

Welcoming America's Three Pronged, Receiving Communities Engagement Approach

Why Receiving Communities?

Many communities around the world have experienced rapid demographic shifts in recent years, especially as immigrants and refugees have headed to nontraditional gateway cities and smaller communities without a recent history of immigration. Change on this scale is never easy—not for immigrants themselves, and not for the long-time residents of communities asked to welcome newcomers whose language and culture they may not understand. Just as fertile soil is needed for a seed to grow, receptive communities are critical if immigrants are to thrive, and if communities are to benefit from the new ideas, talent, and vitality that diversity brings.

Forward-thinking local governments and community organizations work to help longer-term, receiving community members understand who their neighbors are and why they are here, and actively take on bridge building work to help people from diverse backgrounds overcome language and cultural barriers and find common interests and shared values. As populations in a community change, there is a need to focus not only on new approaches to outreach and service delivery to the immigrant community, but also on outreach to the receiving community.

The good news is that, when receiving communities are engaged and also made to feel welcome, more robust, well-resourced, and successful immigrant integration can occur.

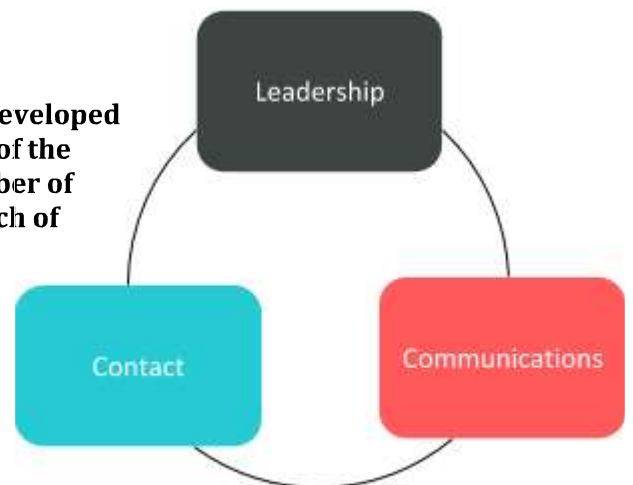
Who is the Receiving Community?

The receiving community refers to the long-time residents of the places where immigrants settle. Receiving communities can include people of all backgrounds, crossing many borders of race, ethnicity, class, and religion - and can even include more settled immigrant populations.

Receiving Community Engagement –

A Three-Pronged Approach

Based on research and practice, [Welcoming America](#) developed the following three-pronged approach to engagement of the receiving community. Welcoming America has a number of tools and resources designed to support practice in each of these areas, as well as a comprehensive Receiving Communities Toolkit available in Welcoming America's [online Resource Library](#) as well as its separate [Welcoming Refugees Resource Library](#).



Building Meaningful Contact

Too often people in communities – whether they are leaders or everyday residents – don't have meaningful connections with immigrants. This is due to a variety of factors including language, cultural and geographic barriers, misperceptions and fear.

Finding ways to bring together immigrants and the receiving community for shared experiences – such as dialogue, intercultural events or joint service projects – has proven to break down barriers and lead to new understanding. Contact building efforts are especially effective when they are

sustained and bring participants together on equal footing. Engagement work ideally takes place in venues that are convenient and comfortable; where common areas of interest can be explored; and where a “safe space” can be created. Some examples of venues include places of worship, community centers, civic clubs, and local schools and universities, where host partners or ambassadors can be tapped to host and lead events.

Leadership Engagement

Engaging diverse leaders to be positive voices around building a welcoming community sends strong signals to the public that demographic changes are an opportunity. Local elected officials, business leaders, faith and civic leaders from both foreign and U.S. born communities can play a vital role in affirming the contributions of all residents and the importance of community unity. These leaders can also be brought to the table more formally through a multi-sector initiative, in which they join with more traditional immigrant serving organizations to craft a vision and strategy for making the community a more welcoming place.

Positive Communications

In many communities, particularly new immigrant destinations, the messages that receiving community members hear about immigrants can be negative, misinformed, or minimal. Finding ways to provide a positive alternative, humanizing new neighbors and speaking to shared values, is critically important.

By reframing the issue, and telling stories that connect real people and their neighbors based on what they have in common, we can help receiving communities start to see how supporting immigrants and creating a welcoming community for all is just another way of building stronger communities for everyone.

Welcoming America offers a number of tools to help with messaging, but ultimately, messages must be tailored to the local audience and community context. Examples of positive messaging frames include shared faith; patriotic ideals; economic contributions; and love of family, among many others. [The Stronger Together Toolkit](#) provides examples of messaging that speaks to shared prosperity, and can be used with policy and business audiences in particular. The [Reframing Refugees Toolkit](#) is a resource for communications that speak to refugee issues, but can be used more broadly for all immigrant groups.

Communications strategy also involves tactics to deploy these messages to strategic audiences. While there will always be those with strongly held views on either side of any issue, smart communications efforts seek to reach those in the middle who may be ambivalent or unsure. Using untapped champions who have credibility and trust with the unsure to deliver the message is often the most successful route. Communications efforts can range from simple approaches, such as publishing a story in a church bulletin, to strategies such as billboards and earned media.