



Holistic, Adaptable, and Collaborative: Recommendations for Immigrant Integration Strategies

In an increasingly mobile and interconnected world, communities and nations that successfully integrate immigrants and make good use of the talents, diversity and dynamism they offer will grow stronger economically, experience a more robust civil society, and develop the resilience needed to succeed in an era of rapid change. Many of the factors that contribute to successful integration are grounded in community attitudes, broad economic structures, and individual acts of welcome. The United States is fortunate that many elements of a positive immigrant integration strategy are already in place in our society, compared to other nations where economic opportunities are closed off, anti-immigrant hostility is rampant, and immigrant communities are isolated.

Immigrant integration could be even more successful, and the federal government can and should build on existing initiatives – governmental and non-governmental – to position our nation to take full advantage of the benefits of immigration for both immigrants themselves and receiving communities. The Presidential Memorandum of November 21, 2014, “Creating Welcoming Communities and Fully Integrating Immigrants and Refugees”, which created the White House Task Force on New Americans, embraces this commitment and establishes an important opportunity to strengthen our nation.

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service is deeply appreciative of this opportunity to provide input into this White House Task Force. LIRS has been serving refugees and immigrants in the United States for over 75 years. Our refugee resettlement network provides comprehensive initial support and orientation to arriving refugees, and ongoing services that promote civic, economic, and linguistic integration. There are many lessons to be drawn from refugee resettlement – a unique public-private partnership designed to successfully integrate newcomers into US communities. In the past year, LIRS resettled over 11,000 refugees through affiliated programs in 45 communities. Our organization also serves unaccompanied children and youth from Central America, as well as their US-based families. In 2014 we helped over 19,000 families with the reunification process, provided transitional care to 1,200 children and youth, and served several hundred youth in foster care programs. LIRS also supported local programs serving survivors of torture in the immigration detention system (our partners identified 389 survivors out of 5,564 individuals who received legal orientation and screening) and people released from immigration detention. Our programs emphasize volunteerism and community engagement, as well as leadership from within refugee and migrant communities.

Drawing on this long history of service to migrants and refugees, and our extensive engagement in helping to create and sustain welcoming communities, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service offers the following recommendations to enhance immigrant integration in the United States. Our emphasis in this submission is on civic integration, and particularly on the critical importance of strong social connections, effective collaboration, and the role of the nonprofit sector. We also stress the urgent need to focus on the integration of youth. We discuss the role of enforcement practices on the integration of immigrant communities and offer several recommendations in relation to enforcement. And finally, we address a few particular areas of human service that make a significant difference in the integration process.

No Single Path to Integration

It is important to recognize that the path and pace to integration is unique for every individual, depending on a wide range of factors including age, national origin, race, culture, religion, legal status, gender, sexual orientation, educational level, employment skills and health status. There is no “one-size-fits-all” integration program that will work for every individual, and there is no universally shared deadline for achieving integration. A young immigrant software engineer may achieve full civic, economic and linguistic integration rapidly, while a pre-literate Congolese refugee woman who has suffered sexual violence will have a longer territory to traverse, and will require a different set of supports along the way.

Similarly, the landscape of our communities is different, affecting the integration strategies that will be most appropriate. A small town in Nebraska that is dominated by the meat-packing industry has assets and challenges that are quite distinct from the South Side of Tucson, Arizona. Political climate, economic opportunities, availability of services, and size and complexity of the community – all of these create unique imperatives and opportunities that affect the particular approach to integration that will be most successful.

Recommendations:

1. The federal integration strategy should emphasize broad guiding principles, supported by an overarching framework of outcomes measures to which the federal departments are held accountable, rather than any single methodological approach to integration, and should be designed to accommodate a diversity of individual and community pathways.
2. Integration programming should be tailored to individual needs. People with risks and vulnerabilities require additional support and assistance. Refugees, survivors of torture, people who have been trafficked, unaccompanied children, seniors and other individuals or populations that have experienced trauma or who have physical or mental barriers fall into this category. It is essential to maintain and elevate specialized federal programs to focus on people who need a greater amount of support to stabilize and integrate. Appropriations for services should also reflect differing levels of need.
3. Refugees who arrive with a history of trauma or other extreme needs should receive extended case management services. A significant expansion of the case management services funded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement is required for vulnerable populations.
4. It is important to rigorously evaluate what has worked for particular communities or for certain populations and to disseminate this learning; however, communities and service providers should be encouraged to adapt these successful plans and models for their own settings and should not have uniform agendas imposed upon them. This approach is consistent with our recommendations to uphold a strong focus on evaluation outcomes, and a flexible approach to methodologies.
5. Because individual and community circumstances vary, it is essential to catalyze and encourage ongoing creativity and innovation in the integration field.

