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# Expanding Community Identity: Opportunities for Interdisciplinary Collaboration in Government Practices to Engage Local-born and Foreign-born Residents in Building A Stronger Community

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Neighborhood building is essential to a diverse and strong New York. We are currently in a progressive political climate where legislation is being crafted so that the laws of New York reflect its residents. This includes foreign-born residents, who have successfully advocated for, and been a part of, this changing legislation. There is work to be done now by local-born residents to increase their ability to change their definition of community to be inclusive, facilitated by social workers and local government offices to ensure that the legislative changes are implemented in the spirit fought for by the coalition of advocates.

*Keywords: Local Government, Community Engagement, New York City Council, Immigration*

How does structural change in policies focused on immigrant communities make a difference in the quality of life in a community? This author has been asking this question as the New York political climate has shifted to a progressive government, both in the City Council and the executive mayoral branch. Exciting pieces of legislations have been enacted that reflect the invaluable work done by the members of grassroots advocacy organizations and policy directors at influential social justice organizations. As instrumental as these policy changes might be, however, individual and systemic social justice issues do not automatically disappear when prominent politicians put forth policies. This paper is interested in continuing the conversation—to value and involve the skills of direct-service social workers within political offices.

Having a law and ensuring that the law is working are two different concerns, and to effectively serve their districts, local governments need to be invested in a continual dialogue between those two concerns. Progressive policies are at risk without a way to address existing personal sources of inequity and to evaluate the implementation. Social workers can become more involved in local government activities and work to incorporate practices to build community dialogue, and ad-

dress discrimination and privilege within members of the community. Local government offices are responsible for listening to and representing all of the residents in their district and by incorporating social work values and practices, they can use that platform to build culturally competent, diverse, respectful neighborhoods. These outcomes are difficult to measure at a macro scale, and integrating interdisciplinary work with social workers and local government can be invaluable in focusing on successful interventions.

This paper aims to increase the conversation and activity among social workers for building on the existing ideas of collaborations between social policy and social work at a local government level. It will explore some of the ways that local government initiatives have focused on strengthening the structural support for the needs of foreign-born communities, the issues that create barriers and threaten the success of these initiatives, and the social work values and practices that can be incorporated in thinking about the successes or failures of those initiatives. Finally, in focusing on the current role of a City Council District Office, this paper explores strategies in which the power of that office can play a role in combatting bigotry throughout the dominant culture and increasing a welcoming community for foreign-born New

Yorkers. It is difficult to imagine any one solution to a completely equitable community, however, this paper attempts to broach the topic of how to engage people who value the existing government power structure in a dialogue of equity and social justice.

### **Recent Government Initiatives**

Across the country in the last decade, business leaders and mayors of U.S. cities, including New York City's former Mayor Bloomberg, have built a coalition called The Partnership for a New American Economy, which "brings together more than 500 Republican, Democratic, and Independent mayors and business leaders who support immigration reform as a way of creating jobs for Americans today" (Partnership for a New American Economy, 2015). These cities have developed programs and policies through the framework of worker resources, and have been integral in encouraging relocation of foreign-born workers into cities for economic growth (Smith, 2013).

Along with developing streamlined systems for worker eligibility in private businesses, advocating for a path to legal status for workers currently without documentation, and supporting more educational programs for these workers, this program is studying the economic effects of implementing policies to build both skilled and unskilled workforces (Partnership for a New American Economy, 2015). There is also an attempt to address negative stereotypes about immigration by providing interactive maps and strengths-based language to illustrate the positive impact of foreign-born workers across the United States (Map the Impact of Immigration Across the Nation, 2012).

In addition to this economic-framed coalition work, in New York many policies have recently been enacted to increase integration of foreign-born residents into New York government and business practices. One of these efforts has been the passing and implementation of programs to provide a Municipal ID card (NYCID) for all residents (Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, 2015). These NYCID cards will allow foreign-born residents and anyone who may have difficulties obtaining all the various paperwork for a state-issued driver's license to obtain a photo identifica-

tion, thereby removing barriers for necessary activities, such as getting into buildings where an ID is required to sign-in and enter, opening bank accounts, and having a law-enforcement recognized identification (Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, 2015). Outreach campaigns aimed at encouraging all residents, local-born as well, to register for an ID, is meant to eliminate the stigma of the ID, and create an inclusive New York cultural identity (Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, 2015).

