

CHARACTERISTICS OF A SUCCESSFUL LOCAL CITIZENSHIP PROGRAM

The centerpiece of a national citizenship initiative will be community-based, charitable, legal immigration service programs. This chapter recommends the key characteristics of such programs, both for program directors and staff delivering comprehensive citizenship services and for funders evaluating the professionalism and capacity of such programs.

Each characteristic is discussed briefly, followed by descriptive details that can be used as benchmarks for achieving the objective. While all programs must fit local realities, these recommendations should be achievable in every community. For more information on legal immigration service program models, please read *Immigration Management: Building Blocks for a Successful Program*, produced by the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. (CLINIC), Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, and Immigration and Refugee Services of America. Readers with interest in this chapter should consider attending CLINIC Immigration Program Management Training. A training schedule may be viewed at www.cliniclegal.org/training.

Well-Trained Legal Staff

The success of a community service model turns on the expertise and dedication of staff. Legal training is essential but can often be overlooked because of time demands and budget constraints. Staff training opportunities set a standard for professional development and serve as a reward for staff who are often overworked and underpaid. The lack of proper training can result in the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) denying an application, an immigrant being placed in removal proceedings, or a malpractice suit against legal staff and their employer. A positive outcome of well-trained staff is a high rate of naturalization approvals and a zero rate of improper filings, which will garner increased client satisfaction and community trust in the naturalization process. Another benefit is improved staff retention.

BENCHMARKS:

- 1 Training time is documented in an employee's work plan and schedule. Staff supervision and yearly evaluation verifies completed training and satisfaction. New employees are assigned experienced mentors and a mentorship plan is implemented and fulfilled.
- 2 The parent agency budgets sufficient funds for all staff to attend yearly trainings on topics relevant to their caseloads. Staff attend local and national trainings by organizations that provide ongoing technical assistance. Local USCIS staff are invited to train community-based organizations on immigration and naturalization law and benefit application processing procedures. In-house, ongoing training, led by a supervising attorney, is preferred, supplemented by occasional external training.
- 3 Peer review of case files is conducted prior to filing applications to ensure quality, particularly for new staff. Peer review is also a form of staff training.
- 4 The parent nonprofit agency simultaneously seeks Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA) agency recognition status and accreditation status for its nonattorney staff.

Partnerships with Community Organizations

One organization can seldom deliver comprehensive citizenship services. Most often, organizations need the resources of other organizations, gained through formal and informal partnerships and volunteer services.

Ideally, a comprehensive citizenship program at the local level is horizontally and vertically integrated with other organizations. Partnerships among organizations with shared or complimentary missions provide expanded services, more training opportunities, and strong advocacy efforts. At the local level, relationships with other community-based service providers enable widespread and

targeted outreach, seamless referrals and expanded services, and the elimination of unnecessary duplication of services. Local agencies also join networks with national support organizations to receive training, technical support, news updates, advocacy support, conference opportunities, and funding.

BENCHMARKS:

- 1** Citizenship programs are active members of national, state, and local coalitions that engage in advocacy and support the provision of naturalization services and other immigration benefits.
- 2** Citizenship programs in formal collaboration share funding opportunities and unite diverse but complimentary expertise, particularly legal immigration services and English as a second language (ESL) instruction.
- 3** An essential purpose of partnerships is to expand a program's service capacity, such as the ability to train staff and volunteers. Partnerships to access legal services ensure that only attorneys or BIA-accredited staff practice law.
- 4** Partnering organizations develop outreach materials in all targeted languages and standardize their appearance and text to ensure quality and clarity of citizenship messages.
- 5** Outreach across the target area is strategically developed among organizations, using current demographic data from the U.S. Census's Community Population Survey and other reliable data sets.
- 6** Community-wide events such as naturalization group application workshops and naturalization oath ceremonies are planned and coordinated with every partnering organization. They, in turn, use their list of friends and media contacts to invite community groups to attend.
- 7** Community-based coalitions regularly communicate with USCIS staff, particularly the community liaison officer, and the Office of Citizenship in the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to maintain open dialogue about case status updates, advocacy concerns, and programmatic needs.

