

Relationships Matter: Volunteerism in Immigrant Communities

Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration
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Volunteers from immigrant communities are part of an untapped generation of volunteer workers. With solid values that speak to community and family, an unwavering dedication towards a collective good, and carrying with them strong ethics of responsibility for community, volunteers from immigrant communities are a mine of potential. Their talents and skills can be put to great use, furthering civic engagement, public participation, and philanthropy.

Nonprofits have been working with immigrant communities for many decades, yet many struggle to learn the formula for an authentic engagement of this population. Knowing the strengths and challenges that volunteers from these communities face can better prepare mainstream organizations to effectively engage them on a long term basis.

This report details the findings and recommendations from a three year project that explored how volunteerism is perceived within immigrant communities, and the struggle of nonprofit organizations to successfully connect with them.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Minnesota has experienced dramatic changes in population diversity over the last 25 years. Once primarily a state of northern European ancestry, Minnesota's diversity growth rate continues to be one of the highest in the United States. The annual immigration rate in Minnesota is triple the rate of 25 years ago. Latino and Asian populations in the state grew by over 160% between the 1990 and 2000 census reports and the African population in the Twin Cities increased by 629 percent. These statistics reveal that Minnesota's population is reflecting a more non-European population with diversity in language, thinking, and cultural practices.

The impact of immigration can be felt on multiple levels within nonprofit organizations. Mainstream organizations in Minnesota face serious challenges in recruiting, managing, and involving volunteers from immigrant and refugee communities. While Minnesota has a significant level of volunteerism, nonprofit leaders recognize that to meet their mission and to serve a diverse constituent population, their involvement of volunteers needs to be expanded to reflect the new face of Minnesota. Yet, these leaders do not have access to the resources, the knowledge, and the information necessary to make these changes.

The Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration (MAVA) and Dr. Mai Moua, Leadership Paradigms, initiated this original research to understand the ways volunteerism appeared in immigrant communities, and how this understanding can be used to help mainstream organizations' authentic engagement of immigrant volunteers. We were interested in identifying the barriers that volunteers from these communities faced when working with mainstream organizations. Additionally, we wanted to learn about organizational practices related to the engagement of volunteers from immigrant communities.

The collection of data for this research included:

- Interviews with twenty-nine individuals from the Hmong, Latino and Somali communities
- Two focus groups held with Somali volunteers
- Two focus groups held with organizations in the mainstream community; one in Saint Cloud and the other in the Twin Cities
- Surveys collected from Latino and Somali participants at a resource fair in Willmar
- 111 on-line surveys collected from MAVA Members
- Literature review of 100 books, journal articles, and documents

FINDINGS FROM RESEARCH

The findings from the research with volunteers from immigrant communities revealed the importance of building authentic relationships and trust in their successful engagement. Additionally, the results supported past research on social obligation and socio-economic status as critical factors to consider when engaging these communities. The data suggested that organizations that pay attention to the cultural dynamics of any group/culture will do better at building relationships and trust.

Surveys and focus group data gathered from mainstream organizations demonstrated the following:

- Half of all participants have worked with immigrant volunteers for less than ten years.
- 62% of participants currently have immigrant volunteers in their organization.
- 69% of respondents feel it is important to involve immigrant volunteers in their organization; they rated this because of:
 - The changing demographics within Minnesota
 - The need for organizations to be more culturally competent in service delivery
 - The need to reflect diverse communities
 - The opportunities that organizations have to conduct outreach into diverse communities
- 25% of respondents felt they were successful at engaging immigrant volunteers. Those who did so were successful because their programs had very tangible skills to offer immigrant volunteers, *and* they spent the time to develop long-term relationships.

Those who worked successfully with volunteers from immigrant communities noted the following success strategies:

1. Have Key Competencies in Staff and Organization
2. Be Inclusive and Respectful to Individuals
3. Build on the Interests and Talents of Volunteers
4. Have Organizational Flexibility
5. Do Community Outreach and Recruitment
6. Provide Meaningful Opportunities

RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of the findings, the following were provided as recommendations for engaging volunteers from immigrant communities:

1. Understanding how relationships are created and why trust is important within immigrant communities can help organizations to successfully engage immigrant volunteers.
2. Organizations are more successful if they can establish and articulate the reasons for developing authentic relationships with immigrant volunteers and communities.
3. Find volunteer opportunities that engage and benefit the collective, family-centered system that is prevalent in immigrant communities.
4. Organizations that cultivate a strong sense of social identity for immigrant volunteers are much better at engaging and recruiting this population.
5. Organizations need to assess the changing landscape of volunteerism, including practices and systems that cause barriers to fully engaging immigrant volunteers.
6. Organizations need to assess their capacity and find the adequate resources to successfully engage immigrant volunteers.
7. Know the cultural history and background of immigrant volunteerism, including the cultural competency skills needed to work with immigrant populations.
8. Build on the talents of immigrant volunteers.
9. Engage the whole organization to recognize the importance of volunteers from immigrant communities.
10. Cultivate racial and cultural understanding, sensitivity, and proficiency.

INTRODUCTION

Minnesota has experienced dramatic changes in population diversity over the last 25 years. Once primarily a state of northern European ancestry Minnesota's diversity growth rate continues to be one of the highest in the United States. The annual immigration rate in Minnesota is triple that rate of 25 years ago. Latino and Asian populations in the state grew by over 160% between the 1990 and 2000 census reports and the African population in the Twin Cities increased by 629 percent. These statistics reveal that Minnesota's population is reflecting a more non-European population with diversity in language, thinking, and cultural practices.

The impact of immigration can be felt on multiple levels within nonprofit organizations. Mainstream organizations in Minnesota face serious challenges in recruiting, managing, and involving volunteers from immigrant and refugee communities. While Minnesota has a significant level of volunteerism, nonprofit leaders recognize that to meet their mission and to serve a diverse constituent population, their involvement of volunteers needs to be expanded to reflect the new face of Minnesota. Yet, these leaders do not have access to the resources, the knowledge, and the information necessary to make these changes.

While Minnesota has a significant level of volunteerism, nonprofit leaders recognize that to meet their mission and to serve a diverse constituent population, their involvement of volunteers needs to be expanded to reflect the new face of Minnesota.

The combination of a rapid growth in diversity in Minnesota and the lack of resources on volunteerism in immigrant and refugee communities have left organizations ill prepared to produce the next generation of volunteers and volunteer leaders. Often, their approaches are rooted in western understandings of volunteerism and organizing; thus biasing them towards a particular methodology of recruitment, training, and management of immigrant volunteers.

