

PROVIDING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



Very few youth workers begin the job with 100% of the knowledge, attitudes, comfort, skills, and experience they need to be effective with immigrant youth, families, and communities. By recognizing this at the outset, leaders of youth organizations can create an overall plan to help staff develop professionally and gain increasing levels of awareness and competence in an organized and coherent fashion.

Although many youth organizations think of training as a primary vehicle for preparing staff, it can be more helpful to view professional development as a larger comprehensive system of staff preparation, of which training is only one component. Professional development involves designing, implementing, and evaluating a series of learning strategies that will enable staff to gain the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors necessary to work effectively with immigrant populations.

Some organizations have established a “diversity” or immigrant youth task force that designs and coordinates the following professional development activities.

Incorporate a Focus on Immigrant Youth in the Orientation Process

- **Incorporate services to immigrants into the organization’s mission, goals, standards, and practices.** Right from the start, when you orient new staff to the organization, you can establish work with immigrant youth as an organizational norm. This kind of introduction to the issue will have a lasting effect.
- **Inform new staff about specific immigrant populations being served.** An orientation for staff can also be a great opportunity for new staff to begin to learn about the specific community they will be working with, and to expand their strategies for working with immigrant participants and families.

Introducing Immigrant Issues Upfront

Setting the tone at a staff orientation can say a lot about what an organization's priorities are when it comes to serving immigrant children and youth. At the beginning of each school year, Oakland Asian Students Educational Services (OASES) offers all tutors and coordinators a two-day training orientation. The session begins with an examination of participant and community demographics designed to help workers understand the variety of ethnicities, countries of origin, languages, and socioeconomic backgrounds represented in OASES programs. Since most participants live in Oakland's Chinatown, staff also explore the differing needs of first-and-second generation Chinese youth.

- Communicate organizational values. One organization used its staff training orientation to address issues of diversity and promote an environment that accepting of all groups, including immigrant cultures. Dealing with these issues up front enabled staff to have a clear understanding about the policies of inclusion.

Encourage Individual Learning and Self-Reflection

- Communicate the expectation that staff members will make a personal effort to learn about the agency's immigrant participants, and to do whatever is necessary to become comfortable serving diverse populations.
- Provide staff with resources such as books, culture-specific newspapers, field trips, and other relevant resources. Sometimes this requires developing your own tools and materials.
- Design your own planning tools and curricula to meet specific needs. Tools can be especially useful in gauging which skills staff already have in order to determine the amount of additional professional development they need. It is especially helpful when national organizations develop tools that their member organizations around the country can use and adapt.



Tools Developed by National Organizations

We actually started this out because local associations were calling us interested in partnering with YMCAs in Mexico or with other Latino YMCAs as an intervention or as a tool for reaching their immigrant communities. So that's when we put this together. –YMCA of the USA National

The International Group from the YMCA of the USA has developed a manual called *“Engaging Newcomer and Immigrant Communities in Your YMCA”* that contains vast knowledge from their work and relationships with local YMCA’s all over the world. This practical guide for local YMCAs includes:

- Tips for serving immigrant children and youth,
- Strategies for understanding immigrant communities,
- Assessment checklists on topics such as outreach, cultural and linguistic competency, and inclusive environments, *and*
- Step-by-step planning guides.

Girls Incorporated is developing a set of resources as part of their national Latina Initiative. The materials described below will be made available to local Girls Inc. sites throughout the country:

- Fact sheets on issues related to Latina demographics, education, health and sexuality,
- Tools for recruiting and retaining diverse staff and board members to serve Latina populations, and
- Resource lists for youth workers.

As part of their Latino Outreach Initiative, Boys and Girls Clubs of America is developing two publications:

- *New Horizons, Reaching Out to and Serving Latino Youth and Families*
- *New Horizons 2, Recruiting, Developing and Retaining Latino Staff in the BGCA Movement*

Implement Training Sessions

- **Incorporate immigrant issues into “cultural competence trainings.”** Many youth organizations have begun to institutionalize training for staff on the issue of cultural competence and incorporating immigrant issues. These trainings provide an appropriate venue for addressing immigrant issues.

Learning First-Hand

Laurie Melrood, Director of Arizona Kinship, Adoption, Resource and Education (KARE) Center, feels it is important for her staff to have a deep understanding of the large percentage (43%) of program participants who are a diverse mix of U.S.-born and immigrant Latinos: “I think the staff’s identification with the cultural, historical and economic experience of these immigrants is critical.” Even though more than half of the staff is Latino, Laurie believes strongly that everyone benefits from continuous learning. She notes that there may be differences in the level of knowledge of the immigrant experience between Latino staff members who are not immigrants and those who have just recently come to the United States.

Each year the KARE Center staff travels to a nearby border town to get an up-close look at the political, economic, and cultural realities of immigrant youth. Staff gets to talk in-depth with a variety of individuals to explore the context from which participants emerge. Laurie says, “It’s an unforgettable experience for folks”—one that they process both formally and informally for many days after the trip.”

- **Offer specific training on working with immigrant youth.** Only a few organizations are offering specific training on this issue. Much more needs to be done to develop training content and activities on topics such as legal concerns, inclusive environments, coping with family separations, cultural and linguistic competency, and negotiating unfamiliar institutions.

