

The Littleton Immigrant Integration Initiative

BY SUSAN M. THORNTON

The census of 2000 was a wakeup call for the people of Littleton, Colorado—and for me as the city’s mayor. As results of the census were released, the forty-thousand residents of Littleton found that the city’s population, which had been 2 percent foreign-born just twenty years earlier, had risen by two thousand to almost 14 percent. In addition, the census showed that 25 percent of the work force in the city’s major ZIP Code consisted of immigrants.

What was happening in Littleton was similar to what was happening across the state, as Colorado became a new “gateway state.” Suddenly, it seemed, police, EMS, and city code enforcement officers were encountering people speaking a variety of languages. The municipal courts were confronting people who spoke little or no English and who didn’t understand American laws and customs. The school district was being asked to educate children whose families spoke more than forty-five languages.

Although people were coming to Littleton from around the world, the largest number was from Mexico, followed by immigrants from other South American countries. The relatively inexpensive apartment buildings in the city’s northeast neighborhood were filling with Spanish speakers.

The First Steps

The city established a Diversity Committee, and city staff began planning ways to accommodate the newcomers. Phrase books were developed for police, EMS, and reception desks at city hall. An “interpretation line” (a phone-based interpretation service) was established for the courts, and a special day was set aside to hear the cases of Spanish speakers.

Seeking to understand immigrant issues more clearly, the city hired a consultant who surveyed newcomers in the northeast neighborhood to learn their concerns, and contracted with another consultant (the Spring Institute for Intercultural Learning) to advise our efforts.

The city sought to increase the cultural awareness of its staff with voluntary “Lunch and Learn” sessions featuring speakers on a variety of subjects. Free Spanish classes were offered, and a number of senior staff members began volunteering as mentors with students at Littleton’s East Elementary School, which had a high percentage of children born in other countries.

At the same time, the city’s Bemis Public Library was reaching out to immigrants through a variety of programs. This included a series of classes on health and citizenship issues; English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, offered through a joint effort of the library and school district; conversational English classes; computer classes; and Learning to Live in the United States classes, conducted in Spanish and addressing domestic violence. A senior librarian wrote grants to make most of these classes possible.

The Littleton Leadership Retreat

Simultaneously, planning was under way for the Littleton Leadership Retreat. This weekend retreat, which takes residents out of town for an intensive weekend to focus on a topic of community interest, has been a local tradition since 1975.

In 2005, the retreat’s volunteer steering committee chose immigration as the following year’s topic. At

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the retreat, a panel of immigrants and refugees representing a number of countries told how and why they came to the United States, and what was both wonderful and difficult about their new lives. Their stories were moving and powerful, and when the retreat was over the sixty-five citizens who attended didn’t want to let the immigration topic drop.

A Planning Grant

At about the same time, The Colorado Trust, one of the state’s largest grant-making foundations, issued a request for proposals that offered year-long planning grants under the foundation’s Supporting Immigrants and Refugee Families Initiative (SIRFI).

Seizing the opportunity, participants from the retreat, members of the community, and senior city staff came together to apply for a planning grant. We were pleased being among nine communities to receive a grant as well as the assistance of an experienced facilitator to help us with our planning efforts.

We established a steering committee made up of representatives from the major agencies and organizations in Littleton—the city, health and mental health providers, the faith community, businesses, real estate professionals, the community college, the local hospital, the public schools, the recreation district, and interested citizens. It also included one immigrant from Nepal and another from Canada.

An early step was to learn what services were available to immigrants in our community. We convened two meetings of local employment, social services, and health care providers working with low-income people as a way to identify gaps and duplication in

services. The meetings were well attended, with providers learning—many for the first time—of the services offered by others.

I agreed to chair the steering committee, which organized a large Community Conversation. This meeting was advertised in the city’s newsletter and on its Website, in the local newspaper, and in bilingual flyers disseminated at the library and businesses and sent home with school children. We purchased food, offered child care, hired a Spanish-language interpreter, and borrowed interpretive headsets. We held the Community Conversation at Bemis Public Library, hoping it would feel like a safe place for immigrants.

Then we sat back and waited. Would any immigrants come? Indeed, would *anyone* come?

To our relief, they did come. More than one hundred people attended this first large community meeting, and at least half of the attendees were immigrants. The evening included a series of exercises, with immigrants and members of the receiving community identifying why they liked living in Littleton. It was something of an a-ha moment when both new and established residents learned that they all valued Littleton for the same qualities: being a clean, safe, friendly community with excellent schools and abundant parks, trails, trees, and other amenities.