These results on volunteerism in ethnic/racial communities are not new. In 2002, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation released a report that illustrated the giving and volunteer patterns of four key population groups in the United States: African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanic/Latino Americans, and Asian Americans. For each, the report outlined the group's different paths to volunteerism, how volunteerism practices are misunderstood by outsiders, and that a mismatch of organizational systems and practices can lead to poor engagement of ethnic communities.

In this study, we wanted to understand the ways volunteerism appeared in immigrant communities, and how this understanding can be used to help mainstream organizations' authentic engagement of immigrant volunteers. We were interested in identifying the barriers that volunteers from these communities faced when working with mainstream organizations. Additionally, we wanted to learn about organizational practices related to the engagement of volunteers from immigrant communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An exploration of documents to understand volunteerism within immigrant communities was reviewed. The literature review is categorized into subtopics.

VOLUNTEERISM IN IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES

In immigrant communities, volunteerism is increasingly seen as a vehicle for communities to tap into resources, services, and networks. It serves as a way to discover and understand the needs of their own communities while allowing them to be part of another culture and lifestyle. In many ways, formal volunteerism provides increased social contact and relationships making the acculturation process easier to handle. Formal volunteerism in the United States allows these volunteers to build social relationships with community organizers, staff and supervisors of the organizations they volunteer for, and it increases their social network and capital.

Volunteer levels among immigrant groups can be overlooked depending on how “volunteerism” is defined. Studies have shown that volunteerism within these communities is seen as reciprocity which is common within communities that are family/collective-oriented.



Community Health Fair
Photo courtesy of Hmong American Partnership

Studies show that the significance of volunteering for immigrants is an important duty, obligation, and social responsibility that enhance their social identity. Immigrant volunteering, whether formal or informal, is heavily influenced by family and friends. Generally, immigrants first volunteer in their own communities before engaging in volunteer work within mainstream organizations. This is due to the fact that immigrants are most attracted to organizations that serve and speak to the needs of their communities.

Volunteer levels among immigrant groups can be overlooked depending on how “volunteerism” is defined. Studies have shown that volunteerism within these communities is seen as reciprocity which is common within communities that are family/collective-oriented. As a result, when these communities are asked about their volunteer participation, they do not often acknowledge it as volunteering.

Informal volunteering can also imply social or religious obligations to either the family, community, or the larger society. Some social obligations that are common among immigrant groups are the use of children as cultural brokers for their parents and friends and neighbors serving in the role of a daycare provider. This is not acknowledged as being volunteer work even though many of these positions are considered paid positions when taken by outside members. Negligence to consider the significance of informal volunteering will greatly undermine the voluntary participation of immigrant groups.

Religious networks are exceedingly important to community participation and volunteer work. For many groups, religion is a central and daily part of people's abide to these values. Volunteering for some immigrant communities is sustained by religious beliefs. Religions such as Islam and Buddhism see the commitment to help others. Immigrant groups who are religiously inspired by such a mandate will carry out this practice among family and outsiders.

BARRIERS TO VOLUNTEERISM

Research has indicated that immigrant and ethnic volunteerism has been limited because there has been a lack of interest within institutions and policies to address the needs and concerns in extending voluntary opportunities for immigrants (Lopez & Safrit, 2002; Howlett, 2006). Sometimes efforts to acquire ethnic/immigrant volunteers are inattentive and not expendable. Ethnic and immigrant groups are not asked to volunteer as much as whites. Communities of color are often perceived to be the recipients of voluntary services; hence, this may be why they are often not asked to volunteer as much. Certain groups also hesitate to volunteer because they feel their help is not needed or valued. This also causes these groups to be less involved in mainstream organizations or engage in formal volunteering.



Latino Man at Volunteer Organization

Studies reveal that there is a lack of commitment in recruiting and retaining ethnic/immigrant volunteers, as well as inappropriate measures to include non-white volunteers. Cultural sensitivity on the part of mainstream organizations remains a huge barrier for immigrant groups in seeking out mainstream voluntary organizations. Research findings have also indicated that in order for recruitment of black and minority ethnic groups to be successful, the structures within the organization have to change. In order to attract a certain group in volunteerism, organizations have to structure their policies in ways that are responsive to the beliefs and experiences of the group. Organizations will need to respond to the barriers that keep these groups from becoming involved.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

This section of the report details the findings from the research. With the assistance of the advisory committee and members of the Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration, we found twenty nine individuals from the Hmong, Latino, and Somali communities of Minnesota to interview. We also used a snow ball sampling approach by identifying gatekeepers and informants who then referred us to other potential interviewees.

As a result, we interviewed nine Hmong persons of which six resided in the Twin Cities metro area and three were residents of the Saint Cloud area. Of the six in the Twin Cities, four were in the 20s, one in her 30s, and two were in their 40s. The three from Saint Cloud were recent graduates of the local university in their area, and all were in their early 20s. 80% if those interviewed were first generation immigrants.



MAVA Volunteerism Award Recipient
Photo courtesy of Katie Bull

For the Latino group, we interviewed twelve individuals in the Twin Cities of which 50% were first generation and the other 50% were second generation Latino; all recorded their background from the following regions: Mexico, Central America, and South America. Seven of the twelve were women. Because of the challenges recruiting participants from the Saint Cloud area, no interviews were conducted from that area.

For the Somali group, eight individuals were interviewed, of which three were in the Twin Cities and five were residents of the Saint Cloud, Minnesota area.

All participants were men and first generation Somali in the United States, having recently immigrated in the early 1990s. A focus group was also conducted in the summer of 2009 with 15 Somali participants from Volunteers of America located in Minneapolis.

Finally, because of the challenges recruiting volunteers from the Latino and Somali communities within Southern Minnesota to participate in interviews, it was decided that a verbal survey would be given. An opportunity to give this survey came during an annual diversity fair in Willmar, Minnesota of which MAVA exhibited at and reached four Latinos, two Africans, and two Caucasian individuals who work with the Latino and African population.

FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH HMONG, LATINO AND SOMALI VOLUNTEERS

Building Relationships and Trust is Essential for the Engagement of Volunteers from Immigrant Communities

Building relationships and trust, as it is seen in a western world, often reflects an “ends” or “outcome-based” result. This ends or outcome-based result can be seen in organizations as “making quotas” or as one participant noted, “I feel that sometimes I am expected to connect them [the organization] with my community and its resources [as a result of volunteering].” These types of outcomes are derived from a need and sometimes a pressure for organizations to “reflect” the people they serve.