Other programs include the City Council's initiatives to increase civic engagement, regardless of one's citizenship status, through Participatory Budgeting (2014) and training local government offices and community organizations in recognizing and assisting residents to apply for the Obama Administration's programs of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and Deferred Action for Parental Accountability (DAPA); and trainings for local government offices to help residents understand the workings of the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS; Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, 2015).

Immigrant advocacy coalitions, such as the New York Immigrant Coalition (NYIC), and the Northern Manhattan Coalition for Immigrant Rights (NMCIR) have played a strong role in advocating for and developing many recent legislative initiatives in the City Council. New York City Council Speaker Mark-Viverito sponsored bills to provide free legal aid to immigrants in Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention, prohibiting the coordination of Riker's inmates to direct transfer to ICE detention centers, and in developing the municipal IDs (New York Immigrant Family Unit Project [NYIFUP], 2014; New York Immigration Coalition, 2015). Community organizations that comprise these coalitions, like Make the Road NY (MRNY), Arab American Association of New York (AAANY), and others who may have a high percentage of foreign-born members, work with the New York City Government to provide resources as well as political support and policy development (Make the Road New York, n.d.; Arab American Association of New York, 2015). The success of these groups in affecting change with the City Council supports work by Cordero-Guzman, Martin, Quiroz-Becerra, and Theodore

(2008), showing that long-standing coalitions between organizations provide the support for individual foreign-born residents to become involved in successful activist mobilizations and political activities for change.

In addition, foreign-born residents have a large amount of potential power throughout the existing political structure. The Immigration Policy Center's study of Latino and Asian immigrants found that new citizens who become eligible to vote each election cycle have the potential to make up to 34% of newly eligible voters (Paral, 2013). In many districts in New York City, the number of new foreign-born eligible voters will outnumber the US-born residents that age into voter eligibility (Paral, 2013). The increase in eligible voters is paralleled by the increase in representation. The National Institute for Latino Policy reports that in the New York City Council now, there are two foreign-born Latino Council Members and two Puerto-Rican born Council Members, including the City Council Speaker (Falcón, 2014).

It is unclear throughout all of these initiatives whether there are measures taking place within these economic and legal focused programs to build resources in the community for the new influx of the foreign-born workforce. The foreign-born worker's own evaluations of these programs have not been discussed as the studies on the implications of recruiting efforts in Economic Development programs are just beginning to be compiled (Smith & Schmitt-Sands, 2014). It also does not seem to examine the interactions with residents and front-line workers who have previously been siloed in a dominant culture community, and are now integrating with a more diverse population.

### **Issues Threatening the Success of Initiatives**

While celebrating the increasing strength of member-led immigration coalitions, and hard-won opportunities for foreign-born engagement in city government, it is important to consider the roles all New York City residents play in implementing these policies, and the benefits and importance of a healthy community.

According to Hillery's (1955) definition of community, the common elements are, "geographic area, social interaction, and common ties" (Hardcastle, Wenocur, & Powers, 2011, p. 97). Local government offices address the geographic district issues and play a role in supporting "formal and informal social and interpersonal networks in a neighborhood," which have been shown to "promote increased social connections with others and provide an important support" (Pinderhughes, Nix, Foster, & Jones, 2001, p. 942).

In a geographic community that does not have a concentrated identity of foreign-born residents, people may define their community using only their "common ties" within their geographic area. Social interaction may be limited to the places and business supported by the dominant culture, and may result in a homogeneous community identity. However, with government-backed economic development programs, and welcoming government policies to increase foreign-born residents in new areas, these communities often undergo a relatively rapid shift in demographics, challenging the "common ties" of the preexisting community identity (Hopkins, 2010; Udani, 2011). Through these sudden and involuntary increased social interactions with cultures, this shift can create stress within the local-born residents' framework of community, and often results in the creation of unwelcoming neighborhoods (Hopkins, 2010; Udani, 2011) threatening the success of the pro-immigration policies and increasing the interpersonal expression of discrimination.