A Holistic Approach Requires Strong Collaboration

Full and successful integration is the result of the interplay between the civic, economic and linguistic aspects of the process, where the different aspects work effectively together and are mutually reinforcing. Beyond these core pillars, the process of integration is also profoundly affected by the breadth and quality of social connections, by access to healthcare, by access to justice, by the integrity and unity of the family, by meaningful opportunities for self-expression and personal development, and by many other factors that shape our complex social worlds. In years of experience working in communities across the United States, LIRS has found that integration is inhibited when individuals are marginalized in any one of these aspects, and advanced most effectively when service providers, community groups, public officials and public and private institutions intentionally collaborate to advance a coordinated and holistic approach to integration. It is crucially important that the actors engaged in the integration process are aware of the manner in which the different aspects interact, and that coordination between helping organizations and institutions reflect the range of factors contributing to integration.

Recommendations:

1. A federal strategy should place a strong priority on multi-sector collaborations, drawing together government, the non-profit and philanthropic sectors, and business. The role of non-profit organizations in maintaining an emphasis on a holistic approach to integration is particularly important in such collaborations.
2. It is important to maintain a coordinated national approach to integration. The White House should appoint a national integration coordinator with the authority and responsibility to call together the wide range of federal departments playing a role in immigrant and refugee integration on a regular basis. Linkages between federal departments should be fostered where a coordinated approach will advance integration - such as the new partnership between the HHS Office of Refugee Resettlement and the Corporation for National and Community Service. Improving national coordination between the three federal departments engaged in the refugee resettlement program should be an immediate priority.
3. There are numerous examples of strong local collaborations that bridge sectors, institutions and local government departments. Federal grant support directed toward existing or emerging collaborations would help communities develop strategies and plans best suited to their local conditions.
4. Programs that help to effectively bridge different sectors should receive federal support and should be upheld as models. LIRS manages a national refugee employment technical assistance program called Higher, partially funded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement, which connects nonprofits and government agencies serving refugees with businesses and corporations to promote employment, self-sufficiency and economic integration. Federally-funded technical assistance programs like Higher should be made available to the wider immigrant community. Welcoming America has been another valuable bridge institution, with a particular focus on the multiple intersecting actors in receiving communities and their role in integration.

5. Programs that focus on receiving communities are vital for successful integration. The federal government should support such efforts across all departments, encouraging integration programs to incorporate outreach, education and volunteerism. The work of organizations that expand community engagement should be promoted and supported, and evaluation measures should look at receiving communities as well as newcomers.
6. Many local government officials have created special offices or task forces to advance the integration of new Americans. Mayors like Stephanie Rawlings-Blake of Baltimore, for example, have been vocal supporters of the President's Executive Action. The federal government should create a national recognition program to highlight the work and achievements of leaders and municipalities whose actions promote immigrant integration.
7. The federal government should provide incentives to businesses that emphasize new American integration in their workplaces. Businesses that offer English as a Second Language classes, citizenship workshops, or cultural orientation to the workplace are providing a vital service. One example of such a program under development in our LIRS network is an innovative partnership between Lutheran Family Services of Nebraska, Cargill, Inc., and the United Food and Commercial Workers union.

Nonprofit Organizations

Integration is a dynamic process involving both receiving communities and arriving newcomers. Nonprofit organizations play an essential role in civic integration by serving as a bridge at the human level of face-to-face interaction. They foster community investment in integration by educating and engaging volunteers, donors, mentors and advocates whose constructive role is essential for creating a climate of welcome.

Recommendations:

1. Include nonprofit organizations in all stages of the federal strategy: development, implementation, and ongoing coordination. Critical nonprofits to engage are those grounded in immigrant and refugee communities, as well as those working closely to expand a climate of welcome in receiving communities. Nonprofit organizations are a particularly important partner for engaging receiving communities. Many nonprofits have been working for decades in the field of immigrant and refugee integration, and their experiences and expertise are valuable for this next stage in our nation's development – they should be included as vital partners in the ongoing development and implementation of an integration strategy.
2. In the refugee resettlement program, the Office of Refugee Resettlement-funded Matching Grant program has been a particularly effective vehicle for leveraging a match of community resources (a 50% match of donations and volunteer hours for every federal dollar) in assisting newly-arrived refugees on the first steps toward integration. The Matching Grant program helps refugee households toward economic self-sufficiency through intensive case management and employment services. Nationwide, close to 30,000 refugees are enrolled in this program annually, with 69 % achieving self-sufficiency within six months. This program should be strengthened by broadening the outcomes to include civic and linguistic integration, and considered as a model for all immigrants.

Evaluation and Better Data

New policies and practices will never be at their most effective without rigorous and systematic evaluation of the outcomes they produce. LIRS recommends the establishment of federally-funded evaluation systems that gather and assess meaningful data so that our nation's evolving national integration framework directs resources and energy toward the greatest impact.

