

Youth Work's Immigration Movement

Agencies open the doors, close the blinds to attract youth from immigrant families.

(November 1, 2007)

by [Ed Finkel](#)

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The Boys & Girls Club of West Georgia, after witnessing a 30 percent increase in Latino participants in three years, offers free weekly Spanish classes for its workers. Girls Inc. of Alameda County, Calif., gives bilingual employees a salary bonus. In Seattle, Camp Fire USA's Central Puget Sound chapter partners with a national research organization to identify local immigrant populations and determine their needs.

In these and other ways, more and more youth-serving agencies are plotting pro-active strategies to better serve the rising population of immigrant youth in their communities. Their efforts go beyond translating documents or providing a token bilingual staffer: They are working to recruit members of immigrant populations, establish a comfort level with them and their families, and find the right mix of programming and services to keep them engaged.

Agencies say the rewards are great, both on the business side - expanding memberships - and in terms of fulfilling their mission to serve the entire community.

"Many of us in the youth work field have some work to do in order to really effectively be able to involve immigrant youth in a meaningful way," says Pam Garza, project director for professional development at the National 4-H Council and co-chair of the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition.

The need is growing: In March 2003, the U.S. Census found that 11.7 percent of the population - some 33.5 million people - were foreign-born, the highest percentage in decades. In 1980, those figures were 6.2 percent and 14.1 million.

"It's because of demographics," Garza says of the efforts aimed at immigrants. "But not just demographics, because youth organizations at their soul, or their roots, were developed to serve all youth. If we're true to that purpose, there's no way we're going to move ahead without being conscientious about serving immigrant youth."

Doing so, Garza says, requires leadership and overall organizational readiness, recognition of language and cultural barriers, an ability to serve a panoply of cultures and a willingness to buck anti-immigrant politics.

In an effort to help, the National Collaboration for Youth recently released a manual, "Preparing Staff to Work with Immigrant Youth," which details how to identify ideal characteristics in potential employees, build staffers' language proficiency and cultural competence, connect with families and communities, and retain staff to help maintain those connections. The publication provides examples of success stories, including those mentioned above, and a list of resources.

The YMCA of the USA produced a similar volume for its affiliates, "Engaging Newcomer and Immigrant Communities in Your YMCA," which puts the issue in stark terms: "If YMCAs are to maintain their relevancy to American society, they must be dynamic, continuously working to engage, include and reflect the communities they serve."

The manual provides how-to information on engaging the community and partner organizations, as well as strengthening linguistic and cultural competency among staff. It asks questions that could apply to any youth agency, such as, "How many people born in other countries participate in your YMCA?" and "How can you help them feel welcome?"

The YMCA's International Group has been working with Ys that "want to enhance" their long-standing work with immigrant youth, and with those "in communities where demographics are rapidly changing," says Senior Associate Director Lynda Gonzalez.

For example, Gonzalez says, the YMCA of Minneapolis helped local Somalis by providing female lifeguards at its facility and closing the blinds so that the women - who must cover exposed body parts in front of men - could swim there. The YMCA of Northwest North Carolina reached out to the growing Latino population in the Winston-Salem area by hosting an intern who was provided through the YMCA of Mexico.

Gonzalez says the international group provides a 2½-day workshop that advises locals on how to analyze their demographics, examine whether their professional and volunteer staffs are prepared to serve immigrant populations, and look at potential obstacles and how to overcome them. The group also recently took a delegation of local executives and decision-making volunteers on a two-week immersion trip to Mexico, Honduras and Guatemala.

Complicating matters for youth-serving agencies is that "many cultures don't have youth programming," Garza notes, so they are often not inclined to seek or join activities that are standard fare for U.S. youth.

That's why agencies must go beyond just passively accepting immigrants who walk in the door, Garza says. She recalls one agency leader telling her: " 'We're open to everyone. If they want to come, they'll come.' "

"That attitude," she says, "will not serve immigrant youth at all."