Inclusion of Naturalized Immigrants as Partners

Naturalized immigrants are possibly the best promoters of U.S. citizenship and exemplify what is good about the nation's immigrant heritage and policies. Their stories and successes are what commit community-based organizations to provide citizenship programs. Yet immigrants who are former clients or local residents not connected to service organizations are an easily overlooked resource. Partnerships with immigrants, especially naturalized citizens, can strengthen a program through their expanded community contacts, technical and experiential knowledge, and donations of time and money.

BENCHMARKS:

- 1** Naturalized immigrants are trained and supported to conduct outreach and eligibility prescreening.
- 2** Naturalized immigrants are featured in multimedia messages and broad outreach campaigns. They promote fair immigration laws in local newspapers, editorials, and letter-writing campaigns to elected officials.
- 3** English and naturalization classes are expanded to include immigrant teachers trained in adult education, English instruction, and naturalization.
- 4** Volunteer English tutors include naturalized immigrants who lack teaching experience or training but possess well-developed English-language skills.
- 5** Naturalized immigrants trained in naturalization law and procedures, including so-called "red flag" issues of concern, conduct mock naturalization interviews in their homes, neighborhoods, or community centers for applicants scheduled for their first interviews.
- 6** Naturalized immigrants speak at naturalization oath ceremonies about the benefits and responsibilities of U.S. citizenship and how these apply to their personal lives.
- 7** Naturalized immigrants join other volunteers to provide post-oath ceremony services, including voter registration, passport application assistance, and information to new citizen parents about their children's citizenship.
- 8** Naturalized immigrants are board members, advisory group members, and donors to local and national charitable organizations.

Ample and Sustainable Funding

Preparing immigrants, particularly the most vulnerable, for naturalization can be a lengthy process. Therefore, a comprehensive naturalization program requires ample and sustainable funding.

Funders should acknowledge that naturalization services leading to U.S. citizenship result in numerous benefits for foreign and native-born communities in an era of historically high immigration. A short list of benefits include: 1) a life-changing, enduring improvement for millions of immigrants, 2) elevated community engagement and good will toward immigrants, 3) a reduced gap between enfranchised and disenfranchised residents, and 4) integration of foreign-born and native-born populations.

A lack of funding for legal service agencies often means that citizenship programs are neglected. The path to citizenship is a daunting, lengthy process, and, when funding is limited, naturalization services and outreach may be neglected in the face of immigrants' immediate need for status and documentation. As a result, fewer foreign-born residents than are optimal know English, U.S. history, and civics. Because of limited funding for outreach and education about the process, even would-be citizens who do not need assistance are slower in making citizenship applications. All this results in an ever-increasing gap between naturalized and nonnaturalized immigrants along racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic class divides. Furthermore, if funding is ample in one state, but not another, the result is a gross imbalance that has national implications.

The failure of government, philanthropic, and corporate sources to adequately fund services allows the nation to benefit from the economic and cultural contributions of noncitizens, while ignoring or impeding their full inclusion as equals under the law.

BENCHMARKS:

- 1 Community service agencies have pie charts breaking down sources of funding by categories to determine if the funding mix reflects an appropriate balance.
- 2 Board members assist in cultivating foundations and individual donors.
- 3 Proposals for funding reflect a comprehensive approach to citizenship services, including demographic and statistical need, well-defined benefits and responsibilities of citizenship, legal and language support services, enduring partnerships, and the macro impact of expanded naturalization rates on the community, state, and country.
- 4 Proposals reflect a collaborative fundraising approach among organizations in support of the citizenship project.

