



## *Integration Workshop*

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Preliminary Draft  
**Executive Summary**  
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## Summary: Building the New American Community Initiative

### Background

The 1990s was an extraordinary decade in terms of the number, origins and cultural diversity of migrants who arrived in the United States. Consequently, immigration's influence on the social, economic and political institutions of the nation has continued to grow, and there is every indication that refugees and immigrants will continue to be a major force for change in the years to come. The influence of newcomers and their children on local communities, and in turn the ways in which communities affect their integration trajectories, lies at the heart of many social and economic changes in American society.

The foreign born today comprise approximately 11.5 percent of the American population, and most settle in long-established gateway cities like New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston, Miami and Houston. During the 1990s, however, a much greater number of newcomers settled in "non-traditional" states and cities where relatively few migrants have settled since World War II. The three cities at the core of the "Building the New American Community Initiative" – Portland (OR), Nashville (TN) and Lowell (MA) – are illustrative of places that since the 1980s have attracted record numbers of refugees and immigrants, and today are working to build communities that are both inclusive and economically, socially and culturally dynamic.

### Building the New American Community Initiative

The Building the New American Community (BNAC) Initiative aims to foster the successful integration of refugees and immigrants at the community level. In the absence of a national integration policy, the Initiative is also an experiment in how governments and civil society can co-operate to achieve positive integration outcomes. Coalitions to develop and experiment with integration strategies have been formed in Lowell, Nashville and Portland, and are assisted by a national team of policy analysts, advocates and researchers from the National Conference of State Legislatures, the National Immigration Forum, the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, The Urban Institute, and the Migration Policy Institute.

This three-year initiative, funded primarily by the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, focuses on building relationships among organizations and institutions affiliated with the refugee/immigrant and receiving communities in order to capitalize on existing resources and opportunities, as well as to foster *two-way* integration. As such, *integration* is a process that involves an entire community, not just its newest members. It is also a long-term one built on daily two-way interactions between refugees/immigrants and receiving communities – in workplaces, schools, neighborhoods, places of worship, shopping malls etc. It also depends on institutions and organizations putting in place the enabling conditions that allow newcomers to achieve economic self-sufficiency and meaningful civic participation.

Four principles underlie the BNAC Initiative's concept of successful integration:

1. New Americans should be involved significantly in decision-making processes;
2. Integration is a two-way process that implicates and benefits both new Americans and receiving community members;
3. Coalitions are among the vehicles that can foster effective and meaningful collaborations in order to tackle the numerous challenges and opportunities associated with socio-economic, cultural and demographic change. These involve public-private partnerships that reach across levels of government and include a

broad array of non-governmental organizations, as well as institutions and individuals from many different segments of society; and

4. Resources should be devoted to integration-focused interventions, as well as coalition building and training opportunities, which lead to systemic change.

The Lowell, Nashville and Portland demonstration sites have developed multiple-issue integration agendas, and each coalition has been compelled as a consequence to develop a diverse membership from the outset. This means that while coalitions have a core of refugee and immigrant serving organizations (mutual assistance associations (MAAs), community-based organizations, resettlement agencies), they also include representatives of various government departments and agencies (state, county, and city), business associations, faith-based organizations, and neighborhood and social service providers. Over time, as the integration agendas have developed and activities initiated, other refugee, immigrant, and receiving community groups have joined the coalitions and even broader representation and involvement has been achieved.

#### Action Agendas: The Local Qualities of Integration

Each demonstration site over time has developed its own particular set of issues and projects that guide coalition activities.

- Portland has concentrated on building the internal capacity and structures of the African and Slavic communities, as well as services for school-aged youth and their families, civic engagement with municipal and state agencies and public officials, neighborhood socio-economic development, and cross-cultural communication.
- From the outset the Chamber of Commerce has been an important member of the Nashville Coalition, and consequently activities in Nashville have had a workforce and business development orientation, in addition to family and refugee community strengthening activities.
- In Lowell considerable attention has been given to civic engagement activities, namely encouraging naturalized citizens to vote in municipal, state and federal elections and organizing candidate forums. The One Lowell Coalition also has developed a strong relationship with the public school system to initiate a program that involves foreign-born parents in school activities and their children's experiences in the school system.

The sites do share a number of issues in common, such as civic engagement programs and a desire to raise awareness among local and state legislators of the contributions made by newcomers to social, economic and political life in each community. But the number of issues particular to each site also highlights the local qualities of integration – that it is a process which is highly responsive to local economic conditions and opportunities, as well as contingent upon long-established “ways of doing things” that structure the everyday qualities of social, political and cultural participation. These entrenched behaviors frequently are resistant to change and may pose the greatest challenges to achieving newcomer inclusion.

#### Main Findings and Policy Implications

**Coalitions as Vectors for Integration:** Integration occurs over a long timeframe and it has been necessary for the coalitions to refine, if not redefine, their missions and structures. BNAC local demonstration site partners were acutely aware of changing national and community priorities in the wake of 9/11 and spent substantial time revisiting their core mission.

Engaging in integration work through a coalition structure also means constantly discovering new institutions, organizations, individuals and practices that influence the experiences of newcomers. In spite of the challenges that the BNAC sites have encountered in developing their base membership, each site has incorporated diverse groups, including representatives of the refugee, immigrant, and receiving communities, and has striven to develop ways that encourage the participation of new members.