### **Social Work Values and Practice Opportunities**

Taking a look at a community in New York City that has a more homogenous identity reflecting the dominant culture, this paper focuses on City Council District 5 as a chance to explore the opportunities to prevent an escalation of an unwelcoming community to a fast growing foreign-born population. District 5 encompasses a large section of the Upper East Side of Manhattan, including Roosevelt Island. The district lines in 2015 are drawn beginning on 54<sup>th</sup> Street to 100<sup>th</sup> Street, mainly from 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue or Lexington Avenue to

the East River, and inclusive of Roosevelt Island. As census information is not calculated by City Council District, and neighborhood census have different boundaries, this paper focuses on the Yorkville section, from 79<sup>th</sup> to 96<sup>th</sup> Streets, between Third Avenue and the East River. In Yorkville, foreign-born residents comprise only 21% of the total population as compared to the 37% of the population overall of New York City, according to the New York City Planning Commission (NYCPC) Report (2014).

Yorkville's own history demonstrates the impact government can have on foreign-born immigrant communities by either supporting the quality of life in the neighborhood or creating an unwelcoming environment. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were a high percentage of German foreign-born residents in the neighborhood (Gorusch, 2011). This changed after World War II, when residents faced the outlawing of popular German membership groups, as well as many land-use zoning changes enacted by City government (Gorusch, 2011), resulting in the physical destruction of many neighborhood resources for conversion into high-rise residential buildings, marketed to and filled by non-German local-born New Yorkers (Jolowicz, 2009).

In Yorkville, and other districts across the U.S. that are currently not considered to be culturally diverse, it is especially necessary for local government offices to be proactive in developing welcoming communities to prevent a reoccurrence of this reactionary effort to strip the neighborhood of its international identity. Using the ideas set forth in the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) *Code of Ethics*, including cultural competence, dignity and worth of all people, and the value of social justice, (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2008), we can work towards increasing the value of human relationships for prevention of tensions and the stress in community identity. It can be a powerful tool to use an institution that is influential in the dominant culture to explore privilege and oppression within communities.

Building multicultural and strong communities encourages future activism and engagement. Ramakrishnan and Wong (2007) found that most political protest activity in the U.S. by foreign-born

immigrant communities took place in welcoming districts across the U.S. In mostly unwelcoming regions, there was a strong correlation to anti-immigrant policy, and little political mobilizations to revise those policies from immigrant groups, reinforcing that a combination of legislation and neighborhood atmosphere are mutually beneficial.

The importance of culturally competent street-level, local government staff cannot be undervalued. There are increasingly available studies showing that local government workers, bureaucratic staff, and law enforcement staff have the opportunity in their roles to decide the manner in which local as well as federal policies are enforced (Decker, Lewis, Provine, & Varsanyi, 2009; Lewis & Ramakrishnan, 2007). In a study among various municipalities in California, police officers independently developed systems of language support and procedures for interacting with people perceived as foreign-born encountered during community patrols and domestic violence responses, despite apparent unawareness of local elected officials of these issues (Lewis & Ramakrishnan, 2007). Another study explores the inclusive efforts of school officials in rural North Carolina, who instituted major efforts to support the needs of immigrant families, with language inclusivity and cultural awareness programs, regardless of the restrictive government policies, without support from the local elected official, and despite budget cuts (Marrow, 2009). Marrow (2009) asserts that these professionals are actively seeking ways to be considerate of challenges faced by foreign-born residents, and are taking efforts to increase awareness and services beyond what local policies require, significantly increasing the impact of accessible benefits and creating a supportive and welcoming resource to connect all residents with children in the school system.

This awareness and effort is valuable in all contact between government and the people they serve, and social workers can play a valuable role using direct-service skills to increase the social justice awareness in political offices. There are currently many considerate and knowledgeable staff working throughout the New York City government; however, there are barriers in the culture and systems of municipal elected offices that need to be addressed to better support these staffers and

to increase the number of culturally competent and effective street-level workers.