- 5 Funders, government, foundations, and private businesses are well informed and conversant on the need for naturalization services, their benefits to immigrants, and long-lasting, positive consequences for local communities and the nation as a whole.
- 6 By invitation, funders visit agency sites where direct services are delivered. They also attend public events such as naturalization workshops, naturalization oath ceremonies, polling stations in immigrant communities, and immigrant-led advocacy events where voter representation is consequential.
- 7 Service providers demonstrate the characteristics of a comprehensive citizenship program that appeal to funders, particularly community partnerships, multiple funding sources, and diverse client populations, as well as documentation and evaluation of outcomes.
- 8 Immigrant-focused and immigrant-led community organizers for social change report to funders on the successes of naturalized immigrants who vote and participate in advocacy campaigns.

Effective Use of Statistical and Client Databases

Using database technology can facilitate decision-making and document outcomes. Demographic data sets of the foreign-born population by characteristics and locale can be very useful in determining service agency office locations, staffing and language needs, outreach strategy, and placement of neighborhood citizenship services and events. Client databases can be organized for simple queries according to nationality, gender, age, zip code, and citizenship eligibility dates for parents and children. Client and demographic databases can be used together to track naturalization applications and approval rates against noncitizen numbers in metropolitan statistical areas. Comparing rising naturalization rates over time against U.S. Census Bureau and USCIS immigration data can mark citizenship program successes.

BENCHMARKS:

- 1 Staff access and read demographic data from the U.S. Census Bureau and DHS's Office of Immigration Statistics.
- 2 Client databases are complete and current with categories for queries and capable of producing mailing labels for client communications.
- 3 Directors use data technology and results to make program decisions.

- 4 Client databases are designed with tickler systems so that when individuals obtain Lawful Permanent Resident status they are sent information on naturalization benefits, requirements, and resources. A similar tickler system is used when individuals are approaching an eligibility date for naturalization: They receive mail and phone calls referring them to language and citizenship classes and setting an appointment to complete a naturalization application.
- 5 Databases are set up with tickler systems to inform parents when children at 18 or older are eligible to naturalize on their own or when minor children are citizens through derivation and need documentation to verify their citizenship status.
- 6 USCIS oath ceremony notifications or responses from calls to clients determine when clients have obtained citizenship in order to provide post-citizenship services.
- 7 Noncitizen data sets are compared to naturalization applications and approvals to determine program outcomes and guide evaluation.

Productive Relations with the Department of Homeland Security

The U. S. Immigration and Citizenship Services (USCIS) is a division of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the successor to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). It is responsible for administering immigration and naturalization adjudication functions and establishing immigration services, policies, and priorities. Its duties include receiving and adjudicating naturalization applications and, in some districts, giving the oath of allegiance and certificate of citizenship. The responsibility of the Office of Citizenship (OoC), also in DHS, is to “promote instruction and training on citizenship rights and responsibilities and to provide immigrants with information and tools necessary to successfully integrate into American civic culture.” USCIS and OoC are separate but work in partnership under the supervision of the USCIS director.

The Application for Naturalization (N-400) and other naturalization-supporting documents are sent to one of four USCIS Service Centers based on the applicant’s residence. The Service Center cashes the application fees and reviews the documentation for prima facie eligibility. Then, the documents are sent to one of USCIS’s District Offices with jurisdiction over the naturalization applicant’s interview, eligibility outcome, and oath ceremony.

Given the authority of DHS over the receipt, processing, and outcome of all immigration benefits, it is imperative that immigrant service organizations have a cooperative and productive relationship with DHS offices. They should be aware of their respective activities, create a feedback loop for questions, answers, clarifications, and

corrections, improve efficiency for immigrant applicants, and generate goodwill despite any past disappointments. Open communication is key. The responsibility should be mutual and evenly shared; if it is not, both government and private services are less effective, more costly, and discouraging to the immigrant community than they otherwise would have been.

