



FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT®
FOR HEALTHY LIVING
FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

March 6, 2015

Ms. Cecilia Muñoz, Director
Domestic Policy Council
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

The Honorable León Rodríguez, Director
U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services
20 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Suite 5110
Washington, D.C. 20529

Dear Director Muñoz and Director Rodríguez:

YMCA of the USA applauds the commitment of the Administration to ensure that all new Americans have an opportunity to integrate well and thrive in the United States. As a charitable organization committed to strengthening community and serving all, we are profoundly grateful for the opportunity to share recommendations with the White House Task Force on New Americans to advance newcomer integration nationwide.

With more than 40 million foreign-born individuals currently living in the U.S. and an estimated 78 million by 2060, a comprehensive immigrant integration strategy rooted in civic, economic and linguistic approaches is an imperative. Our future as a nation will depend on our collective ability to create meaningful opportunities for immigrants to access resources and support systems which allow them to make significant social and economic contributions.

For more than 160 years, the Y has responded to the nation's most pressing issues by activating resources and engaging people from diverse backgrounds for individual and collective action. We believe that our communities are at their strongest when everyone has the opportunity to learn, grow and thrive, which is why newcomer integration has historically been – and continues to be – an organizational commitment. From the nation's first-known English as a Second Language (ESL) class at the Cincinnati YMCA in 1856, to modern-day initiatives like the New American Welcome Centers at the YMCA of the Greater New York, the Y remains focused on ensuring immigrants can reach their fullest potential and that receiving communities are welcoming of their newest members.

In order to thrive, New Americans need comprehensive integration support and opportunities to become productive, self-reliant and connected to their communities. The Y applies a holistic approach, which supports both newcomers and receiving communities through a pathway of programs and services focused on key areas of need: language and education, health and well-being, citizenship and civic engagement, economic integration and employment, and community development. We also leverage our global network by partnering with YMCAs worldwide to

understand the cultural attributes which often influence newcomer integration in the U.S. so that we can more effectively engage, advocate for and serve immigrant populations.

To ensure the continued prosperity of our nation, it is critical that we act quickly and collectively to implement a New American integration strategy to address and support the needs of individuals, families and receiving communities. We offer the following recommendations for consideration to advance this important initiative.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I. Foster and Leverage Cross-sector Collaboration

No single sector can take on the challenge of new immigrant integration on its own. As with most social issues, forward progress is accomplished through collaboration between the government, corporations, academic, private, philanthropic and nonprofit sectors. For example, in 2012-2013, through coordination with the U.S. Departments of State and Health and Human Services, the YMCA of Greater Houston helped 1,100 refugees and trafficking victims resettle and become self-sufficient. This YMCA successfully mobilized government, foundation and corporate support to expand this life-changing program. Each sector has a contribution to make and is vital to the holistic approach to community integration.

Early success of a national integration strategy will also be dependent on the ability to take programs, services and experiences to scale through trusted collaborations and consistent standards of delivery.

- Include nonprofit organizations in all stages of the development of a national immigrant integration strategy. Nonprofits have community expertise, reach and trust, and provide safe spaces for newcomers and receiving communities. Many nonprofits have been working in communities for generations and understand the complex and unique nature and needs of their constituents. Nonprofits at the local level are often nimble, allowing them to create relevant and valued responses to community need.
- Identify partners that foster program incubation and innovation with the infrastructure and human resources to scale efforts quickly, effectively and comprehensively.
- It is important to maintain a national approach and vision for integration, to ensure the coordination of and enhanced collaboration with key federal departments; create and affirm national collaboration agreements with key service providers; and facilitate an active network of stakeholders.
- Beyond national collaborations, encourage and foster state and local collaborations, providing mechanisms and resource incentives.