Back home, the community supports each other. It's not a volunteer network...it's part of society and that's just how it is.

- Somali Participant

Relationships and trust in these communities are not based on an “end result.” Rather, it is individuals working together to secure the sanctity of the relationship. It is the relationship that is at stake, not the end result. For the Hmong community, relationships are kinship, tribal and clan-based. As one participant noted,

In the Hmong community, [there] is a huge volunteer commitment that the Hmong people are doing....if someone passes away, and there is a funeral service, a lot of Hmong people will come together to help with cooking, rituals; even if they have to spend 24 hours. I see a lot of volunteers (right there) that have been helping each other; they have been comforting each other. This is volunteer work, but they did not document or record it...I just feel like because we have the habit back in our homeland when someone needs help with harvesting their crops we help them out and then they come and help you out. That support system has been present for a long time in the Hmong community.

For the Latino community, the family and community is core to relationship building and trust. One person noted,

My family was brought up to help, raised with the expectation to help out where you can.... I don't know if it's considered volunteering, it's just helping out. It's not how it's thought of – hey, this is what's going on and can you help. It's seen as “helping out” not volunteering.

Within the Somali community, tribal and religious values influence relationship norms. One person spoke to this by saying,

I guess the number one [reason] would be their [Somali] spiritual belief. That is the driving force...that's telling them to do volunteerism for communities that they live in for the greater good of that community.

As noted by many interviewees, there is a large need for organizations and members of the dominant society to build authentic relationships with immigrant communities and their members. A Somali man responded that it's important for nonprofits and county agencies to *"know the culture and the people. The community has to trust them."* Additionally, he added, *"[they] need to work with the community so they better understand the needs and to respond appropriately."* Similarly, a participant from the Hmong community said,



Community Volunteers Wash Graffiti in their Neighborhood
Photo courtesy of Rick Rhay

To the Hmong community, sometimes if they don't know an agency or a person, they may not trust it. Trust is very important. One idea is they want the Hmong to be recognized [valued] so that is also important. It has to be an agency they know because that agency will know who they are and what kind of help they need.

What does this mean for organizations that recruit and engage immigrant volunteers? It means that organizations need to understand how relationships are created and why they are created in the Hmong, Latino and Somali communities. One way is for organizations to understand how a group's culture can impact volunteerism. For example, a Latina participant said this about understanding the workings of the Latino culture and volunteerism:

Traditionally, our cultural community is collective and interdependent. We have a collectivist spirit and independence is not valued highly.



Volunteering at "Sports Day"

A Hmong participant noted the following about culture's impact on volunteerism:

Volunteerism that has a cultural attachment is more important than volunteerism that does not have attachment with culture. For example, at a funeral we would go and spend time, we would give money to family we don't even know, we stay there many hours to fill up the room. We cook food and it's not a big deal, but that's because it's part of the culture. [We learned] that when you have a funeral, [it's expected that] people will come and help you out.

And, one Somali interviewee said, *"Somalis mainly don't volunteer to build or advance their career....They mainly look at the volunteerism from its humanitarian angle, which is helping others to improve the life of the whole."*

Organizations that pay attention to the cultural dynamics of any group/culture will do better at building relationships and trust.

Volunteerism is a Social Obligation within Immigrant Communities

We found that participants perceived volunteerism from a place of social obligation. These were commonly expressed among immigrant groups as the use of themselves or their children as cultural brokers. This included oral and written translations, filling out forms, or attending school or meetings. For example, one Hmong participant noted,

I have done a lot of interpretation for parent teacher conferences. Last Friday we had a community engagement public forum that the school needed moderators for [in order to] talk with parents about the changes that are needed. I don't work there but I will do it for the parents.

Another way that obligation was seen was through the use of one's skills to help improve one's community or ensure one's status in the community. Generally, this is seen not as a benefit to oneself, but rather a benefit to the larger collective, and in the example below from a Somali participant, a way to keep social identity in place.

Girls stay with their family and don't go out. They stay home and clean the house. They will go out to help with the neighbors, like other moms or new moms and help with kids like babysitting. They help people so that they can go to work so they don't have to worry about a babysitter.

These types of informal volunteerism are not acknowledged as being volunteer work, and even more importantly not considered as skills for employment. For example, a Latino trained attorney in her home country said that her licensure as an attorney was not credible enough in mainstream organizations. She ended up in a volunteer position that did not utilize her skills as an attorney and working with children. The volunteer position she received: cleaning windows.

I suppose some people would consider what I do as volunteerism. But in our community [Hmong] it's hard to say. Some things that you volunteer for others within the Hmong community, they expect you to do it, so it's not really volunteer work. It's more like required volunteerism.

- Hmong Participant

Because families, villages and kin are part of the social norm for these three immigrant populations, relationships become a way to cultivate a sense of belonging, a social identity. Within informal structures (e.g. helping one's neighbor with a sick child or taking time to cook for guests at a funeral), volunteer opportunities help to solidify one's social identity. These events seal the relationships and, in many cases, uphold the social norms that support the relationships. As an example, a Hmong man said this in response to informally volunteering time for family and friends,

I give great advice to my siblings, niece, and nephews who are off to work and school. I don't think that's volunteerism to help family out, it's just what I do. In the Hmong culture it's just expected you do it all the time. You go out to family functions and help out (wedding funeral); that's just a cultural thing.

A Hmong woman interviewee noted similarly the importance of family and volunteerism on one's social identity. She said,

The value of family is really being connected to your family and being able to help each other out when necessary. [We have a] responsibility and there is a deep sense of responsibility that is instilled within our families and the community. Traditionally the older siblings are responsible for the younger siblings, and this translates to older generations being responsible for younger generations.

A Somali man from the Saint Cloud region, in reflection of social obligation, noted the following:

Informal volunteering is well known in the Somali community. In the town where I grew up, we had this "goob" concept. How it works is that we were farming community. During the harvesting season, all farmers used to come together and help each member of the community to harvest the crops. They would work on each member's farm at a time. They did that to help those families who did not have enough members to do the work.



Harvest Season

Additionally, many spoke about the importance of their own political history, and how these histories shape social identity. For example, banding together as a village or utilizing kinship networks to collectively take action against a political dictator or leader.

Finally, our research shows that collective systems are critical factors to consider within informal volunteerism. Overall, participants noted that the assistance and help they provide is often for a greater good for the community, not to a specific organization. This is why many of the

immigrant participants volunteered for organizations that are part of their community such as a Hmong American Partnership or a local mosque or church.

