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With much appreciation,

Pam Garza
National Youth Development Learning Network
National Collaboration for Youth



Because first and second generation immigrant youth currently constitute 20 percent of the children growing up in the United States, their healthy development has fundamental long-term implications for our society.¹

By definition, youth development is the provision of services and opportunities to support all young people in developing a sense of competence, usefulness, belonging, and empowerment. In today's society, youth organizations have both an opportunity and a responsibility to encourage and support healthy development for the growing numbers of immigrant youth in communities throughout the U.S.

There is also a business case to be made for encouraging youth organizations to proactively include immigrant youth in their services. Consider this example from parks and recreation described by Washington Post writer, Annie Gowen²:

One chilly April morning two years ago (2005), manager Jill Vanden Heuvel was at her desk at Algonhian Regional Park expecting a quiet Sunday when the cars started to arrive. Hundreds at first, then more than a thousand, bringing scores of Iranian families toting blankets, coolers and small grills.

Picnickers without reservations plunked down in areas reserved by others. Toilets overflowed. Cars were parked haphazardly on the grass. Tempers flared. When Vanden Heuvel tried to get the crowd to disperse, they accused her of racial discrimination.

As the crowd quickly grew to 3,000 people, more than twice what the park could handle, Vanden Heuvel called her boss in a panic. They decided to shut down the park to cars—a rare move for the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority. Feeling helpless, park employees turned to their computers, Googling such terms as “Persian” and “holiday” and “spring.” That’s how they learned that on Sizdeh Bedar, a popular celebration in Iran, it’s considered unlucky to stay indoors. Now each April, the park is ready with extra staff.

1 Suarez-Orozco, C. Todorova, I. 2003. Understanding the social worlds of immigrant youth. New Directions for Youth Development. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

2 Gowen, A. 2007. Picnic, games and culture shock: Parks work to tailor services while educating immigrants on rules. Washington Post. July 1.

While the mission of U.S. parks and recreation facilities is broader than just youth development, there is a definite commitment to enrich the lives of young people. Gowan reports that facilities throughout the country are changing to respond to the needs of the growing numbers of immigrants. Most are hiring multilingual staffers who target immigrants seeking to build connections, learn, and educate rather than enforce rules. Some are broadening their services, e.g., building cricket fields for Jamaican and Indian populations; serving kimchi alongside hot dogs to appeal to Koreans; and building bigger picnic pavilions to accommodate large Latino families that include youth of all ages. Parks and recreation expert Robert Burns of West Virginia University says, “Parks and recreation programs have to remain or become relevant to the changing demographics of America if they’re going to be used and funded.” Clearly, the area of parks and recreation is not alone; all youth-serving organizations must do the same if they are to remain relevant and viable.

Some youth organizations have an already proven track record of working with immigrant youth, others are just getting started, and still others are not sure when, how, or whether to get involved. As the example above illustrates, it’s challenging to provide accessible and relevant services to immigrant youth and families. Youth and families new to the U.S. have much to learn and navigate. They face cultural differences, language barriers, unfamiliar systems and rules, prejudice, and political controversy. Add to that the fact that many immigrants are unfamiliar with the basic concept of youth programming. This can lead to lack of interest, distrust, and/or fear. On the organizational side, leaders and administrators must find the funding they need to broaden their efforts while simultaneously making the organization visible in immigrant communities, building relationships, recruiting and preparing staff, and promoting inclusive environments. Many organizations will need to change and grow to remain vital and relevant, not only for today’s youth, but for generations to come.

Designed for program directors and other managers who are responsible for preparing staff to work with immigrant youth, this report provides:

- A context for understanding the diversity of today’s immigrant youth and families as well as issues involved in serving them;
- Ideal characteristics of staff hired to serve immigrant youth;



- Strategies for recruiting and retaining staff;
- Professional development strategies;
- An overview of the leadership and vision required to make these efforts successful.

Making the commitment to serve immigrant youth affects every dimension of an organization—outreach, programming, curriculum, environment, relationship building, and community collaboration. A key ingredient is staff. Youth organizations must recruit, prepare, and hold on to staff who can understand, respect, and work successfully with immigrants. Frontline youth workers who are appropriately prepared will be able to build connections, provide opportunities, earn trust, ensure safety, and provide the hope and support needed by immigrant youth and their families. Likewise, organizational leaders will have a clearer idea of staff requirements and be better able to craft a plan to recruit, hire, prepare, and retain caring and qualified workers.

Interspersed throughout the report are quotes and case studies from experienced youth workers representing more than 20 local and national youth organizations that have been pioneers in serving a diverse mix of immigrant youth. There is also a set of user-friendly checklists located in the Appendix.

As the information, recommendations, and case studies in this publication demonstrate, there is much work to be done. There are hard questions to ask, conversations to open, bridges to build, and longstanding practices to change. The effort, however, is essential if youth organizations want to truly reflect a core commitment to serving all communities, including populations of immigrant youth.