In Yorkville, New York City District 5 Council Member Ben Kallos has begun a program to incorporate a team of graduate-level social work interns, led by a Constituent Services Director with an LMSW, who seek to integrate their awareness of the biopsychosocial dynamics to resolve complex issues faced by residents (Ben Kallos, personal communication, 2015). Expanding on this program would increase the skills of all staff, as social work values can be used towards integrating skills training programs for all front-line District Office staff and interns. Social workers can run training sessions to share and develop active listening techniques, empathetic responding, and transference awareness, as learned in a foundation of clinical practice (Brandell, 2011), resulting in increased positive communication strategies between staff, residents, and the community.

Training others also provides an opportunity to address a barrier for effective awareness and personal initiative efforts: the size of the constituent body. In New York, the local government is responsible for a small city's worth of people. New York City Council District 5 alone represents over 168,000 residents (New York City Districting Commission, 2015), larger than Syracuse, NY. Responding to the number of needs and issues that the residents who are already comfortable in engaging with their government can occupy the majority of staff time, even if the staff is interested and has a strong desire for more outreach opportunities (government staff, personal communications, 2014).

This time pressure can also be addressed by creating a meaningful framework by which to include the local-born residents themselves as anti-oppressive culturally competent resources. By incorporating the residents' desire to be more active and helpful in their communities, social workers can develop inclusive programs to create a meaningful approach for the residents themselves to address community challenges and concerns. Using a social work framework of inclusive programs, based on feedback and incorporating residents' skills, it is possible to bring a diverse knowledge base, an active community to increase

foreign-born engagement policies, and useful strategies to create a foundation for future elected officials into a government office (District 5 residents, personal communications, 2014).

For example, senior citizens in the area that have spoken to the present author have expressed feelings that they have specific insight into efforts made by previous Council Members, and, if asked, can advise on what has worked, and what did not work through the cycles of elected officials in their district. Many long-term residents have experience and knowledge of rent regulations and insight into housing court intricacies, and have the desire to pass on their knowledge to others, while facing barriers of immobility, and isolation (senior residents, personal communications, 2014). The District Office can support these residents seeking involvement, and assist in connecting neighbors together to increase the diversity of social interactions, which, in turn, will strengthen neighborhood identity.

### **Opportunities for Mezzo Level Initiatives**

New York City Council Offices routinely work with local social service agencies, and precedents exist for co-hosting senior citizen health fairs, information sessions, community meetings; as well as providing support for schools and most recently, opportunities for residents to create capital improvements through Participatory Budgeting meetings (Ben Kallos, personal communication, 2015).

As social workers are trained group facilitators, having a role in these meeting spaces means they can listen for ways to explore if the foreign-born resident's needs are filled and if there is tension stemming from local-born residents unwelcoming behaviors and expressions. Social workers can assess these dialogues, and inform the Council how to improve the District Office services and offer insights into which programs in the district are successful and work with budget staff to shift more City Council funding for those programs.

Despite having a smaller percentage of foreign-born residents, District 5 does contain a variety of programs and resources supporting foreign-born and culturally diverse residents, including one of New York City's largest Islamic Centers, a Korean church, a Bohemian Benevolent & Literary As-

sociation, some remaining German Cultural Society members, and activities and members of the Northern Manhattan Coalition for Immigrant Rights. There are a high number of small business owners, restaurants, and domestic workers residing and working in District 5, all communities that have a higher than average percentage of foreign-born workers (NYIC, 2014).

Planning meetings to connect local-born residents who do not identify with these cultural institutions with a variety of residents who do, communities like District 5 can encourage the awareness of resources to residents who have not sought them out, and create intergroup dialogue sessions. Intergroup dialogue is “a facilitated community experience designed to provide a safe yet communal space” and an avenue through which social workers may “address power, cultural differences, and divisive issues constructively” (Dessel, Rogge, & Garlington, 2006, p. 303).

Engaging with local-born residents who may have non-welcoming attitudes, intergroup dialogue may reduce the “anxiety and threat that has been shown to positively correlate with negative attitudes toward marginalized groups” (Moradi, van den Berg, & Epting, 2006). By integrating these conversation efforts with pre-existing engagement efforts from the District Offices, there is the potential to be especially effective in connecting with a wider swath of neighborhood residents.

