

IMMIGRANT LEGAL RESOURCE CENTER

1663 Mission St., Suite 602 / San Francisco, CA 94103 / (415) 255-9499 / Fax 255-9792

1395 Bay Road / East Palo Alto, CA 94303 / (415) 853-1600 / Fax 853-1608

Reply to:
San Francisco ✓
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ESTABLISHING NATURALIZATION LIAISON MEETINGS BETWEEN COMMUNITY AGENCIES AND THE INS

by Susan Bowyer and Mark Silverman, Immigrant Legal Resource Center

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INTRODUCTION

The Immigrant Legal Resource Center (ILRC), working with community agencies in Northern California was successful in establishing an ongoing naturalization liaison between non-profit agencies and the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). The meetings have been very useful for the non-profit agencies in a number of ways. Non-profit agency staff members have become more knowledgeable about the practical operation of the INS naturalization process. The liaison meetings have also served as an informal forum to discuss the agencies' concerns about the INS administration of the naturalization process, both in terms of ongoing issues and individual cases. Moreover, the meetings have resulted in a closer cooperative working relationship between the agencies and the INS in the context of naturalization.

We believe that such liaison meetings have great potential for establishing a cooperative effort to promote naturalization throughout the country. It is our hope that the following description of how we initiated and developed the liaison meetings will assist immigrant service organizations in establishing liaison meetings in other areas of the country. The description divides the process into six chronological steps. If we can further assist you by sharing our experience, please contact us. Also, please share your experiences establishing naturalization liaison meetings with us:

Immigrant Legal Resource Center
1663 Mission Street, Suite 602
San Francisco, CA 94103
tel: 415-255-9499 (ask for the "attorney of the day")
fax: 415-255-9792

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF NATURALIZATION LIAISON MEETINGS WITH THE INS IN THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA

STEP ONE: INITIAL MEETING OF INTERESTED COMMUNITY AGENCIES

The ILRC and the citizenship outreach coordinator of a local immigrant service agency called an initial meeting of community organizations interested in promoting naturalization. We sent out letters inviting organizations to discuss joint efforts to promote naturalization and followed up with phone calls.

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The resulting meeting was well attended. The idea of establishing liaison meetings with the INS was one of the agenda items. It was discussed within the overall context of promoting naturalization and establishing ongoing coordination among non-profit agencies in the Bay Area.

The ILRC proposed that our informal group organize regular meetings with the local San Francisco District INS office (which also has jurisdiction over Sacramento, San Jose and Fresno) to discuss naturalization issues. INS personnel and community agency representatives would attend the meetings. As described in more detail in Step Two, we decided to invite the INS to a single meeting about naturalization with staff from community agencies, rather than proposing ongoing liaison meetings. We designated two persons at the meeting who knew people at the INS, including an ILRC staff attorney, to contact them about our idea for a meeting. We also agreed to set a follow-up meeting of our informal committee or coalition to decide on our agenda items for the INS meeting.¹

STEP TWO: SETTING UP THE INITIAL MEETING WITH THE INS

An ILRC staff attorney and a director of a community agency in San Francisco's Chinatown did the initial work in setting up the first meeting. Each called people they knew at the INS. Although this was somewhat duplicative and required coordination between the two of us, it did demonstrate to the INS the broad community interest in such a meeting, and probably generated more INS activity in following through to set up the meeting. We also utilized this approach because we did not know who would be most successful in setting up the meeting.

When we spoke to our contacts at the INS, we invited them to hold a meeting with us to go over the local INS office's naturalization procedures. We noted that the meeting would promote dialogue between the INS and the community agencies so that the work of both entities could be more cooperative, effective, and efficient. We referred to the successful experience of meetings between the INS and community agencies which the ILRC helped facilitate during the legalization program. The INS agreed to hold such a meeting at its San Francisco District Office. The INS asked us to submit our questions or agenda items in writing prior to the meeting. We set a date with sufficient time in advance to give the community agencies time to meet to come up with the questions and agenda items.

STEP THREE: PREPARATION FOR THE FIRST MEETING

¹ Although establishing the liaison with the INS was just one of the initial goals of the informal naturalization coalition, it provided a concrete initial focus for us to develop our work together. This helped the development of our group, which subsequently resulted in an ongoing formal committee on naturalization apart from the liaison meetings with the INS.

We then sent an invitation to community agencies to participate in the meeting with the INS. Included with the invitation, we invited the agencies to attend a preparatory meeting before the meeting with the INS to formulate questions to be submitted to the INS. We invited community agency staff who would not attend our preparatory meeting to submit questions in writing to us. We sent this invitation to two groups: 1) the list of organizations who had participated in our first meeting; and 2) a larger list of community agencies in the Bay Area.