Organizations:

Oakland Asian Students Educational Services (OASES)

Oakland, Calif.

(510) 891-9928

<http://www.oases.org>

The Need: OASES was founded in 1983 as a student service club on the University of California-Berkeley campus by undergraduates from Oakland's Chinatown. "They realized that

there was something that was missing in their lives because their parents were immigrants," says Executive Director Nhi Chau.

The Approach: OASES primarily provides after-school programming to K-12 youth, including homework help and tutors. It also offers enrichment activities. Middle- and high-school youth receive diversity education aimed at building their identities and making them comfortable with people of different backgrounds.

History: After eight years as an informal group, OASES became a separate nonprofit.

Youth Served: About 400 per year. OASES says that about 70 percent are in elementary school, 70 percent are low-income and 50 percent are English-language learners. About 70 percent are Chinese-American, 10 percent are Vietnamese, 7 percent are Latino and 7 percent are African-American.

"They have a different set of needs - not only their economic background but an additional layer of [language and cultural] challenges," Chau says.

Staff: The agency has 11 full-time employees, five half-timers, three AmeriCorps workers and 400 volunteers. Five staffers are immigrants, and most are of Asian or Pacific Islander background. Having that background is important, Chau says, partly to help in communicating with local youth. "It's probably natural that we draw that kind of staff. They grew up in the neighborhood, [and] they know where students are coming from."

Staffers who don't have those ethnic backgrounds are trained in understanding the youths' culture and circumstances. Consider the problem of tight living quarters, Chau says: "The space to do homework, be to themselves. When you have a very crowded living space, it can be difficult for them to concentrate."

Another issue can be the hesitance among some youth of Asian descent to ask questions. "You don't question authority. Asking a question for them is very difficult," she says. "Staff and volunteers need to understand that."

Funding: The annual budget is about \$1.15 million, with 75 percent coming from public sources - through contracts with the school district and through city and county grants - while about 20 percent comes from foundations and individual donors, such as the Allstate Foundation.

Indicators of Success: All 12 high school seniors involved in the program in 2005-06 went on to college. Two of them went to UC-Berkeley and became volunteer mentors and tutors, Chau says. That's nothing new, she says: "I myself am a graduate of the program."

Community Outreach Services YMCA

Winston-Salem, N.C.

(336) 722-9772

www.ymcaoutreach.org

The Need: This branch of the YMCA of Northwest North Carolina began working strategically to reach the Latino population after a noticeable upsurge of émigrés throughout the 1990s, says Executive Director Ed Toole. "We started to say, 'Hey this is a big need here in our community,' " he says.

Forsyth County, which contains Winston-Salem, has seen its Latino population continue to rise quickly, from 6.4 percent in 2000 to 10.1 percent in 2006, according to the Census Bureau.

The Approach: The branch hosts an after-school program for 40 youth in a heavily Hispanic apartment complex and has imported an intern through the YMCA of Leon, Mexico, who lives for free in the apartment complex.

The branch offers a "Hispanic Achievers" program - modeled after the national "Black Achievers" one-on-one mentoring program - for youth from late elementary school through high school.

Staffers deliver a career-based curriculum at four high schools that includes visits from professionals. That effort is aimed at curbing a local dropout rate among Hispanic youth - 13.5 percent in the 2004-05 school year - that's triple that of whites and double that of African-Americans, Toole says.

The Hispanic Family Mentoring Project gives newly arrived parents information about the American school system.

Youth Served: The Y serves about 500 Latino youth, about half of its overall youth total. Hispanic Achievers reaches 200, the family literacy program serves 200, the mentoring project 50 to 100, and the after-school program about 50.

Staff: Toole says he's worked hard to recruit Hispanic and other bilingual professionals. Three of the nine full-time workers and the intern are Hispanic, and another full-time staffer is fluent in Spanish.