Socio-economic Factors Present a Challenge for Volunteerism from Immigrant Communities

Socio-economic factors and educational attainment influences the level of formal volunteer participation among immigrant groups. Studies show that immigrants with a higher education and income are able to access more volunteer opportunities. Socioeconomic status also factors in where volunteer or community work cannot be an option if families are trying to find employment. Some families who face dire conditions where employment is a first priority are not able to participate in formal volunteer structures.



Muslim Woman at Community Meeting

As an example, a Somali man shared with us that “[volunteer] commitment is challenging. People are struggling and don’t have the time to donate.” A Hmong man noted the following about socio-economic factors in the Hmong community:

We have to understand that 56% of these folks [Hmong] have less than a high school education. 1/3 of the kids are living below the poverty level. It’s not just Hmong but it’s all the people in poverty, and their first focus is how do we put food on the table? Then they say where does my clan need me? Then, they say what outside of the clan might interest me? When you’re seeking Hmong volunteers you have to understand that they have immediate need. If you want them to volunteer for your cause you have to present it in a way that outweighs their short term needs.

A Latino man provided the following as a response to commitment of volunteers from the Latino community:

Organizations reach out to Latinos and people genuinely are interested and sign up. What happens is life gets in the way; things come up unexpectedly; tragedies in the community which keeps them from showing up, and then they are seen as less reliable and inconsistent. It’s no fault of theirs; it’s just a way of life.

We did find that informal volunteerism, regardless of socioeconomic factors, is still prevalent among the three immigrant groups. A Somali man noted that although the economy has taken a toll on him, he still drives his neighbors, families and kin to search for employment, to check up on their health, or to talk to housing counselors. For him, there is a social obligation and a social order he needs to maintain. And, a Hmong woman participant said that she still has a responsibility to her clan and family no matter her economic situation.



Latino Man Volunteers with Conservation Nonprofit

Certain groups are hesitant to volunteer because they feel their help is not needed or valued; this was connected to building trust and relationships. This was expressed by participants as, “our community doesn’t understand the concept of volunteerism” or “there is too much paper work and record-keeping which is an obstacle to helping.” And, related to this, the notion of credibility was prevalent and speaks to the value of experiences and skills many immigrant volunteers bring with them to more formalized volunteer opportunities. For example, a Somali man noted that he was a doctor in his country, and in the United States, he is asked to accompany others to their appointments because many individuals in the community do not trust the medical system.

Finally, this study like others has shown that a lack of education and/or inability to speak English well does affect ability to volunteer in a more formalized manner. All three groups noted that “people are not comfortable to volunteer” if they can’t speak English well, or “people are not aware of what is available to them; this [formal volunteering] is a different idea for them.”

FINDINGS FROM SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUPS, NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS AND IMMIGRANT VOLUNTEERISM

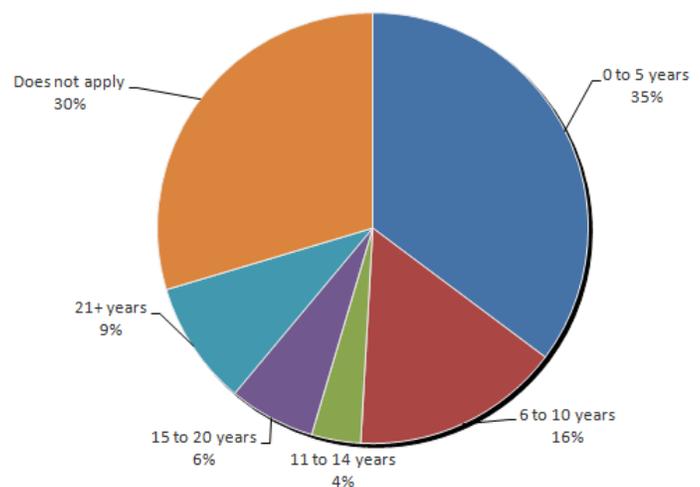
Members of the Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration (MAVA) received an email invitation with a link to a survey; this reached approximately 800 members. This on-line survey was created in Survey Monkey. Of the 800 members, 111 participated in the survey on-line. The majority of participants (69%) were from the Twin Cities Metro area, 10% were from Southern Minnesota, 5% were from Northern Minnesota, and the rest were from Central Minnesota. Additionally, 47% responded that they worked in organizations that had over 100 plus employees. 8% worked in organizations where there were 51-99 employees, 11% worked in agencies that employed 21-50 persons, and 22% worked in organizations that employed 6-20 staff. Finally, those who took the survey reported their positions in their organizations as follows: 63% Volunteer Managers, 20% Manager/Director, 14% Program Staff, and 3% executive directors.

Furthermore, on March 17, 2009 the Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration held a focus group with its members. An email invitation was sent out to members in the Twin Cities Metropolitan area. Thirty two individuals signed up; in the end, thirty six attended the focus group. Of the 36, six were from the Hmong, Latino, and Somali communities. And, in April 2009, a focus group was held in Saint Cloud. Twelve individuals responded, and nine were present for the focus group. Of the nine, one participant was from the Latino community and one was from the African community.

Findings from Survey: Working with Immigrant Volunteers

- Half of all participants have worked with immigrant volunteers for less than ten years.
- 62% of participants currently have immigrant volunteers in their organization.
- 69% of respondents feel it is important to involve immigrant volunteers in their organization; they rated this because of:
 - Changing demographics within MN
 - To reflect diverse communities
 - To be more culturally competent in service delivery
 - The opportunities to conduct outreach into diverse communities

Figure 1: How long has your organization worked with immigrant volunteers?



Comments on the value of immigrant volunteers include:

- I think that immigrant volunteers have a great understanding of what our participants are going through. Our participants build trust with immigrant volunteers easily.
- Everyone needs to be culturally competent in the services provided.
- The world is changing very quickly and everyone must be culturally competent to best serve.
- We have a very diverse staff and we like to reflect that diversity in the volunteers that work with us too.
- Our organization staff is just as diverse as the clients we serve. Encompassing volunteers of minority ethnicities is extremely important to our agency.
- Our department works with refugee populations and it is vital that we have volunteers who can speak their languages and who are a familiar face to our newly arrived families.
- Diversity is imperative in today's volunteer work force. The demographics of MN are changing and we need to change with the times and be more reflective of the communities we serve.

Figure 2: Do you currently have immigrant volunteers in your organization?