The focus of the discussion at the preparatory meeting was to formulate our questions and agenda items for the upcoming meeting with the INS. At the meeting, we drafted questions for submission to the INS and we designated one person (the ILRC staff attorney) to put them in final form for submission to the INS.

At this meeting, we also discussed our general approach. We agreed that at the end of the meeting with the INS, we would suggest to them that this be the first of ongoing liaison meetings. There was discussion of the importance of a cooperative, non-adversarial approach at this first meeting with the INS. Although we did include areas of concern (such as the INS policy in adjudicating applications of persons who had received public assistance), we agreed that it was important at the first meeting to focus on areas of mutual interest and cooperation rather than differences.

Also at this preparatory meeting, we delegated responsibility (to the ILRC attorney) to put the questions and suggested agenda in their final form, and also to incorporate any questions forwarded by persons who could not attend. We completed the questions and forwarded them to our INS contact. We also produced copies of the questions for members of our informal coalition.

STEP FOUR: FIRST MEETING

The first INS liaison meeting was held in the conference room of the INS San Francisco district director. There was a good turn-out among the community agencies. The INS had a number of staff persons, including those assigned to naturalization. Near the beginning of the meeting, we said how we hoped this meeting would be part of a cooperative effort between the Service and the non-profit agencies. We spoke of the legalization meetings with the San Francisco Legalization Office in a very positive light and expressed our hopes that we could establish the same type of productive relationship in the naturalization area.

We were successful in setting a very friendly tone for the meeting. The INS representatives were very open, and not defensive (as they often seem to feel that they must be in other settings). The INS representatives described the naturalization process -- which was very informative for the community agency participants. In addition, it was very useful in building rapport and creating an atmosphere of open exchange between the INS representatives and the staff from community agencies. The INS answered the questions that we had submitted to them.

Toward the end of the meeting, we said that we thought that the meeting had been very successful. We said that we hoped that there could be additional meetings. We suggested a follow-up meeting. The INS agreed, and we set a tentative date.

STEP FIVE: MAKING THE LIAISON MEETINGS PERMANENT

The community agencies held a follow-up meeting amongst ourselves. People were pleased with the first liaison meeting. We came up with the idea to host the next meeting at a community agency. The director of the agency in Chinatown offered to have a meal served.² We thought that would be a great idea. We agreed that each agency would pay for the lunch of those participating and that we would collectively help defray the costs of the lunches for the INS personnel. We also discussed some of the questions that could be submitted, and delegated the task of getting those questions in final format and sent to the INS.

After the community agency follow-up meeting, we invited the INS to the lunch meeting. They accepted our invitation. We sent them the questions well in advance of the meeting.

The second meeting was very successful. It was a turning point in the process of making the liaison meetings permanent. The INS demonstrated that it took the meeting seriously by producing written answers to our questions. The hospitality of the Chinatown agency in serving the meal created a very favorable atmosphere for the meeting.

During the discussion, one potential problem was averted. One of the participants, who is not a member of the staff of any community agency, made points in a very confrontational way. Some of his points were not related to naturalization. We pointed out the concerns that went beyond the scope of the meeting and helped him limit his questions to naturalization issues. We were thereby generally able to preserve the atmosphere of informal exchange between the agency staff and INS representatives.

By the end of the lunch meeting, it was evident that both the community agency staff and the INS representatives were committed to ongoing meetings. We set a tentative date for the next meeting.

STEP SIX: THE CONTINUING LIAISON MEETINGS

Since those initial meetings, the liaison meetings have become institutionalized, with the ILRC as their sponsoring organization. They are held quarterly at the offices of a community agency in San Francisco. About 50 organizations from around the Bay Area have submitted questions and attended the meetings. As we have been doing since the inception of these liaison meetings, we send questions to the INS in advance of each

² The agency offers training for restaurant workers as part of its program.

meeting. The meetings also provide an opportunity to clarify the questions, and to ask INS staff to expand upon their answers.

The INS has answered many dozens of questions that have arisen in the course of our naturalization outreach and practices. Some of the information we have learned has reached agencies throughout the country because the ILRC has included much of it in its recent manual, Naturalization: A Guide for Legal Practitioners and other Community Advocates. Most of our questions have asked for clarifications of naturalization law, regulations, and local and national policies and procedures. However, we have also brought problems to the attention of the INS staff. For example, many agencies have asked whether the INS can institute a procedure to deal with documentation for lawful permanent residents who have chosen to apply for naturalization rather than renewing their green cards by September 20, 1994. Until we pressed the INS on this issue, they appear not to have been aware of the complications created for people who hold expired green cards, but who will not have their naturalization certificates until the months long process from application to swearing-in is completed. As a result, they informed INS headquarters and worked together to devise an appropriate procedure.

Additionally, agencies are encouraged to submit questions about individual cases, if they provide the name and A-number of the person whose file they are inquiring about. Similarly, if we can provide applicant's names, A-numbers, and dates of interviews, we can use this forum to bring instances of unfair treatment by naturalization examiners to the attention of the naturalization supervisor.