II. Integration Strategies Must Honor Multiple Dimensions of Diversity

As a country that was built on the experience and contributions of immigrants, a national strategy needs to reflect the multiple dimensions of diversity that influence the new immigrant and their experience within American society such as country of national origin, age, education level, faith or belief tradition, gender/gender identity, immigration status, socio-economic status, sexual orientation or reason for immigration.

- A national integration strategy should be organized around flexible frameworks that allow for customization and adaptation to account for the rich complexities and assets of receiving communities.
- Frameworks should be grounded in common foundational human needs that ensure physical, cognitive and spiritual stability. The YMCA utilizes an effective framework and approach focused on language acquisition and education; employment and economic mobility; health and well-being; civic engagement and citizenship; and community development.
- Integration programming should be designed to ensure direct and customized services for individual and family needs, while also elevating opportunities for receiving communities to contribute to core pathways.
- While outcomes and outputs should be rigorously measured to ensure positive community impact, innovation and adaptation should be actively encouraged to stimulate community relevance and engagement.

III. Focus On Family Unity and Youth Development

Historically, immigration policy in the United States has been grounded in connecting families. As a nation, we recognize that families create the support systems that help ensure success, stability and contributions back to society. Additionally, many arriving communities share more collectivist family practices and therefore are more interdependent than those who are born into American culture. This often requires program models which accommodate family participation. Through its Parents as Teachers program for example, the YMCA of Greater Charlotte engages and effectively helps immigrant parents prepare their children for entering the school system.

Any national integration strategy must also include an emphasis on supporting the integration of children and youth. Young newcomers are often the most vulnerable and marginalized – and yet offer the greatest potential for integration and long-term success in the United States. Early achievement in school has a direct correlation to career success as an adult. Youth must also be embraced and engaged early and often to mitigate disenfranchisement, alienation and isolation that can lead to risky and negative behaviors such as gang membership or engagement in violent activities.

Beyond traditional immigrant services such as language acquisition, career readiness and citizenship preparation programs, youth can be prepared as a future generation of leaders through civic engagement, democratic processes and governance programs, cross-cultural service-learning and volunteerism.

- Prioritize and encourage program models and strategies that consider family participation.
- Support the increase of early childhood readiness programs through community-based organizations working outside of the school systems particularly with informal and in-home childcare providers.
- Support programs that provide wrap-around services to youth and families, including trauma counseling, cultural orientation and adjustment programs, social engagement and family reunification efforts.
- Support programs that provide leadership and civic engagement opportunities for new immigrant adolescents, including participation in democratic processes and volunteerism with long-standing community members.

IV. Unite And Create Safe Spaces Between Diverse Communities

Immigrant integration must be recognized as a two way engagement – between the arriving and the receiving communities. It is the positive intersection of these two relationships – where the inclusion of newcomers into American society is seen as an asset rather than as a deficit – that produces the greatest chance for successful integration. Integration however, is not achieved through a series of programs. Rather, it is a series of constructive and supportive experiences that are contextualized for both the new immigrant and the receiving community with the idea that community cohesion benefits all.

In addition, full integration can only take place when communities see value in the contributions each has to offer. Through years of experience in working with diverse communities across the United States and around the globe, the Y understands that intentional efforts must be made to connect and bridge communities to foster empathy, understanding, trust and productive engagement. The building of a cohesive community begins when people are brought together in forums to learn about one other, dismantle stereotypes and build the relationships necessary to curb cross-cultural conflicts. YMCA programs range in complexity from a simple 'faith and food' open house (YMCA of Greater Ohio) to the New Immigrant Academy for youth (Louisville YMCA) but each are effective in convening people from diverse backgrounds to deepen cross-cultural understanding.