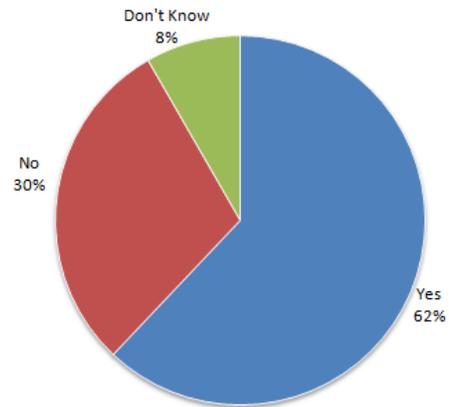
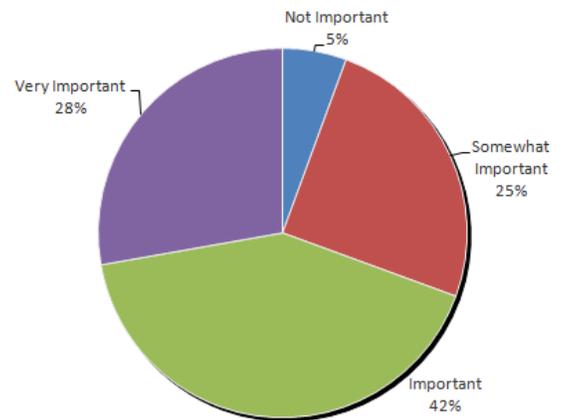


Figure 3: Importance Scale to Involve Immigrant Volunteers in Organization



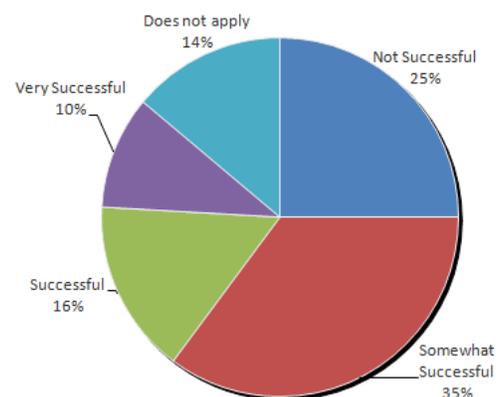
Findings from Survey: Success Ratings for Involving Immigrant Volunteers

25% of respondents felt they were successful at engaging immigrant volunteers. Those who did so were successful because their programs had very tangible skills to offer immigrant volunteers, *and* they spent the time to develop long-term relationships.

Comments around successful engagement of immigrant volunteers included the following:

- Our organization has strong ties with the community, including area high schools. Each

Figure 2: Success Rating for Involving Immigrant Volunteers



- summer a number are offered paid internships in order to gain professional experience.
- Most of our volunteers who are immigrants have been former students in either our ESL program or another ESL program. They understand how important the extra attention provided by a volunteer helped them achieve their academic goals.
 - We offer internships as well as volunteer opportunities, and have been fortunate to have a number of applicants from various backgrounds.
 - I work hard to find volunteers in the community that truly represent the community we serve.
 - Because we are in the heart of the city, we are able to recruit volunteers from our neighborhood which is quite diverse. Many of the immigrant volunteers are looking for job opportunities and recognize the value of volunteering at a place where they are applying for paid employment.

Those who were *somewhat successful* or *not successful* reported that cultural understanding and awareness were barriers, as well as transportation and a lack of resources (funding, organizational support and proper recruiting systems). Others included the following:

- While we are always recruiting in immigrant communities, we don't get a lot of return on our efforts.
- Our outreach to them is poor because our organization's leadership just doesn't get why we need to make the effort to not only involve but to engage these communities.
- It is difficult for us to reach this population. There are many barriers - language and culture.
- Most of the immigrant volunteers come to us from the colleges and university systems and are school aged. We haven't been as successful with other age groups.
- We have a small population of immigrants. Most of them are users of our services and therefore aren't able to volunteer according to our policy.
- While we've had some success in building relationships with individuals and organizations in our students' communities, volunteer recruitment in these communities has been (at worst) not successful, and (at best) passive.
- We don't have an active immigrant recruitment plan in place.

Findings from Survey: Capacity Building for Organizations Working with Immigrant Volunteers

Participants were asked to identify the first, second, and third areas of capacity building needed within their organizations to create an environment that successfully involves volunteers from immigrant communities. Respondents noted the following:

1. 40% picked “*connection to and with immigrant communities*” as their first important capacity building need for their organization. 36% noted that they would like to “*understand what volunteerism looks like within immigrant communities.*” 39% noted that *cultural competency* was an important capacity building area. These were the three highest scores in a primary capacity building area.

2. For a secondary capacity building area, 46% of respondents picked funding resources to work with immigrant volunteers; 43% chose gaining more knowledge in working with immigrant volunteers as the two highest scores.

Figure 3: Capacity building areas to successfully involve immigrant volunteers.

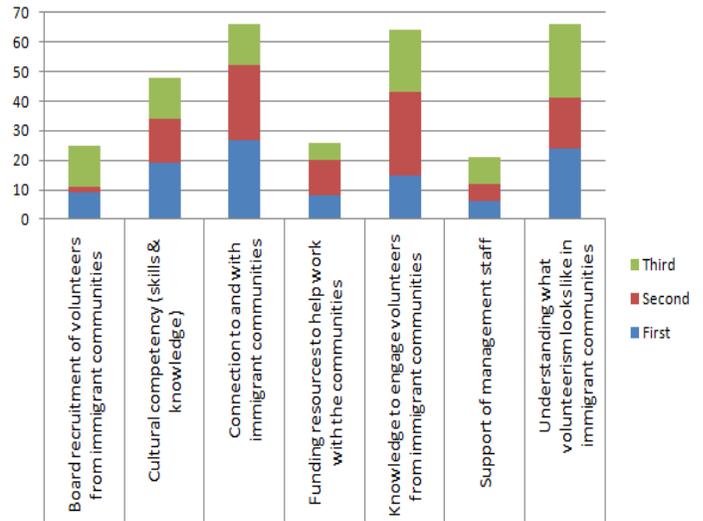
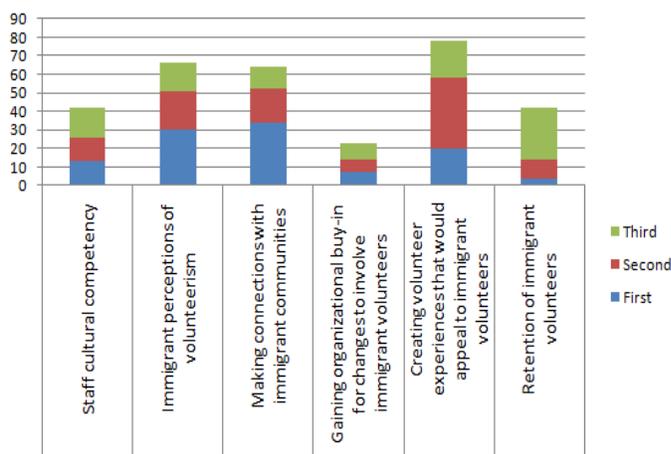


Figure 4: Topics that would assist organizations in their involvement of immigrant volunteers.