Recently the ILRC has taken over the tasks of collecting and sending questions to the INS and taking and sending out minutes of the meetings to participating agencies. However, during much of the life of these meetings, this work was done by a volunteer -- Nelly Reyes-Rosenberg.

What follows is a brief description of the procedures we follow in implementing the INS Naturalization Liaison meetings.

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR ONGOING LIAISON MEETINGS

Announcement: About a month before the date that has been set for an upcoming liaison meeting, the meeting coordinator should send a notice to participating community agencies informing them of the date, time and location of the meeting. (As a group of participating agencies solidifies, you can put addresses formatted for labels on your liaison meeting diskette.) This notice should include a request for questions of the INS, and a date by which agencies should send their questions to the meeting coordinator. That date should give the coordinator enough time to prepare them in time to get them to the INS two weeks in advance of the upcoming meeting. This two week period gives the INS time to review the questions, look up the applicable law and regulations, and formulate their answers. (Note that after the initial meeting, the meeting coordinator can include the minutes of the

previous meeting in the mailing with this announcement.) A sample announcement is included at Appendix A.

Formulating Questions: As questions come in from participating agencies, the meeting coordinator should review them to see if the answers are easily available, or if they pose an issue that the INS should address in the liaison meeting. Because the ILRC serves as the meeting coordinator, and some of the participating agencies are relatively less knowledgeable than is the ILRC about naturalization, we find that we are able to answer several of the submitted questions without sending them along to the INS. In addition, some newcomers to the meetings may ask questions that have been answered at previous liaison meetings. The meeting coordinator can provide those answers to the questioner and leave them out of the list for the INS to answer at the upcoming meeting -- unless it is a question that seems important or universal enough to be addressed again before the whole group. After this initial review, the meeting coordinator should type up the questions to send to the INS. Ideally, the questions should be typed up in a computer file so that, after the upcoming meeting, the answers can be listed under each question for distribution to the participating agencies. Sample questions are included at Appendix B.

Sending Questions to INS: The meeting coordinator should send (or fax) the questions to the INS representative responsible for the liaison meetings at least two weeks in advance of the upcoming liaison meeting. (Each INS office might have its own particular schedule. Work it out with your local office.) Include a cover letter noting the time, date and location of the meeting. You may consider thanking the INS representative for his or her participation in the meetings. Sample cover letter included at Appendix C.

Meeting Preparation: The coordinator should make enough copies of the submitted questions for everyone at the meeting to have a copy (note that several people might come from each agency). She might also like to bring several copies of the minutes of the previous meeting for newcomers to the meetings.

Meeting: The meeting coordinator should arrive in time to greet the INS representative before the meeting gets started. She should make sure each person has a copy of the questions for the meeting. After starting the meeting, she can ask people to introduce themselves, including what agencies they are representing. She should ask if anyone has announcements. Then she can turn the meeting over to the INS representative to answer each of the submitted questions. If she feels that the INS representative has not thoroughly understood or answered a question, she can ask for clarification, or recognize someone else in the group to do so. If any of the community agency participants appears to be becoming hostile toward the INS representative, she should point out that the liaison meetings are intended to foster cooperation between the INS and community agencies, and suggest that the participant bring up his or her concerns with the INS individually.

Setting the Date: At the end of each liaison meeting, set a date for the next meeting three months later (or to reflect the frequency you have decided upon).

Distribution of Minutes: The meeting coordinator or another volunteer should take minutes of each meeting. Ideally, she can type the answers on disk under each question that was provided to the INS so that participating agencies can understand the context of each answer. If the INS representative would like to review the minutes for accuracy, or to add things that help answer the questions after the meeting, the meeting coordinator can send them to him or her before sending them out to the participating agencies. It is a good idea to ask the INS representative to sign or initial the minutes to indicate INS approval. (Sample cover letter included at Appendix D, and sample minutes are included at Appendix E.) Then, between one and two months before the next meeting is scheduled, the meeting coordinator should distribute them to all of the agencies and individuals who have attended the meetings (whether or not they attended the meeting reported on in the minutes). (Note that the announcement of the next meeting and request for questions can be included in the mailing of the minutes.)³

CONCLUSION

The community agencies involved in the INS Naturalization liaison meetings in the Bay Area have benefitted significantly from these meetings. We had many pressing and important questions answered by the very people who will be adjudicating the cases we present. We have also developed relationships with INS representatives that helps us approach them informally outside of the meetings. Moreover, we have fostered a dialogue between normally adversarial groups that everyone involved seems to enjoy, and which may beneficially affect how we relate in other contexts as well.

³ Agencies interested seeing a compilation of all the questions and answers from all of our liaison meetings may request them by writing to us at the address listed above.