Later in the evening, participants broke into small groups to discuss what would make immigrants feel more integrated into the community. Following the meeting, these ideas were condensed into six topic areas, and workgroups were assigned to develop goals, activities, and tasks in:

- Education
- Employment
- Health and wellness
- Two-way integration
- Information dissemination
- Housing

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The workgroups, which included both immigrants and members of the receiving community, met over a period of months and developed plans for how the initiative would proceed if it received implementation funding from the foundation.

Once those plans were developed in draft form, we scheduled another community meeting to present and fine-tune the concepts. About eighty people attended the second meeting. What we heard from them informed our mission and vision, as well as the strategic plan for the grant application we made to the foundation.

The mission adopted for the initiative was to:

- Help newcomers with information
- Connect people with each other
- Encourage citizenship and community and civic involvement

We then established our vision: to become a community in which all people who live, work, study, or play feel that they belong and can contribute. (See the initiative's Website at www.ConnectingImmigrants.org.)

Implementation of the Initiative

After a year of planning, the steering committee submitted an implementation grant to The Colorado Trust, and the Littleton Immigrant Integration Initiative (LI3) received four years of funding in the amount of \$75,000 per year. The City of Littleton served as fiscal agent for the implementation grant, as it had for the planning grant, and individuals who had helped develop the strategic plan morphed into the initiative's new governing council.

We immediately set about putting our major goals into action.

Goal One: Create a One-Stop Information Center

Immigrants told us that moving to a new country and community is stressful and confusing, and that it would be helpful to have a place where they could readily find information. Because libraries are a source of information for the entire community, we located our new One-Stop Information Center at Littleton's Bemis Public Library. We hired a full-time coordinator, who began gathering information from as many agencies and organizations as possible and putting it into a computerized database.

The first coordinator we hired was not bilingual in Spanish, which we found to be a significant barrier to many who were seeking information. After that false start, we hired a second coordinator, this time a woman who was fluent in both English and Spanish. However, within days of accepting the position, she was offered another job that furnished health care benefits for her family, which we were unable to offer because of limited funding.

As a result, it took us almost eighteen months of working through the posting of job descriptions, reading hundreds of job applications, and interviewing numerous candidates before we finally found the perfect coordinator for the One-Stop Information Center. She is a naturalized citizen, born in Mexico but fluent in English as well as Spanish, with a bachelor's degree in finance and a minor in accounting. She also has a great passion for helping other immigrants. Each year she assists approximately twenty-eight hundred people from a variety of countries with information and referrals.

Early on, the initiative's governing council made a decision not to ask about the immigration status of those coming to the information center. For one thing, we offer only information, not direct services. For another, our employees are not trained to identify "legal" versus "illegal" documents. Our policy

is to give information to anyone who comes through our doors, whether an immigrant or a member of the established community.

Bemis Library had conducted one-to-one English mentoring, pairing immigrants with Rotary Club members in the past, so a senior librarian who has been the key to the success of the initiative thought a similar approach might work with citizenship. She contacted a member of a nearby church who was conducting group citizenship classes and discussed one-to-one citizenship mentoring with her. The church volunteer helped us select training materials, as did the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS).

We put out a call for volunteer citizenship mentors through the local media and civic groups and were extremely pleased when ninety-four community members ultimately responded. With materials and initial training from the USCIS, the LI3 coordinator began to match immigrants with community members.

In just the last nineteen months, 134 immigrants have registered in the program and are studying with their mentors. Of these, so far 54 have passed their citizenship exam. One particular story illustrates our efforts. It involves a man who spoke little English and who was illiterate even in his native language; one of our volunteers taught him to read and mentored him for eighteen months until he passed his naturalization exam and became a citizen.

The USCIS has told us that, to their knowledge, our one-to-one citizenship mentoring approach is unique in the United States, though recently a neighboring library district began a similar citizenship mentoring program. To date, twenty-five volunteers have mentored more than one immigrant, with ten mentoring three or more immigrants. Combined, the mentors have donated many hundreds of hours to the program.

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The USCIS is so impressed with this program that the agency has run twice-yearly naturalization ceremonies in Littleton's city hall just for "our" immigrants. (Normally, such ceremonies are held in Denver and involve three hundred to six hundred strangers being sworn into citizenship together.) In the Littleton ceremonies, mentors attend as well as immigrant families and community members. The city manager, mayor, and representatives from the legislature speak, and when the moving ceremony is completed there is rarely a dry eye in the house. Following the ceremony, the initiative serves cake and refreshments along with bestowing small gifts on the new citizens.