BENCHMARKS:

- 1 Regularly scheduled meetings are held between DHS representatives with decision-making authority and immigrant-focused coalitions that deliver immigration services and promote fair immigration policies. Meeting agendas are set in advance, mutually developed, and reflect the needs of both sides. DHS provides community groups with accurate statistics on applications filed and processing dates. An agreement should be reached as to whether policy discussions and case inquiries will be on the same or separate meeting agendas.
- 2 Community-based organizations document the needs of immigrant customers and legal service providers in letters to the appropriate DHS staff in authority. Letters specifically state what action is needed to produce the desired outcome.
- 3 DHS staff make their phone and fax numbers and email addresses available to legal representatives with confidence that this contact information will not be shared freely or abused.
- 4 By invitation, DHS staff attend public information meetings and naturalization workshops for question-and-answer sessions with immigrant communities.
- 5 By invitation, DHS staff provide immigration and naturalization law training to charitable legal and social-service staff, including English and naturalization teachers.
- 6 DHS maintains and updates a list of BIA-recognized agencies providing charitable legal immigration services and community-based English-language classes. Community-based organizations delivering these services facilitate DHS’s maintenance and updates of these lists.
- 7 By invitation, DHS conducts offsite “circuit-ride” adjudication appointments and oath ceremonies at community organization sites for the ease of immigrant clients, especially the elderly, the disabled, and those living in cities far from USCIS District Offices.
- 8 DHS welcomes the participation of community groups in oath ceremonies and their provision of post-citizenship services.

Integrated Legal and Language Services

Although legal immigration staff and English-language teachers use different skills and deliver different services, their identities are inextricably linked in the minds of their foreign-born clients. Almost all immigrants have contact with both professions over the course of their lives in the United States. Yet these professionals know little about one another, and institutional and programmatic ties have not been fully developed. This lack of integration is particularly detrimental when delivering comprehensive citizenship services.

Typically, these professionals see foreign-born clients with similar characteristics and needs. Their clients tend to be recent arrivals who are semiskilled, work multiple jobs, and earn low income. They have few years of formal education and have low literacy rates in their native language. They often are juggling childcare responsibilities at home. Many are from such vulnerable populations as refugees, the elderly, or the disabled.

These immigrants contribute their labor and culture but are often so overworked they have no time to pursue their own immigration and English-language needs. Delivering legal and language services to them requires a shared mission, an increased number of combined resources, cross-trained staff, and time to redesign fragmented programs. The desired outcome is to ensure that our nation's most vulnerable newcomers are not alienated and made more vulnerable in their adopted country, but receive all the opportunities the United States has to offer to them and their children. Promoting and delivering citizenship services is one of the best ways to achieve this goal.

BENCHMARKS:

- 1 Legal immigration programs or parent organizations include in-house literacy and English-language programs for the foreign born. Institutional spaces are shared, and both legal and language services offer expanded hours, transportation, and childcare.
- 2 Together, both professions call on employers to provide worksite English and naturalization classes for their employees.
- 3 Legal immigration programs, charitable organizations, and language programs forge programmatic ties that provide seamless services. Joint funding proposals that recognize the imperative of blending these services are submitted to lead funders.

- 4 Legal immigration staff and their parent organizations join language instructors in educating funders about the severe lack of affordable and accessible English-language classes. Both professions can garner increased federal, state, county, philanthropic, and corporate funding for English-language services by working together.
- 5 Legal immigration programs train language teachers about basic naturalization law but provide legal service support to avoid pressuring them to act as paralegals for their immigrant students. Legal staff visit language classes to conduct immigration question-and-answer sessions.
- 6 English teachers offer legal immigration staff language instruction for cross-training purposes to certify them to teach English and citizenship classes.
- 7 English and naturalization teachers are recruited and trained to participate in naturalization group processing workshops.
- 8 Professionals from both occupations unite in designing native-language outreach for English classes and naturalization instruction materials.
- 9 Teachers of immigrant student populations are recruited as members of immigration coalitions to improve the flow of information between USCIS, English teachers, and the immigrant community.