In *Figure 6*, respondents noted the top three areas of training that would be most useful to their organization’s involvement of immigrant volunteers. The responses were similar to their responses in capacity building areas. Participants were most interested in: (1) making connections with immigrant communities, (2) understanding the perceptions of immigrants about volunteerism, and (3) creating volunteer experiences that would appeal to immigrant volunteers.

FINDINGS FROM SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUPS SUCCESS STRATEGIES WHEN WORKING WITH IMMIGRANT VOLUNTEERS

From the survey and focus groups with mainstream organizations, participants shared success strategies that worked for their organizations when involving immigrant populations. These success strategies included the following: *competencies of staff and organization, being inclusive and respectful to the individual, building talents and interests of volunteers, organizational flexibility, community outreach and recruitment, and provide meaningful opportunities.*

HAVE KEY COMPETENCIES IN STAFF AND ORGANIZATION

Participants noted certain qualities and characteristics of their staff and organizations that led them to be successful with immigrant volunteers. Some of these included: open mindedness, flexibility in working styles, ability to understand, and learning to think outside of the box, knowing the culture and language of the volunteers, and the ability to empathize and understand cross cultural issues.

BE INCLUSIVE AND RESPECTFUL TO INDIVIDUALS

A second successful strategy that worked for some organizations include a focus on the individual's interests and goals rather than stereotyping them based on the culture they came from. Participants noted that it was important to treat each person as an individual and to *"ask them what they need"* or to *"offer them as much help as possible"* and even to *"direct personal attention and encouragement to them."* One participant noted that building relationships has been essential to her success with the communities she works with; that *"until relationships are developed, we can have the best recruitment efforts available, but the relationship comes first."* Finally, some spoke about the importance of making certain *"immigrant volunteers know they are important to the organization and to the volunteer work. Tell them they can bring their family and friends to events."*

BUILD ON THE INTERESTS AND TALENTS OF VOLUNTEERS

A common theme from the surveys pointed to building on the interests and talents of volunteers. Some noted that it is important to understand the talents, how they might differ or be the same and to match the opportunities to the skills and talents of these individuals. One person noted, *"Listen to their interests and place them in meaningful positions or connect them to an agency that better aligns with their own mission."* Additionally, some spoke about *"personalizing the experience"* to the strengths of the volunteers.

Six Success Strategies to Engage Volunteers from Immigrant Communities

1. Have Key Competencies in Staff and Organization.
2. Be Inclusive and Respectful to Individuals.
3. Build on the Interests and Talents of Volunteers.
4. Have Organizational Flexibility.
5. Do Community Outreach and Recruitment.
6. Provide Meaningful Opportunities.

HAVE ORGANIZATIONAL FLEXIBILITY

Another success strategy mentioned by several participants spoke to the need for organizations to be more flexible with their systems, policies, and procedures. Successful organizations were flexible in their scheduling of volunteer hours; coupled with this was an *“understanding for cultural issues like family obligations”* that could come up during volunteer time. Another success in organizational flexibility was creating an environment that had an *“open door policy”* which promoted relationship building and a more welcoming environment. Also, making sure that attention is paid to the immigrant volunteer(s) by spending more time to train or work with them on issues, skills that need to be built, or just *“being helpful.”* Finally, an aspect to organizational flexibility was for leaders or supervisors to create space that minimized frustration around policies and systems for those who are volunteering and for those who manage volunteers.

DO COMMUNITY OUTREACH AND RECRUITMENT

Those who worked successfully with immigrant volunteers shared that it is essential to *“meet with them in their own communities, which helps the relationship and trust.”* For many, community outreach and recruitment of immigrant volunteers begins with knowing the communities that organizations want to work with and connecting with gatekeepers and community leaders. Additionally, partnering with immigrant-serving organizations has worked for many, but overall, the common theme in this area is to involve immigrant volunteers by building relationships and trust.



Community Partners

Photo courtesy of Hmong American Partnership

PROVIDE MEANINGFUL OPPORTUNITIES

Finally, a common theme for success strategies includes the idea that providing meaningful opportunities for immigrant volunteers creates long term value. Ideas such as, *“ask the group what is meaningful to them”* are important. Additionally, providing immigrant volunteers with an opportunity to engage in meaningful activity that brings value back to their families and culture helps build relationships. Some mentioned that *“providing a mentor or coach”* to help them during their volunteer time would be beneficial and serve as a symbolic gesture of investment. Finally, knowing how to create opportunities that *“engage the individual’s interest”* is critical and can come through building relationships and trust among volunteers and the organization.

Findings from Survey and Focus Groups: Challenges to Nonprofit Organizations’ Ability to Manage Immigrant Volunteers

Finally, we were interested in the root causes and barriers within an organization when working with immigrant volunteers. Two themes were most common; they are: *cultural understanding, sensitivity, and proficiency* and creating appropriate *organizational structure and systems* to support immigrant volunteerism.

CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING, SENSITIVITY, AND PROFICIENCY

Cultural understanding and proficiency was expressed as a challenge in various ways. First, participants felt that language barriers contributed to an unsuccessful engagement of immigrant volunteers. *“Not knowing the language of the immigrant volunteers”* and *“volunteers who did not know English”* served as a barrier because *“materials in our organization are in English and we don’t have funds to translate”* and *“our volunteer positions require a certain level of English speaking and writing skills.”* One participant noted that the...

...major reason we have not taken volunteers from immigrant populations is our inability to effectively communicate. Many times, the people who may want to volunteer only speak broken English. We need to be able to effectively communicate the rules and policies of our programs and if we are not sure they understand. We do not want to risk taking them.