Absent such a significant national investment to date, a number of modestly-funded efforts have already yielded intriguing insights. For example, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service recently undertook two initiatives that provide a helpful window into the integration process. The first of these was a series of Community Conversations that brought together members of the receiving community as well as newer members. About 1,000 individuals from across the country participated. Through this process, we learned that the turning point in successful integration for migrants and refugees is when they feel they are able to contribute their talents, ideas and experiences to the community. It is when they stop being recipients of service or invisible laborers, and become a positive force in the lives of their communities. We also learned through that process of the importance of a holistic approach to integration, which has informed these recommendations.

The second initiative we carried out was a mail survey of recently-arrived refugees, inquiring about their social connections in the community. This survey was sent to about 25,000 refugees who were resettled in the United States by LIRS, and more than ten percent of them responded – an astonishingly high rate of return for a survey of this type. One of the things that we learned is that a majority of respondents help others in their community once a month or more often, demonstrating fundamental behaviors of civic engagement. Both initiatives – Community Conversations and our refugee survey - have been useful for informing our integration efforts.

Recommendations:

1. Invest federal resources in evaluation.
2. Learn from work and research that has already been carried out both here in the United States and in other countries. Canada, Australia and New Zealand have all done interesting work in this area, defining outcomes and identifying indicators of successful integration. The Migration Policy Institute and Cities of Migration have collected many examples of promising practices in integration and have conducted useful research.
3. Develop holistic indicators of integration outcomes with input from a wide range of stakeholders, including immigrants, refugees and nonprofit organizations, and building on their best evaluation practices.
4. Collect both quantitative and qualitative data, and conduct both summative and formative evaluation. It is critical – especially given the cultural issues at stake – that the lived experiences of members of receiving communities and new Americans are voiced and inform our approach to integration through formative evaluation processes. It is also critical to develop an evidence-based and data-driven framework to measure integration outcomes.
5. Conduct longitudinal studies. Integration is not a short-term process – under many definitions it extends across generations. It may be useful to gain insight from people who can look backward at the integration process from today's vantage point, offering insight into the programs of the past, but rigorous longitudinal evaluation should be established now for current programs.

Focus on Youth

Any national integration strategy must include a special focus on youth. Adolescents and young adults are in a developmental stage of identity formation, making choices that will determine the future course of their lives. Many immigrant youth find themselves torn between cultures and social worlds, trying to reconcile different expectations and opportunities, but without a feeling of rootedness anywhere. When the alienation of immigrant and refugee youth is profound, their disaffection can lead them to join gangs or sign up for extremist causes, with devastating consequences for them, for our communities, and for troubled regions around the world. Among the factors at play in the recent mass migration of children from Central America was the internationalization of gangs formed by the marginalized generation of young asylum-seekers who preceded them by 30 years.

Young people are also a great and typically underutilized asset in the integration process. Their extraordinary capacity to serve as a linguistic and cultural bridge across generations is essential within many family structures, although it can also be a burdensome responsibility. Young people at the beginning of their working lives have the opportunity to develop the skills our economy needs, without the struggle many of their elders face with re-credentialing or entering into new and unfamiliar forms of labor. Their curiosity, flexibility and orientation toward the future are qualities needed by communities adapting to our interconnected world.

Recommendations:

1. Support programs that provide leadership and engagement opportunities for immigrant and refugee youth. The newly-launched RefugeeCorps partnership between the Office of Refugee Resettlement and Americorps is a promising federal model. The federal government should also support and promote successful community-based organizations such as Homies Unidos, which works in the Salvadoran community to confront gangs and prevent violence, and Soccer Without Borders. Programs that engage youth as mentors to other youth have been very effective in LIRS programs serving unaccompanied minors.
2. Until 2013, the Office of Refugee Resettlement funded a national clearinghouse on refugee youth issues, called BRYCS (Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services), hosted by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. LIRS was an initial co-founder of this project. This clearinghouse is an invaluable resource for the wide array of organizations, institutions and branches of government that come into contact with refugee youth or their parents. The federal government should promote and provide funding for clearinghouses of this nature that address the special concerns of youth and their families.
3. Schools across the country are operating effective and innovative programs that help immigrant and refugee youth quickly acquire the English language, as well as academic and social/cultural skills. Among the many successful models are schools in Portland, Hillsborough County in Florida, Seattle and Denver. These programs are aided immensely by the school impact grants provided by the Office of Refugee Resettlement. This type of grant-making, combined with an elevation of the most promising practices, should be expanded as part of our national integration strategy.