Addressing Legal Concerns

Staff want to know why it is so hard for someone to become a citizen of the U.S. Some of them don't understand the distinction between legal resident and U.S. citizen. Other folks get very frustrated because they are under the impression that you could just come over and become a resident or a citizen—that the path to citizenship is easy. –Agency Director

Staff and family members often want to know:

- *What types of services are immigrants with different citizenship or residency statuses eligible for?*
- *What types of legal documentation should we ask immigrant parents and families to provide, and for what purposes?*
- *Can staff “get in trouble” for serving undocumented youth?*

There are no easy answers to these questions. The current immigration system is complex, challenging to understand, and even more challenging to navigate. Although the federal government determines the overall immigration policy, state and local governments are responsible for responding to and meeting the needs of immigrant residents. The best approach for youth organizations is to research the following:

- Your organization's policies and procedures
- Funder's regulations and recommendations
- State and local laws
- The Immigration/Nationality Act

Some agencies bring in an attorney with expertise on immigrant issues to serve as a resource to staff and participants or you can contact Jonathan Blazer (blazer@nilc-dc.org) at the National Immigration Law Center.

Thanks to Irena Lieberman, American Bar Association, Commission on Immigration, for her help with this.

- **Ask staff to design and implement training.** One organization convened a staff affinity group that planned information sessions for the rest of the youth workers on content areas in which they had personal experience or specific expertise. The agency provided the staff trainers with the resources and support they needed to make this happen.

We have learned so much from the individuals we have hired who are Latino; they do an excellent job at helping us to understand the families we serve. –Agency Director

- **Invite leaders, elders, and others from the immigrant community to educate staff.** Inviting the participation of the leaders and elders speaks to your belief that the community really does have something to offer your organization. It sends a strong message of respect and honor, and can build strong bridges to future relationships and work.

Learning From the Immigrant Community

When the YMCA in Minneapolis began serving increasing numbers of Somali immigrants, tensions began to arise between staff and participants. As it turned out, staff were misunderstanding and reacting to certain cultural gestures and mannerisms. To address this problem, Executive Director Michael Melstad began holding discussion sessions during which Somali elders from the community would come and educate staff about the specific behaviors and gestures in question as well as many other aspects of Somali culture. Michael says, “The most helpful thing we’ve done is have these sessions... They (the Somali elders) would say ‘Here’s what this means,’ or ‘When you do this we feel like this,’ and it’s made a big difference.” Michael feels that the elders have given the YMCA staff great insight into Somali culture; he feels that much of the positive change he has seen in the relationships between the staff and the Somali participants is attributed to these dialogues.

Set Up Staff Dialogues

There are some common issues that this client population shares, but they're articulated differently depending on the experience and the culture, the context and the history of individual families, where they come from, what they've done, what the economic picture has been or is now, whether they're underground or not. –Agency Director

- **Hold a dialogue session in response to a specific issue or challenge.** Providing services to immigrant youth and their families can be rewarding and also challenging. Organizations typically have to change the way they do business—often a difficult and tense process. Putting the issues on the table can be a great way to address concerns and questions related to the work with immigrant participants. It is critical, however, to first establish a group contract to ensure there will be safe space for open and honest dialogue.

Addressing Political and Anti-Immigrant Issues-

Youth workers need safe space to air their assumptions and challenge their own stereotypes. They also need to brainstorm ideas and share concrete strategies for taking action on difficult political realities, such as helping youth learn how to respond when assumptions or stereotypes come up, or dealing with community tensions.

Beyond understanding how to support youth in these areas, staff members themselves, especially those from immigrant or diverse backgrounds, may need support while dealing with troubling social and political realities in their own lives.

Staff is aware of the anti-immigrant sentiment. They feel it and they experience it. That's why some of them feel like they have to work harder - and not just in the agency, but with everyone who is associated with us.

Providing support on these issues at the organizational level will ensure that staff feels valued, accepted and comfortable. It will open spaces for dialogue.

- **Use regularly scheduled events for staff dialogue.** Use a segment of staff meetings as a regular opportunity for staff to discuss an issue, ask questions or brainstorm ideas and solutions. One local director initiated conversations in meetings by voicing questions such as, “What about the kids whose parents don’t speak English—how are you all dealing with this?”

National Organizations Create Networking Opportunities

Our affiliates are stand-alone organizations, and although they are deeply alike in terms of their mission and philosophy and approach, they are widely varied in terms of their history and who they serve. And so a national effort, like the Latina Initiative, is more complex than one might think. You need to “think globally, and act locally” to create a set of national behaviors or activities that at the same time can also be customized so that local affiliates can do what they need to do. –National Organization Staff Member

- **Create a nationwide professional affinity group.** The goal of this group is to engage in strategic planning to support local organizations in their efforts to include immigrants and to share staff development methods.
- **Offer local-to-local mentoring and conference calls.** Local staff can visit programs that have demonstrated success in serving immigrant youth, and spend focused time with their counterparts. This kind of support and mentoring enables staff to share their expertise on working with immigrant youth. One national organization had “regional affiliations” that helped forge local multi-site groups to share best practices and support each other in working with the community’s Latino population. These are examples where national organizations have seen the importance of helping local staff learn from and network with each other. Similar networking opportunities can be created on the local, state and regional levels.