There are currently templates that exist to increase community dialogues with a focus on immigration. The New York State New Americans, in conjunction with the Mayor’s Office for Immigrant Affairs, offers content and guidelines for hosting discussion groups for *Community Conversations on Immigration* (New York State Office for New Americans, 2014; Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, 2015). The Arab American Association of New York also provides a template and support through their Take on Hate Initiative, for developing community conversations (Take on Hate, 2015).

The conversations also provide a safe introduction to self-awareness for local-born, culturally dominant residents and acknowledging privilege in a safe space. As noted by Corey, Corey, and Corey (2013), by undergoing training to understand where one is in the process of learning about

diversity, people can be aware that others are “similarly at very different stages in their cultural awareness and identity development” (p. 49). Using social work training for group facilitation, local government staff can encourage skills to develop trust and establish comfort in exploring the concerns of local-born residents as well as foreign-born residents within the topic of community identity and immigration. Local government staff can then also assist in referrals to further anti-racism and anti-oppression trainings for interested residents.

Communities like District 5 can also add an immigration focus to engage more residents in the existing resources provided by the office by proactively reaching out through the immigration coalitions and community groups. As Elizabeth Benjamin of Community Service Society of New York, describes, “there is a lot of misinformation out there – that you can’t take any government benefit because it will affect your chances of getting a green card” (Goldberg, 2014). By actively seeking information about who is in the district, in lieu of responding mainly to contact initiated by residents, the office can collaborate in outreach initiatives that may be needed for foreign-born residents to learn of opportunities to participate in open office hours, legal clinics, health fairs, and public meetings. This increases not only the social interaction of a diversity of residents, but the common ties of connecting to work together to increase concerns spanning cultural identities, such as construction noise during early morning hours or an abundance of bus stop trash, can also increase levels of community identity in a geographical area.

Having district office staff trained in proactively cultivating interactions between diverse residents in a neighborhood with the reputation of homogeneity can jumpstart an incorporation of social work skills, such as group facilitation and psychosocially-informed community organizing and outreach, to create intergroup dialogue and not only increase the success for implementation of progressive policies, but provide a ground for activity and allies for future equity in government.

## Evaluation

Evaluating the impact of prevention and community identity shifts can be difficult at a macro level. To also incorporate measurable outcomes to these initiatives, social workers can look to the tangible skills incorporated in social work training. In the micro-initiatives, measured assessments of skills, such as active listening, increased awareness, and conflict resolution skills, like the Effective Listening and Interactive Communications Scale (ELIC; King, Servais, Bolack, Shepherd, & Willoughby, 2012) can be integrated into all front-level government staff job performance evaluations. Also, incorporating results from measures such as the ACT Council of Social Services' Cultural Awareness Self-Assessment Toolkit for community service providers can assist in the office-wide evaluation of the District Office services (ACT Council of Social Services, 2009).

To increase the use of evidence-based measures for community building, we can look to scales to assess the attitudes and values of participants in meetings and intergroup dialogue, and track it over time, calling upon social work researchers to develop questionnaires and surveys to measure the effect in the community of Nagda's (2006) assertion that intergroup dialogue consists of four main factors, "(1) appreciating difference, (2) engaging self, (3) critical self-reflection, and (4) alliance building" (p.553).

Concrete issues of shared resources, and increased access to them can be tracked through assessing and revising CouncilStat, the City Council constituent issue database, to aid in tracking the number of concerns that may stem from, however tangential, a barrier faced by a foreign-born resident. This way, researchers and data analysts can begin collecting evidence and developing analytics to gauge if outreach efforts and building community support networks are successfully providing needed services.

## Discussion

The focus of this article has been to encourage social workers to press for and imagine the idea of creating a framework in local government to assess and be proactive in using immigration-

focused community-based social work ethics and practices in local government District Offices. By valuing social work direct-practice skills and advocating for an increased connection between politics and social work, we can work to create healthier, more equitable communities. Any of the recommendations suggested above should be further explored with research of evidence-based practices of dialogue and interpersonal communication.

With the current political climate, this is an exciting and opportune time to increase collaborations in a range of activities for a successful implementation of current inclusionary policies and insure that front-line staff has the resources and skills to support and drive forward socially just policies and create welcoming communities in all districts in New York City.

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