The one-to-one citizenship mentoring program has drawn considerable national and even international attention. Numerous communities have come to view our work, a delegation from Belgium recently visited, and the initiative will be featured on a Swedish TV series about life in the United States.

Goal Two: Establish a Community Health Liaison Program

Because one barrier to successful integration of immigrants is maintenance of personal health, the initiative hired a half-time community health liaison, an immigrant from Latvia who was studying for her master's degree in social work at the time. (She has since completed her degree.) Like the coordinator of the One-Stop Information Center, the liaison set about learning all the health resources available for uninsured and low-income people in our community. Soon she was meeting individually with immigrants to learn their needs and connect them with appropriate resources, a process that is individualized and often very time-consuming.

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The liaison also pulled together an active advisory committee involving all the major providers of health, mental health, and dental care for low-income families in our area; conducted wellness workshops in the immigrant community; founded an immigrant women's discussion group; and partnered with other agencies to sponsor cultural competency trainings for health providers. In addition, she coordinated activities with a van furnished by Adventist Community Services that offers free basic screenings and medical care at Littleton's library each week. About forty low-income people, many of them immigrants, come to the van for help weekly.

An early challenge the initiative faced was finding an office for the liaison. Because of limited space at Bemis Public Library, she was initially housed at the nonprofit Arapahoe/Douglas County Mental Health Network; later we were able to move her to a space at the library adjacent to the One-Stop Information Center.

Goal Three: Expand the Parent-School Community Liaison Program

We were aware that teachers, administrators, and counselors faced an array of noneducational issues when working with immigrant or refugee families. Littleton Public Schools was using federal funds to staff one school-parent liaison position for thirty hours a week to deal with such issues. The initiative used grant funding to take this position to full-time. This liaison, who was bilingual in English and Spanish, worked closely with the initiative's coordinator and the community health liaison.

We found that a very effective way to disseminate information about workshops or other events for

immigrant families was to translate the information into Spanish as well as English and send the information home with school children; the parent-school liaison was instrumental in translating and getting permission for us to use the schools' information dissemination systems.

Goal Four: Develop an Immigrant Friend Program

This program was designed to bring people together in monthly meetings, matching immigrants with established residents to help them with the challenges of adapting to this new country. Our thinking was that mutual understanding and friendships would evolve as people learned about one another's culture.

We had some success with this approach. For example, a Peruvian family wanted to know how to ride light rail, so a receiving-community family took them to downtown Denver on the rail; in turn, the Peruvian family took their new friends to a Peruvian restaurant in Denver.

However, in the long run this program did not work out well and was dropped. We believe low participation resulted because of a six-month time commitment and open-ended format. In addition, the monthly meeting was too rigid, and immigrants working multiple jobs may have found it difficult to attend.

As a result, we shifted the focus of this program and renamed it "Two-Way Integration." We developed a DVD of immigrants talking about their experiences as they settle into this country, and we are showing it to churches and community organizations. The goal is to create greater awareness of the challenges that immigrants face, and to garner more community support for them and for initiative programs.

Goal Five: Enhance Existing Community Events and Develop New Events to Offer Multicultural Experiences

This was another program concept that did not work out as well as anticipated. Littleton has a long,

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rich tradition of festivals and events, and attempting to add more events eventually was more than we had time and energy to pursue. We tried having booths at a number of festivals but found that people were focused on having fun, not on thinking about serious issues.

We did, however, attempt to encourage immigrant participation by advertising existing festivals through flyers and the One-Stop Information Center. In addition, we have begun conducting an annual international craft fair at Bemis Library; this year eight vendors (three of them immigrants) sold handcrafted items from around the world.

Additional Programs and Projects

A major strength of the initiative from the start was its governing council. Most of the people who began the planning for the initiative are still involved and active on the council today. Because our small staff was swamped with work from the beginning, individual council members have taken on the responsibility of conducting additional programs and projects. Here is a brief description of these activities.

English as a Second Language. The initiative offered beginning and advanced classes in English at the library and in churches in the northeast neighborhood. Trained ESL teachers, assisted at times by volunteers, taught the classes. About once a year we also offered training sessions for community members who wanted to become ESL teachers; most of those who responded came from faith-based institutions.

