.
- Put posters in businesses that are frequented by new residents: ethnic food stores, K-Mart, etc. (The posters should be in the immigrants' language.)
- Send flyers home with school children.
- Get local employers to encourage their new immigrant employees to attend. Distribute flyers and put posters in the work area.
- Get church leaders involved in the recruitment effort. Ask the Priest at the Catholic Church or the pastor at a Protestant church frequented by immigrants to announce the program during the service. Ask to include a program flyer in the Church bulletin.
- Attend sporting events where a large number of new immigrants congregate. Hand out promotional flyers.

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