A Full Range of Naturalization Classes and Services

Just as linking legal and English-language professionals is important to delivering efficient services, forging a comprehensive, community-wide citizenship program is critical. Whether in the name of one organization or as part of consortia of agencies, a comprehensive approach provides seamless services. Such a program supports all the special needs of naturalization applicants and assists them from start to finish—from education about eligibility, rights, and responsibilities to post-oath ceremony integration and empowerment activities.

Naturalization classes are where the most time and effort is spent to make citizenship possible for the greatest number of people. Classes for literacy in native and English languages, vocational English, General Education Degree (GED) classes, and civics instruction can foster the desire and build the skills for citizenship. All foreign-born residents of the United States, despite varying degrees of English-language ability and length of lawful permanent residency, should be viewed as potential citizens. A short-term view of an immigrant's future in the United States, coupled with a fragmented or limited roster of legal and language citizenship services, will exclude vulnerable populations from a national citizenship implementation plan.

BENCHMARKS:

- 1 Literacy, language, and citizenship classes are sufficient in number, conveniently located, and offered at times that meet the needs of immigrants, based on registration numbers, drop-out rates, and pre-registration rates.
- 2 Enrollment is open, offering flexibility to immigrant learners with demanding schedules.
- 3 Curricula for all English class levels seamlessly incorporate components of naturalization content to maintain students' interest and to encourage Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs) to see citizenship as a long-term goal.
- 4 Naturalization content emphasizes adult learning strategies and innovative techniques, including comparisons between the native country and the United States, debates on historical and contemporary politics, role play, student presentations, field trips, guest speakers, multimedia tools, and computer-based learning.
- 5 English classes that teach civics are not substituted for citizenship classes for applicants in the naturalization process who need specific training to pass the naturalization test.
- 6 Mock naturalization interviews are flexibly scheduled and available each week for LPRs who have an upcoming USCIS interview or test appointment.

Program Links with National Support Organizations

A national citizenship implementation plan greatly depends on integrated partnerships at national, state, and municipal levels among charitable organizations that have a mutual goal to promote citizenship and deliver naturalization services. Although considerable activity takes place at the local community level, there is an obvious need for national organization, leadership, funding, technical support, evaluation, and promotion.

Many charitable legal immigration services and language support programs are members of local, state, or national coalitions. However, as the immigrant community grows, charitable immigrant-focused and English-language support programs change and expand. It cannot be assumed that the current infrastructure of local and national membership agencies and coalitions can adequately respond to a national movement that encourages citizenship. Therefore, a national citizenship implementation plan should promote vertical and horizontal linkages that encourage replication of best models, ensure quality services, and avoid placing immigrants in situations harmful to their status and family unity.

BENCHMARKS:

- 1 Each local service provider is a formal, active member of a community coalition that has a leadership structure and defined roles.
- 2 Each local service provider, on its own or through a coalition, is a member of a national support organization that provides leadership, policy information, management guidance, advocacy assistance, funding, training, technical support, evaluation, and guidance for sustainability.
- 3 Local and national coalitions frequently meet or participate in conference calls to continually assess the viability and challenges of a national citizenship plan.
- 4 Formal communication structures and reporting methods identify areas of the country where services are best delivered in number and quality and where they are poorly provided.

Solid Program Evaluations and Reassessment

Charitable program staff have little time or capacity to fully engage in program evaluation and assess the value and impact of services. Too often, qualitative and quantitative reports to a parent organization or funder are prepared at deadline, not systematically peer reviewed after submission, and not designed to be cumulative and follow trends and track unmet needs. A national citizenship plan requires well-defined goals and objectives, proven interventions, shared data collection that is methodologically sound, and data review with wide dissemination of results. Failure to take these steps will result in the lack of documentation of the plan's impact, wasting considerable funding and human services. Replication and sustainability of a national plan is highly unlikely without cooperative support for program monitoring and evaluation.

BENCHMARKS:

- 1 Naturalization applicants are identified at intake or when they obtain language or naturalization certificates.
- 2 Service delivery agencies collect data that can be easily compared with city, state, and national statistics to evaluate integration goals.
- 3 Data is tracked by nationality, native language, gender, age, income level, special needs, and outcomes. Local data is compared to current municipal and national data sets.
- 4 Trends reveal over- and under-representation of applicants by demographic characteristics. Possible causes are identified, and alternative approaches are pursued and constantly reevaluated.