- Support the development and advancement of cultural orientation and building competencies – investing in both the new immigrant and receiving communities. The Y conducts training courses throughout the U.S. focused on developing cultural competencies of staff and volunteers to strengthen and expand newcomer inclusion efforts looking at all dimensions of diversity.
- Invest in the development and implementation of community-based welcoming platforms that foster the interaction and engagement of new and receiving community members, including civic development initiatives created through a shared vision for community improvement and the application of democratic processes.
- Leverage volunteers – providing mechanisms for and encouraging the participation of both receiving and new immigrants in volunteer leadership roles that advance integration efforts.
- Identify and make available public space for community bridge-building efforts.

V. Build a Culture of Philanthropy in Support of New American Initiatives

It is widely understood that financing an immigrant integration strategy cannot rest solely on the shoulders of one sector. Since our founding, the United States has demonstrated the power of cross-sector funding as a means to achieve national objectives. The blend of federal, state, local and private funding – in partnership with the stewardship and application of those funds through grass-roots, community-based organizations – has led to our ability as a nation, to respond to the most pressing social challenges. Stimulating and enhancing this practice will foster greater ownership, accountability, collaborative innovation and sustained outputs.

- Identify funding streams to invest directly into new immigrant and receiving community integration strategies.

- Leverage corporate opportunities to provide internships and workforce development experiences for adolescent newcomers and immigrants.
- Cultivate and develop collaborative partnerships with key corporate and foundation partners who understand the importance of and contributions made by new immigrant communities.
- Identify and implement possible charitable incentives to promote investment into community bridge-building, collective impact and integration efforts.
- Identify and implement incentives to motivate state-level contributions through community-based organizations.
- Identify and implement incentives targeting established immigrant community members to reinvest in the immigrant integration experience for new arrivals.

VI. Create a New, Asset-based National Narrative on Immigrant Integration

The creation of a robust, sustained and multipronged messaging campaign that focuses on the contributions of new Americans is needed to change the predominantly negative narrative that currently exists. Immigrant integration must be recognized as a mechanism to strengthen our communities and nation, rather than one that divides us. The University YMCA at Champaign-Urbana for example, is building understanding and changing the immigration narrative locally through panel discussions and a speaker series that reaches more than 1,000 community members a year.

- Develop and execute a comprehensive communications strategy beginning with the articulation of the outcomes and recommendations of the Task Force.
- Sustain the campaign across federal agency departments, focusing on asset-based contributions of new Americans and success stories of receiving communities.
- Lift up examples of tangible historical and contemporary contributions of immigrants with direct benefit to receiving communities.
- Push narrative down to community through state, local and community-based messengers and organizational communications channels.
- Amplify messages through strategic collaborations with national media channels, thought leaders and national and local organizations.
- Support frequent and sustained community-based opportunities to convene and connect new immigrants and receiving communities, utilizing shared experiences such as the arts or athletics.

VII. Proactive Preparation of New Immigrant Communities Through Global Strategies

New immigrants begin their journey in a home of national origin. While not all new immigrants to the United States have a seamless and fluid experience, many do. They come to the U.S. for a variety of reasons such as employment, education or family reunification; yet most still need support in successfully integrating into their adoptive nation.

To that end, as a dimension of a national integration strategy, consideration should be made to begin the integration process before community members arrive in the United States. In situations where this is possible, new arriving community members may have an advantage in the integration experience if they are able to secure language skills, cultural orientation basics, family support, degree transfers, or more – in advance of traveling to the U.S.

- Collaborate with global organizations that have a presence in both sending nations and the United States.
- Create mechanisms and tools to equip organizations from sending nations to prepare individuals for entry into the United States.

Immigrants must be viewed and treated as an asset for strengthening the United States. Embracing new community members and integrating them as fully participating and contributing members of American society positions our country for sustained growth and global influence. This is an important time in the history of our country to put forth a national integration strategy that builds on the unique attributes of American culture and democracy; honors the rich contributions that new immigrants make to the nation; leverages multiple sectors as key actors in the integration experience; and maximizes the collective and unified strengths of the arriving and receiving communities.

By working together, we are confident that we can build a strategy that other nations will turn to as an exemplary model for true community integration.



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