Second, participants felt that the biases of staff and organizational leaders towards certain groups and the value differences that exist within different cultural groups presented a challenge. For example, one participant noted that as a hospice care center, their notions of death and dying are different from the immigrant volunteers they work with, thus how do they bridge an understanding of the topic when the volunteer has a different view of death and dying? Other cultural differences include frustration and lack of understanding for reasons why men and women volunteer differently within their communities, and in general, not understanding what volunteerism looks like within immigrant communities.



Leaders of Volunteers at MAVA Workshop
Photo courtesy of Frank Mazzocco

Finally, some participants noted that there is a *“fear of the stranger”* and *“racism and discrimination issue in organizations”* that is not being addressed. One participant said *“our staff feels uncomfortable because they don’t understand”* and another said that staff members have an attitude and behavior that is *“not tolerant to take extra time to explain things to the volunteers”* and that *“it’s not my job”* is pervasive. This bias and the misperceptions were clear in the survey and focus group responses. Some commented that they *“are unsure about the values of volunteerism in immigrant communities”* and one person mentioned that *“they [immigrants] don’t know what volunteering is all about”* while another said *“their culture does not encourage volunteerism.”* Based on these perceptions, immigrant communities do not trust the organizations because *“they don’t understand what it is that we do and why we do it for them.”*

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES AND SYSTEMS

One of the most common themes is the appropriateness of an organization’s structure and systems to engage immigrant volunteers. Some of these systems dealt with the type of

volunteers that are needed. For example, youth or college students could only volunteer if they could meet a certain amount of credits/hours in their volunteer time. Another was due to flexibility and timing, for example, a volunteer position that needed extensive training, but did not allow for flexibility in that training. Additionally, organizational systems did not consider the impact that socio-economic status can have on immigrant volunteers. Transportation and compensation for hours volunteered were the most frequently noted barriers in an organization's systems. Participants wrote that transportation funding is low or non-existent, thus volunteers from socio-economically disadvantaged communities do not have access to volunteer events and opportunities.

Some participants mentioned the legal system and organizational policies as a barrier to involving a certain set of immigrant volunteers. Comments included the following:

- Because our organization conducts criminal background checks of everyone, this sets the tone for those who already do not trust the police or people in authority.
- We are a county-based system and some people do not trust that.
- Immigrant communities sometimes are intimidated by the complex judicial system.
- The rules and regulations we have can be intimidating to someone who doesn't know what they are or how to follow them.

Additionally, some participants spoke to the role and behaviors of leaders and staff within their organization as barriers to making change.

- Our organization is a dinosaur, slow to adapt. Too many ideas without leadership to define a well defined direction with a vision clear to all to direct and execute goals effectively. Or not enough buy-in from the organization whose top management is protecting the kingdoms they built and have not let the next generations into the realm.
- What keeps us from coming to a common understanding of how to best serve is time; we are often too busy with work to take the time to meet and discuss.
- The root cause is the staff time it takes to develop relationships with individuals in these communities and resources (money available to staff programs).

Finally, some participants wrote about the organization's expectations for volunteers' skills versus what skill sets are available. For example, one person noted that in her experience the immigrant volunteers she worked with have a limited skill set and her organization does not have a good way to access the talent. She wrote,

We need to find ways they can still serve, build on their confidence, and learn new skills. This requires commitment on the part of the organization to breakdown projects into understandable and easier 'chunks' to help invite all levels of proficiency.

This comment is one of many that speak to an organization's inability to transfer and/or translate the current talents of immigrant volunteers into skills that can be used to make the organization more effective and efficient.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our research, the following are recommendations for nonprofit organizations to think about when engaging volunteers from immigrant communities.

1. Understanding how relationships are created and why trust is important within immigrant communities can help organizations to successfully engage immigrant volunteers.

Our research shows that immigrant volunteers want organizations to recognize and honor a more authentic relationship that goes beyond “end results” and “outcomes.” They want organizations to understand that relationships within their communities are not short-term; that there is a long-term investment that includes understanding the deeper reason for why relationships are created and how trust is formed. Thus, organizations need to ask the following:

- (1) Who is important in relationships, and why?
- (2) What forms of relationships exist in this community?
- (3) What do relationships mean within this community?
- (4) How do people in this community work together?

Because participants stated that building relationship and trust is key, asking these questions enable an organization to be more authentic in their engagement of volunteers. They drive at the heart of how relationships are perceived in any community.

2. Organizations are more successful if they can establish and articulate the reasons for developing authentic relationships with immigrant volunteers and communities.

Organizations must explore their reasons and identify their intentions for engaging immigrant volunteers. Why is this important? From our data collection of all groups and participants, we found that organizations have not done an adequate job in defining their work around volunteerism and immigrant communities. This was demonstrated in comments from organizational staff who spoke about “no specific strategies or plans,” related to this area, and the limited support that volunteer managers/coordinators/staff received to implement and successfully engage volunteers from immigrant communities. As a result, we suggest that organizations ask themselves the following questions when taking on this initiative:

- (1) Why do we want to engage immigrant volunteers?
- (2) What do we know about this community?
- (3) What values or beliefs do we hold about this community?
- (4) What issues or challenges might we face?
- (5) What type of relationship do we want to have?

We feel these questions will help an organization to assess its readiness in working with immigrant communities.

3. Find volunteer opportunities that engage and benefit the collective, family-centered system that is prevalent in immigrant communities.

Because the immigrant participants spoke about their families and the communities as central to their social identities, it is important for organizations to find volunteer opportunities that speak to the family and/or community system. Organizations can also better articulate the benefits and impact that formal volunteerism has on family and community systems. For example, a volunteer from the Hmong community noted that he enjoys volunteering at a local Hmong organization because he knows that his tutoring of school children helps to promote and advance Hmong education in the United States. He felt that non-Hmong organizations articulate only how the volunteering helps to improve the agency's mission (organizational), and not the community.

We provide some tips for this recommendation area for your work with immigrant volunteers:

- Volunteer activities with the entire family present or activities that benefit the community (not just the organization) will have better turn out than those that do not speak to either of these systems.
- Address family concerns within volunteerism because, although family ties can enforce volunteerism, family obligations can also prevent individuals from volunteering.
- Understand the restrictions to potentially volunteering such as child care needs, cultural brokering, and running family errands.
- Recognize that most often, family centered activities and issues (social relationships and obligations) will take priority to organizational volunteer commitment.

4. Organizations that cultivate a strong sense of social identity for immigrant volunteers are much better at engaging and recruiting this population.

Over and over again, we heard from the participants that the identity of the immigrant volunteer is more closely tied to their communities and their families than to an organization. And, when it came to volunteering in organizations, volunteers would likely choose organizations within their communities. Moreover, they choose organizations that speak to and align with the values of their social identity.