- 5 USCIS statistics of applicant approval and denial rates are compared with client sources to identify disparities or undesirable trends in specific populations who fail first and second naturalization interviews or tests.
- 6 English-language and literacy programs conduct pre- and post-course tests on language, literacy, and naturalization content knowledge. At each stage, individual results are provided to students for self-assessment and encouragement. Program staff evaluate cumulative test results to gauge intervention effectiveness and to show funders the success of intervention.
- 7 Service delivery agencies provide clients with customer satisfaction surveys to identify strengths and weaknesses of the program and to collect ideas for improvements.
- 8 Focus groups of recently naturalized citizens are held to gather input on how the community and target populations evaluate the naturalization process and the citizenship services delivered by charitable organizations, volunteers, and government agencies.

Multiple Links within the Community

A national citizenship implementation plan will successfully recruit and retain support from as many sectors of society as possible in every community. Assisting naturalization applicants to become U.S. citizens can inspire people of diverse backgrounds and perspectives, not just the foreign-born, but the native-born population as well. Out of this common labor of love, local charitable programs can gain significant community support and resources. Widespread local backing and community involvement help ensure sustained interest and engagement at the national level. If communities nationwide embrace a national citizenship program, it will be possible for everyone to feel as though they have a vested interest in the process and a valued role in helping community members become citizens.

BENCHMARKS:

- 1 Charitable legal service programs continually recruit, train, and retain pro bono attorneys to assist at group naturalization workshops and help individual clients needing extensive legal services.
- 2 Individuals representing diverse sectors of society dedicated to immigrant integration regularly attend training in naturalization law and naturalization test tutoring.
- 3 Elected municipal officials, community leaders, and civic associations make recruitment of volunteers to aid in naturalization a high priority.
- 4 A Community Citizenship Volunteer Corps is formally or informally established to train and engage private citizens and staff from various organizations to join in

outreach, teaching, tutoring, and naturalization group processing workshops. Volunteers help organize special events on Independence Day and Citizenship Day (September 17) and at oath ceremonies. They participate in post-naturalization assistance activities and pro-immigrant organizing and advocacy events.

- 5 A Community Citizenship Volunteer Corps listserve is available for maximum communication on upcoming events and the need for volunteers.

Positive Media Coverage

The media, including broadcast celebrities, have considerable influence in defining an issue and shaping perceptions. Regrettably, the trend toward sensationalist news reporting has meant that stories emphasize the so-called negative aspects of immigration rather than the positive contributions immigrants make and the challenges they face. Although we are a nation of immigrants and benefit largely from immigrant labor and cultural traditions, few can recite basic facts about immigration numbers or differentiate between myth and fact.

The quest of immigrants to obtain U.S. citizenship is a story that remains inspiring because each person's history and struggle to obtain their "American dream" is different. Migrants' stories are also uniquely informative about global conditions and local realities.

It is the responsibility of immigrant-supporting groups to make these stories known. Positive media coverage can translate into a welcoming citizenry that is informed about immigration and inspired to participate in a national citizenship effort.

BENCHMARKS:

- 1 Local media are routinely invited to cover USCIS oath ceremonies and given access to one or more immigrants who are willing to tell their stories.
- 2 Organizations involved with promoting citizenship continuously target the national media with stories highlighting the desire of most immigrants to obtain U.S. citizenship and their struggles to become U.S. citizens. They release compelling data and reports that illustrate the lack of a national immigrant policy that supports integration and citizenship and the benefits of greater U.S. citizenship rates for immigrant and native-born communities.
- 3 Local, non-English outlets provide frequent updates by immigration on important changes in immigration laws and offer public service announcements on naturalization eligibility requirements and the rights and responsibilities of U.S. citizenship.