"Our staff have been sensitized to [cultural issues] for a number of years," Toole says. "We're very close to it. We're constantly meeting with this population."

Staff meetings include discussions about serving a multicultural population, he says. "We look at new information. Are demographics changing, what are the latest issues, what are the policy changes?"

Indicators of Success: The United Way of Forsyth County (one of the branch's primary funders) has begun pushing for outcomes data, and the branch expects to have some solid information by

January, Toole says. Pre- and post-test data among parents enrolled in the Family Mentoring Program showed increases in knowledge about the school system, their children's education, the importance of attending college and how to be advocates for their children.

Camp Fire USA

Central Puget Sound Council, Seattle

(206) 461-8550

<http://www.campfire-usa.org>

The Need: Because its communities include significant numbers of people with Chinese, Latino and Somali backgrounds, this Camp Fire chapter teamed up with a national research organization, Leadership Inc., to identify local immigrant populations and determine their needs.

The Approach: "We see where they're clustered," says Jackie Peterson, director of marketing and communications. "We have a very longstanding relationship with the Chinese community and the Buddhist temple," in addition to Latino and Somali groups. "We go to the agencies where those people are and try to work out an arrangement with them to work on whatever their goals are."

Camp Fire then develops appropriate activities. The Somali population includes many widowed mothers whose husbands were killed in the ongoing war there; programming strives to augment their children's work in school, because the women often work long hours. For American-born parents who have adopted children from China, the focus is on activities that help the youth stay connected to their heritage, like attending the Chinese puppet show at the Seattle International Children's Festival last summer, Peterson says. Latino parents learn how to say letters and numbers in English by playing Bingo. "Our activities are meant to be practical and experiential," Peterson says.

For all groups, the programming attempts to build leadership skills. Peterson says that can mean such things as helping to organize groups of youth: "Parceling out environmental assignments, do they need any tools, how do they coordinate everybody? ... It's really about the kids learning to lead and arrange these projects."

History: Camp Fire USA was founded in 1910, and the Puget Sound council formed in 1911.

Youth Served: About 17,000 youth, ages 3 to 18, with the largest concentration at the middle-school level. About 43 percent are low-income.

Staff: The chapter has 10 to 15 employees, not including those who work in its child-care center. Staff members receive training in how to recognize and root out racism and ethnocentrism in others and in themselves. One training topic focused on how to better understand the Muslim culture.

Funding: The chapter budget is \$3.2 million, with grants from such sources as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, REI, Boeing and the Bank of America.

Vietnamese Initiative in Economic Training

New Orleans

(504) 255-0400

<http://www.vietno.org>

The Need: Director Cyndi Nguyen started this after-school and summer program in 2002 after returning to New Orleans, where she grew up. "It was a great need that many Vietnamese parents expressed to us," she says. Census figures show that New Orleans is home to 6,412 people of Vietnamese descent, and Nguyen says they're concentrated in the Village L'Est neighborhood. **The Approach:** The initiative hosts an after-school and summer program targeting Vietnamese youth in grades K-8. The after-school program focuses on academic help. "In many situations, the parents are unable to assist their children because of the language barrier," Nguyen says.

The agency's Summer Bridge program covers reading, writing, math, science and social studies, along with enrichment activities like piano, pottery and karate.

Staffers - some of whom are of Vietnamese background - strive to understand the youths' culture and help the youths understand American culture. "We just want the kids to understand and appreciate their culture more. They tend to shy away from their history," Nguyen says. Embracing their ethnicity "is not cool when they're hanging out with their friends."

Other problems stem from a common conflict among immigrant families: "A lot of the kids are Americanized, and their parents are not," Nguyen says. That gap manifests itself in the youths' diet, which Nguyen says has compelled the agency to start an anti-obesity effort that includes a soccer team. A "Weight Watchers-type program" might be added.