Language Partners Program. As this is being written, the initiative is establishing a one-to-one Language Partners Program similar to the Citizenship Pro-

gram. The program will pair volunteers from the community with immigrants wanting to improve their English. As with the Citizenship Mentoring Program, this new program is expected to encourage cross-cultural exchanges and mutual understanding.

Legal Nights. In partnership with the USCIS and the American Immigration Lawyers Association, the initiative organized evenings where immigrants could come to learn more about immigration processes, legislation, and other topics. We offered food, child care, and translation services and held the meetings in churches in the northeast neighborhood. The first Legal Night attracted one hundred immigrants, and by the end of the evening it was clear that people wanted more than general information: they wanted to talk with a lawyer about their own unique immigration issues. As a result, we allotted time at subsequent meetings for immigrants to meet privately with a lawyer to ask their specific questions.

Back-to-School Night. In the fall of 2008, the initiative partnered with the Littleton Police Department, Bemis Library, a local family foundation, and our recreation district to sponsor a Back-to-School Night in the city's northeast neighborhood. Several immigrant women who lived in nearby apartment complexes helped plan the event and went door to door to get the word out about it. Several hundred immigrants came for free activities, books, school supplies, information, and hamburgers cooked by Littleton police officers.

Literacy Program. Also in the fall of 2008, a senior librarian took the lead to establish the initiative's Literacy Program. She applied for eligibility to Reading Is Fundamental, an organization that makes books available for children and adults at very reasonable prices. We used funds from the initiative and a support group for the library and local museum to purchase books in both Spanish and English and disseminated the books at the Back-to-School Night. That evening, thirty families also signed up for library cards. We are continuing to dis-

seminate free books once each month in the northeast neighborhood.

International Film Program. Seeking to increase cultural understanding among members of the receiving community, the community health liaison and senior librarian identified foreign films (on DVD) that describe the immigrant experience. Funding from the initiative and Bemis Public Library was combined, and twelve films were purchased and made part of the library's permanent collection. A description of the films was sent to teachers in Littleton-area schools, who can borrow the DVDs for use in their classrooms.

In addition, the liaison established and publicized a monthly "Film and Conversation" night at which the films are shown. About ten members of the receiving community attend regularly.

Resource Festival. A real estate professional on the initiative's board approached the South Metro Realtor Association for funding for a one-day festival to highlight community services and resources available to immigrants. Forty-five organizations and agencies attended the event, which presented information about housing, health, mental health, schools, senior services, employment, and more. Bilingual flyers were widely disseminated, food served, and school children entertained with singing. About 120 people, many of them immigrants, attended this event, which was held at the recreation center closest to the northeast neighborhood.

The Political Climate Heats Up

As we were beginning to implement the Littleton Immigrant Integration Initiative, the political climate in Colorado was changing. The issue of undocumented immigrants was increasingly coming to the forefront, with heated discussion in the Colorado legislature and passage of strong measures to prevent undocumented immigrants from receiving state-supported services. At the same time, congress-

man Tom Tancredo, who represented the greater Littleton area and who had a campaign office just a few blocks from our information and health offices at Bemis Public Library, was raising the level of debate about "illegal immigrants" to a fever pitch in Washington and across the United States.

Immigrants—even those here legally—became more fearful, and as chair of the initiative I became concerned about a possible backlash against our work. As a result, for the first eighteen months of our existence I advised that the initiative keep a relatively low profile.

Indeed, we had two unfortunate incidents. One involved a woman who was found repeatedly removing brochures about the initiative from the library and putting them in a dumpster; subsequently she was banned from the library. The other incident involved a man who showed up at our first Legal Night acting in a hostile manner toward our volunteers; ultimately he left, but only after venting his hatred of "those people" who were gathering peacefully inside.

I am pleased to be able to report that as our work became more visible, the wider backlash I feared did not materialize. We believe this was largely because of our strong focus on citizenship and learning English, two goals that most Americans appear to view as positives.

Sustainability Efforts

Acutely aware that the grant from The Colorado Trust, under which the initiative has operated, will run out at the end of June 2009, our governing council has increasingly focused on how to sustain the work of initiative, if not the initiative itself. We had originally hoped that the City of Littleton would pick up the positions funded by the initiative, but the city's revenues were falling faster than expenses were rising, and it was unable to furnish the support needed. It was willing to continue to

supply accounting services, office space, technical support, and other important in-kind services but was unable to absorb the positions.