4. The Office of Refugee Resettlement serves thousands of unaccompanied children who have been apprehended at our borders or in the interior. Insufficient funding has caused some troubling shortcuts. The deep child welfare expertise of the Administration for Children and Families should be brought to bear in a more comprehensive way in a review and overhaul of practices such as the use of large congregate care facilities and family/sponsor reunification processes that lack adequate safeguards against abuse and trafficking, and the Administration should vigorously press for increased funding.
5. One of the most essential services needed by unaccompanied immigrant children who have been released to the care of relatives and sponsors is post-release follow-up. In our experience, there is a high-risk period at about six months following release when family breakdowns become more prevalent, with the occurrence of runaways and other poor outcomes. A relatively modest investment in follow-up services would provide a big boost to successful integration.

Cultural Orientation

One of the core activities of the refugee resettlement program is the provision of cultural orientation. At Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, we have extended cultural orientation services beyond the 11,000 refugees resettled by our network to other foreign-born populations entering our communities. For any newcomer, appropriate cultural orientation accelerates the process of achieving self-sufficiency and participating effectively in community life. A great deal of cultural orientation occurs informally, through the dissemination of advice from longer-term residents to newer ones, and can be greatly aided by community-wide access to good accurate information. The federal government should ensure that this information aiding cultural orientation is available to aid in this informal dissemination. However, formal programs of cultural orientation are also of great benefit to many newcomers, particularly those who face greater barriers to integration.

Recommendations:

1. Support and fund a national clearinghouse of information on integration, and promote the development of materials that can be customized to meet local community needs. LIRS has developed a common guide called First Steps as a resource for refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants released from detention, with additional supplements for lawful permanent residents and asylum-seekers. This resource is available in English and Spanish, and in hard copy and e-book formats. It provides guidance to service providers and clients on legal and social services, and offers advice on ways to connect to the community. The federal government should help get guidance like this into the hands of those who most need it.
2. Integrate cultural orientation practices into the work of all of the federal departments that interact with immigrants and refugees. From “legal orientation programs” for immigrants in immigration proceedings, to orientation programs in the schools, and from workplace orientation programs to parenting workshops for newcomers, cultural orientation programs that give newcomers information about US society and systems give people more capacity to participate in a meaningful way.

3. Ensure that all government service centers, hotlines and other public outreach programs are equipped with cultural competency and language access for immigrant populations. Require each of the federal departments to conduct an audit of such programs and to take corrective action where such services are not in place.
4. Where possible, use peer to peer models that promote leadership from within immigrant and refugee communities and that deepen the knowledge base within the informal networks that are so important for cultural orientation.

Legal Rights, Immigration Enforcement and Family Unity

In LIRS consultations with refugee and immigrant communities, we consistently hear of the debilitating impact of family separation on people's lives in the United States. Long separations cause both economic and emotional distress, and create the conditions for family breakdowns that place individual members at greater risk. A true national integration policy should eventually be reflected in the passage of legislation that eases family visa backlogs and promotes family unity.

Immigration enforcement practices such as Secure Communities can also inhibit integration, because even people with legal status may have concerns about working with law enforcement for the greater security of their communities if it would expose friends or loved ones living in the shadows. This undermines the fabric of the social contract, creating mutual suspicion where trust is essential. Harsh enforcement practices in general alienate members of immigrant and refugee communities and cast many administrative violations as criminal acts, raising unnecessary concerns in receiving communities.

Integration is helped by the robust protection of legal rights, including labor rights and other workplace protections. Immigrants and refugees face particular challenges in securing services and advocating on their own behalf related to their immigration status, linguistic access, and understanding of their rights and US laws.

Recommendations:

1. Continue to push Congress for passage of immigration reforms, including improvements to family immigration.
2. Use executive authority to strike an appropriate balance in immigration enforcement. It was correct to set aside Secure Communities, and other immigration enforcement efforts should be reviewed with the same lens. In particular, LIRS has long maintained that the swollen immigration detention system is completely disproportionate to the enforcement needs of the administration. When the United States Government is detaining families with young children, it sends a bleak message to immigrants, refugees and receiving communities, and undercuts the community values that contribute to immigrant integration.
3. Continue to disseminate information on laws, rights and responsibilities, with particular attention to the issues faced by immigrants and refugees, through the various federal departments and in the relevant languages. A thorough and systematic top-to-bottom review to assess gaps or outdated materials will help to make these resources more relevant.

Conclusion

Immigrants are an asset to our society. The federal government has an opportunity to provide strong leadership on behalf of immigrant integration, establishing policies and programs that facilitate the integration process. The Task Force on New Americans is an important first step.

The messages of Administration leaders should also consistently reinforce the value of our immigrant heritage and the ongoing vitality of our immigration policies. Government officials should promote integration by speaking out about immigrant contributions, promoting the benefits of diversity, and encouraging communities to be more welcoming.

One important step we recommend in shaping national attitudes to immigration is to reframe existing federal grants to states and cities that are intended to help them cope with high numbers of newcomers (so-called “impact grants”) as New American Investment Grants. Language matters.

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