Youth Served: The numbers have dropped since Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, Nguyen says. The agency serves 60 youths from about five K-8 schools in New Orleans. The mix is about 60 percent Vietnamese and 40 percent African-American. Eight percent are low-income. Last summer, more than 200 youth attended the camp.

Staff: The initiative has four full-time staff members, and uses high school and college students as part-timers.

Funding: The initiative's budget is about \$300,000, with 90 percent coming from the Louisiana Department of Education. Another \$20,000 comes through a federal Community Development Block Grant from the city.

YMCA of Minneapolis

Blaisdell and Hiawatha branches

(612) 827-5401

<http://www.ymcatwincities.org>

The Need: These two YMCA branches in south Minneapolis experienced an influx of Somali immigrants starting in the early 1990s, during the U.S. military intervention in that nation's civil strife.

The Approach: In order to draw in more of those youths, the Ys reached out to Somalis at housing complexes where they settled and at local high schools, setting up programs at some of those locations.

Among other changes at their own buildings, the Ys drew the blinds on exercise rooms and hired female lifeguards to ensure that Somali women could use such facilities without violating their religious and cultural prohibitions on showing too much skin.

"It's about trying to understand what their needs and inspirations are," says Mike Melstad, executive director of both branches.

When it comes to serving youth, he adds, "The majority of folks who came over had never been to school and were not literate in their original languages. It was a tremendous adjustment."

The Y has had some difficulty partnering with agencies within the Somali community, particularly mosques, Melstad says. "There seems to be some reluctance on the part of the mullahs to have people involved with civic organizations," he says.

Youth Served: The Y branches serve between 400 and 500 Somali youth at seven schools, and several hundred families in the Y facilities.

Staff: The Y tries to help diversify its staff by recruiting older program participants. "That's the next turn of the wheel in helping people with social adjustments become employees, and then eventually move into leadership of the organization," Melstad says. "They've had to learn all these different work expectations in America vs. expectations somewhere else. It requires a lot of patience and understanding on both ends."

Other staffers get basic diversity training, he says. "We started out having little seminars that were about, 'Do this, and don't do that,' " he says. After that, he says, "it became much more about self-discovery."

In the post-9/11 world, anger toward and suspicions about Muslims became an issue. "It's a sentiment in the community, and many of our staff feel the same way," he says. "You just have to work through it. You definitely cannot pretend it's not there."

Girls Inc. of Alameda County

San Leandro, Calif.

(510) 357-5515

www.girlsinc-alameda.org

The Need: When it began 50 years ago, the Alameda County chapter primarily served what was then a "very white, working-class community," says Associate Executive Director Judy Glenn. But "the population has changed dramatically, especially in the last 15 to 18 years," to include a large number of Latinos - 20.8 percent countywide in 2005, according to the Census Bureau - although it's "still working class and poor."

The Approach: The agency delivers most of its programs in schools, primarily through after-school activities. For example, Latinas y Que ("And What of It?") provides leadership training to high-school-aged girls. "It was actually developed by the principal of the comprehensive high school in our community" about 13 years ago, Glenn says. "She felt many of the Latinas at the high school were getting lost."

Latinas y Que delivers enrichment in subjects like math, science and technology, as well as a greater understanding of all Hispanic cultures, including Mexican, Puerto Rican and Salvadoran. A major focus, Glenn says, has been "exposing girls to what it would take for them to go to college."

Youth Served: This Girls Inc. chapter serves nearly 7,000 youth, roughly half through mental health services offered to both girls and boys, in about 45 locations, most of them schools. The program's population is more than 30 percent Latino, about 30 percent African-American and 12 percent Asian.

Staff: The chapter has 98 employees, about half full-time, with about 20 AmeriCorps workers. Glenn estimates that 20 percent of the staffers are Latina and 25 percent are African-American.

The direct service staff meets twice a month in small groups to reflect on their work. "Sometimes cultural issues will come up, particularly when a staffer talks about a particular girl or family member they're attempting to work with and it's challenging," Glenn says.