Similarly, the partner agencies that have been involved in the initiative since the beginning have not had the resources to absorb the positions. (It should be noted, however, that we conservatively estimate that the city and these agencies combined have allocated more than \$217,500 in in-kind support for the initiative each year. This does not include the many hundreds of hours of volunteer and staff time given to mentoring, meetings, and special projects.)

A review of local foundations quickly revealed that there are many more funding options related to health for low-income people than for immigrant integration activities. The Colorado Trust itself, for example, is now focusing its funding solely on access to health care. As a result, the council decided to split the initiative into two new entities at the conclusion of the grant.

One nonprofit will become the South Metro Health Alliance (SMHA). Representatives of more than thirty health- and mental-health-providing agencies will make up the board of the new alliance. Its vision will be far broader than is currently the case; the SMHA plans to serve low-income people (including immigrants) not just in Littleton but also in Arapahoe, Douglas, and Elbert Counties. A key will be provision of case management services to help people navigate confusing and frustrating health systems, and establishment of a way for clients to share their health information between providers.

The other half of the initiative will encompass the One-Stop Information Center and all nonhealth-related activities such as ESL and citizenship mentoring.

Both halves of the initiative are aggressively meeting with foundations to seek support. In addition, the

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information portion of the initiative has applied for Community Development Block Grant Funding from Arapahoe County, is meeting with businesses that employ large numbers of immigrants, and is seeking support from faith-based institutions, volunteers, and the community at large.

Lessons Learned by the City

As the City of Littleton began working to reach out to immigrants in the community, we learned a number of lessons that may be helpful to other communities:

- *Identify your champions.* In Littleton's case, this included a senior library supervisor, a police sergeant, the city's human resources director, and myself as mayor. Our city manager and the city's director of economic development were also extremely supportive and involved.
- *Identify resistance.* There will be resistance, so above all stay out of the immigration debate. Focus on legal immigrants.
- *Work to eliminate stereotypes.* Work first with your own staff, then with the community at large.
- *Avoid expensive or exclusive initiatives that are for immigrants only.* Members of the receiving community may well resent such "special" initiatives.
- *Assess how your outreach efforts fit with everything else on your plate.* If you take on too much, you are no good to anyone.
- *Build momentum.* We began slowly with three years of low- or no-budget activities that progressively became more visible.

Lessons Learned by the Initiative

In conducting the Littleton Immigrant Integration Initiative, we learned additional lessons:

- *Allow time.* It took far longer to develop job descriptions, hire staff, set up offices, purchase computers, and so on than any of us imagined.
- *Don't be unduly fearful.* Fear of an anti-immigrant backlash has not materialized in Littleton, despite the very conservative nature of the community.
- *Citizenship and ESL are the keys.* It is hard for even the most “anti-illegals” person to oppose citizenship and ESL activities.
- *If a program doesn't work out, change directions.* Not every program or idea that sounds good initially will work out as planned. Be flexible. Learn from what doesn't work, as well as what does.
- *One-to-one activities promote true integration.* The Citizenship Mentoring Program has been our most successful way to foster cultural exchange and mutual understanding. We anticipate the same will be true for our new Language Partners Program. Both are relatively low-cost but require some materials and at least one staff person to “match” volunteers and immigrants, and to oversee the programs.
- *Success requires broad-based, sustained community leadership.* Our initiative would not have been possible without the sustained involvement and leadership of Littleton's senior staff, elected officials, community volunteers, and the organizations and agencies serving low-income people. Members of our governing council adopted a hands-on approach early on and have stayed active throughout the life of the initiative.
- *Finding funding is hard work.* We knew it would be hard to find ongoing funding to sustain the work of the immigrant initiative, but it has

become especially so since the crisis on Wall Street. The funding ability of governments, foundations, businesses, and individuals alike has declined dramatically.

Conclusion

Certainly there are many additional innovative and creative ways for communities to reach out to newcomers beyond what we in Littleton have had the resources to try. In fact, I have written about some of those innovative approaches in a publication for The Colorado Trust and Colorado Municipal League. With the Littleton initiative, we feel we have only scratched the surface of what can be done to help immigrants truly become members of the community.

The years since Littleton leaders began visualizing an outreach to the immigrant community have flown by. In retrospect, it is remarkable how much has been accomplished by such a small staff and in such a short time. Our efforts have drawn national and international attention. Now the challenge is to see if the local community will rise to sustaining the work of the initiative into the future.

Stay tuned.

Reference

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