Sound management is an important element of a successful integration coalition. In the three sites, the BNAC coalitions have grappled with finding the right management structure – questioning whether their manager should function as a leader or a facilitator or if the management position should be part-time or full-time. Given the range of issues and the challenge of moving many of them forward simultaneously, a full-time, fully funded manager and reasonable management infrastructure are needed to support the activities of a coalition. For coalitions to work well, leaders also must encourage the sharing of authority, recognition and responsibility among all coalition members.

***Institutions and Integration:*** Integration is often gauged by individual socio-economic status or language competency measures, but organizations and institutions often set the policy and practice context in which integration occurs. The BNAC Initiative facilitates and/or enhances the quality of relations between refugee and receiving community organizations. By working directly with organizations and institutions as diverse as refugee MAAs, city planning departments and business associations, coalitions have seen long-established practices begin to change so as to respond better to the needs of newcomers, and develop their potential as societal members. Integration requires that the laws, rules, practices and norms of organizations and official institutions, which may have been formulated decades before significant new refugee/immigrant settlement occurred in a city, not impede two-way integration. Building knowledge and relationships between organizations, and enabling refugee and immigrant leaders to participate in this building process, has been a core focus of BNAC activity that enables newcomers and long-established residents to capitalize on emerging relationships.

***Refugee and Immigrant Leadership:*** Leadership Skills Development has been one of the main activities of the BNAC Coalitions at all three sites from the inception of the Initiative. To ensure that newcomers have the confidence and the skills they require to assert and articulate their respective communities' needs, assets, and concerns successfully, each coalition has put significant energy into leadership skills building. The goal has been to produce effective leaders by providing them with training on organization and membership development, as well as on such critical integration issues as access to jobs and social services, promotion of civic engagement, knowledge of refugee/ immigrant rights and responsibilities, access to English language training, and youth development and education. The coalitions have sought to build strong and stable newcomer organizations as a true reflection of effective refugee/immigrant leadership development.

***Civic Engagement:*** One of the major goals of the BNAC Initiative has been to educate policymakers about newcomer communities and their integration experiences in local places, as well as to bring refugee and immigrant voices to the table on a range of policy issues. This has been one of the most successful aspects of the Initiative, with newcomers not only learning about the American electoral system and the importance of voting, but also participating as partners with public agencies in the coalitions. In practical terms, refugee and immigrant organizations have played a direct role in crafting policies and programs that directly influence their communities *as well as* the receiving community. In turn, through trainings and direct interactions, newcomers have developed greater confidence and security in communicating with public officials. This also has given many policymakers a

better understanding of newcomer communities, the particular challenges faced by refugees/immigrants and their children as they become Americans, and how public policies could facilitate (or impede) productive integration.

***Persistent Integration Challenges:*** There are many integration issues that are rooted in the particular economic, social and political circumstances of cities. However, the newcomer communities in every BNAC site identified two sets of issues as fundamental to their integration and the social mobility of their children: i) employment status in relation to credential and education attainment recognition, language acquisition and skills upgrading, and ii) youth development opportunities especially in the educational system. The inability to utilize training acquired abroad because of reluctance on the part of many receiving community institutions, licensing boards and employers to recognize foreign credentials has been repeatedly identified as a major barrier to integration.

Likewise, the quality and content of education and opportunities for youth to develop their skills have been identified as major integration problems that merit community-wide attention. Included under the youth development umbrella are issues pertaining to English-language training, linguistic limitations that impeded children's ability to develop their skills in subjects such as mathematics and science, an absence of culturally appropriate after-school and recreation programs for girls and boys, and language and cross-cultural communication difficulties encountered by parents when interacting with school systems and teachers.

Employment and youth development integration challenges are generic to each site, but they are also ideal examples of issues that are tailor-made for coalition action. In each site the coalitions have taken steps to address pieces of these large and complex issues. By facilitating interactions between newcomer and receiving community organizations, Nashville has been able to make substantial steps toward unraveling the complexities of the accreditation process for foreign-trained engineers, and Lowell has fostered a program that encourages refugee parents to become involved in the school system. Similarly, refugee/immigrant groups have played a significant role in shaping Multnomah County's (Portland) School-Aged Policy Framework and the ways in which services will be provided to youth and their families.

***Policy Responses for Integration:*** The BNAC Initiative highlights the range of social and economic conditions that influence integration opportunities across the country. The history of newcomer settlement in the BNAC sites has tended to be episodic rather than continuous and, relative to large gateway cities, they tend to have less fully developed institutional relationships and networks that facilitate integration. Other cities are in a much stronger position due to a long history of providing settlement services, while still others have much more limited capacity and expertise. If the federal government is to embark on a broad integration program, one of the most salient lessons to be drawn from the BNAC experiment is how the "uneven geography" of refugee and immigrant settlement, as well as the availability and quality of resources within each city, requires innovation in integration policy development and delivery. Engaging the resources of several levels of government and their agencies, businesses, private organizations and a broad spectrum of community-based partners is an intensive and demanding way to build social policy, but it is one that will be tied to local conditions and needs. It is also one that by its very nature demands a tolerance for variation in policy objectives, program development and delivery across the nation. Such a collaborative, if differentiated, policy approach is absolutely essential in this period of high and highly diverse immigration.