It would be important then to develop strategies that focus on this significant factor. A successful strategy used by one organization to retain and recruit Latino volunteers was to create an environment that nurtured and spoke to the Latino volunteers' social identity. We suggest using the strategies below to continue your work successfully.

Strategies include:

1. Personalizing the volunteer position to the volunteer's experiences, e.g. skills, knowledge, talents etc.

2. Making a connection between the impact of the volunteer position and the volunteer's background, family, and community.
3. Ensuring that volunteer is allowed the opportunity to utilize their culture and language skills, yet not "boxing them into" a specific role, e.g. cultural broker.
4. Invite them to include their families in volunteer events, social meetings, etc.
5. Get to know your volunteer's cultural history either through discussions with them and/or attending events in their community.

By doing this, the organization can begin to build trust and a stronger relationship can be created as a result.

5. Organizations need to assess the changing landscape of volunteerism, including practices and systems that cause barriers to fully engaging immigrant volunteers.

Organizations need to strategically and intentionally have periodic conversations about changes in volunteerism and the impact this has in their organizational practices. Many immigrant participants in this study as well as organizations in focus groups indicated that organizations do not do enough to hold meaningful strategy sessions on immigrant volunteerism. We recommend that these conversations should include and begin with board and organizational leadership/management. Questions should include the following:

Change Questions

1. What changes do we see in volunteerism, particularly with immigrant volunteers?
2. What is (or will be) the impact of these changes to our organization? To our mission? To how we deliver our programs?
3. How can our organizations adapt to meet these changes?
4. Are we willing to change? If so, how far are we willing to change? If not, why not?

Barriers Questions

1. What have we heard or do know about that is causing barriers to participation?
2. Do we have the capacity to address the barriers?
3. What will it take for us to successfully involve immigrant volunteers?
4. Are we willing to address the changes? Why or why not?

6. Organizations need to assess their capacity and find the adequate resources to successfully engage immigrant volunteers.

Organizations need to assess their level of financial and time commitment to working with immigrant volunteers and the communities they come from. Engagement of volunteers from communities more accustomed to informal volunteerism takes considerable change and transition work in adapting organizational structures, policies, and systems to be more culturally relevant and sensitive. Even though resources are tight for most organizations, the reality is that to successfully involve immigrant volunteers, it will either take securing adequate funding and time or re-shifting how time and resources are used in organizations. We suggest assessing your organization's resources in the following areas:

1. What type of staff members (personalities, behaviors, style of work) are needed to work with immigrant volunteers?
2. What skills are necessary when working with immigrant volunteers?
3. Do we have systems in place that create barriers to participation? If so, what needs to be adapted?
4. What types of structures (roles and responsibilities) do we need to provide for a successful engagement of immigrant volunteers?
5. How will we know we are making positive changes and being inclusive to immigrant volunteers?

7. Know the cultural history and background of immigrant volunteerism, including the cultural competency skills needed to work with immigrant populations.

Cultural competency and proficiency of staff and the organization are critical to have when working with immigrant volunteers. Organizations that feel they are successfully involving immigrant volunteers create environments where volunteers thrive. These environments have the following characteristics:

1. Leadership creates a culture that emphasizes the importance of having volunteers from immigrant communities.
2. Diversity is part of a larger strategic plan/direction for the organization; it is embedded in the shared vision of the organization.
3. Culturally proficient staff members who have a genuine interest for working and interacting with immigrant volunteers.
4. Direct and personal encouragement of the immigrant volunteers.
5. Recognition for the value and knowledge the volunteer brings (outside of being a part of the immigrant community).
6. Ensuring the relationship is authentic and maintaining a relationship where both individuals learn from one another.
7. An organization that has the intention to continuously learn about the cultural background and needs of the volunteer.

8. Build on the Talents of Immigrant Volunteers

Many immigrant volunteers have skills and knowledge that are not tapped into and/or not seen by organizations as valuable contributions or “credible.” One participant noted that his skills as a licensed doctor in Somalia can be useful to nonprofits but no one at these nonprofits asked him about his background outside of the volunteer position he applied for. They only realized he could provide assistance, in his specialty area, to the Somali clientele when he told them he had

an obligation to take a friend to the doctor. His role was to interpret and provide health information, and that the friend wanted him there because he was a doctor.

The lesson learned from this story is to provide volunteers with meaningful opportunities and space in which they are allowed to share their experiences, knowledge, and expertise.

9. Engage the whole organization to recognize the importance of volunteers from immigrant communities.

Many organizations noted that, in general, part of the volunteer coordinator/manager's role is to improve or find ways to engage immigrant volunteers. However, these organizations also said that because this responsibility has been delegated to the volunteer coordinator/manager, the rest of the organization is not invested in the process to involve volunteers. Immigrant volunteers indicated that they could feel the ripple effect of this in their volunteer work. For example, a Hmong volunteer said her volunteer coordinator treats her with respect and gives her opportunities to contribute, but the rest of the staff and the organization do not exhibit the same behaviors and appreciation for her work. It is critical then, for the whole organization to understand the value of immigrant volunteers to the agency's mission and services.

10. Cultivate racial and cultural understanding, sensitivity, and proficiency.

Many comments from the survey pointed to racial and cultural misunderstanding, biases, and misperceptions about immigrant groups, immigrant volunteerism, and cultural norms and values. Organizational leaders (we include board members here) must be ready to address issues of race, culture, and ethnicity and be prepared to discuss with their staff, volunteers, and community their philosophy for inclusion as it relates to immigrant volunteers. It was apparent in the data collected that there is much work to be done around cultivating understanding for culture and eliminating racial biases. Organizational leaders must have a plan of action that addresses these areas of an organization.

TECHINICAL NOTES

In the data gathering process, we also interviewed three mainstream agencies (two in the Twin Cities area and one in Saint Cloud) but we decided not to use the information collected. Due to limitations of the research (funding, time, and staff), this information was not included in the data analysis.

DEFINITIONS FOR HMONG, LATINO AND SOMALI

Hispanics or Latinos are classified as “one of the specific Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino categories listed on the Census 2000 questionnaire –‘Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano,’ ‘Puerto Rican,’ or ‘Cuban’-as well as those who indicate that they are ‘other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino.’” The Hmong were acknowledged in the Census 2000 as being people who inhabit the mountainous regions of China and Southeast Asia. Somalis were categorized as being Muslim people originating from Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti. (U.S. Census Bureau)

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