



Relationships Matter: Volunteerism in Immigrant Communities *Executive Summary*

INTRODUCTION

Minnesota has experienced dramatic changes in population diversity over the last 25 years. Once primarily a state of northern European ancestry, Minnesota's diversity growth rate continues to be one of the highest in the United States. The annual immigration rate in Minnesota is triple the rate of 25 years ago. Latino and Asian populations in the state grew by over 160% between the 1990 and 2000 census reports and the African population in the Twin Cities increased by 629 percent. These statistics reveal that Minnesota's population is reflecting a more non-European population with diversity in language, thinking, and cultural practices.

The impact of immigration can be felt on multiple levels within nonprofit organizations. Mainstream organizations in Minnesota face serious challenges in recruiting, managing, and involving volunteers from immigrant and refugee communities. While Minnesota has a significant level of volunteerism, nonprofit leaders recognize that to meet their mission and to serve a diverse constituent population, their involvement of volunteers needs to be expanded to reflect the new face of Minnesota. Yet, these leaders do not have access to the resources, the knowledge, and the information necessary to make these changes.

The Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration (MAVA) and Dr. Mai Moua, Leadership Paradigms, initiated this original research to understand the ways volunteerism appeared in immigrant communities, and how this understanding can be used to help mainstream organizations' authentic engagement of immigrant volunteers. We were interested in identifying the barriers that volunteers from these communities faced when working with mainstream organizations. Additionally, we wanted to learn about organizational practices related to the engagement of volunteers from immigrant communities.

The collection of data for this research included:

- Interviews with twenty-nine individuals from the Hmong, Latino and Somali communities
- Two focus groups held with Somali volunteers
- Two focus groups held with organizations in the mainstream community; one in Saint Cloud and the other in the Twin Cities
- Surveys collected from Latino and Somali participants at a resource fair in Willmar
- 111 on-line surveys collected from MAVA Members
- Literature review of 100 books, journal articles, and documents

FINDINGS FROM RESEARCH

The findings from the research with volunteers from immigrant communities revealed the importance of building authentic relationships and trust in their successful engagement. Additionally, the results supported past research on social obligation and socio-economic status as critical factors to consider when engaging these communities. The data suggested that organizations that pay attention to the cultural dynamics of any group/culture will do better at building relationships and trust.

Surveys and focus group data gathered from mainstream organizations demonstrated the following:

- Half of all participants have worked with immigrant volunteers for less than ten years.
- 62% of participants currently have immigrant volunteers in their organization.
- 69% of respondents feel it is important to involve immigrant volunteers in their organization; they rated this because of:
 - The changing demographics within Minnesota
 - The need for organizations to be more culturally competent in service delivery
 - The need to reflect diverse communities
 - The opportunities that organizations have to conduct outreach into diverse communities
- 25% of respondents felt they were successful at engaging immigrant volunteers. Those who did so were successful because their programs had very tangible skills to offer immigrant volunteers, *and* they spent the time to develop long-term relationships.

Those who worked successfully with volunteers from immigrant communities noted the following success strategies:

1. Have Key Competencies in Staff and Organization
2. Be Inclusive and Respectful to Individuals
3. Build on the Interests and Talents of Volunteers
4. Have Organizational Flexibility
5. Do Community Outreach and Recruitment
6. Provide Meaningful Opportunities

RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of the findings, the following were provided as recommendations for engaging volunteers from immigrant communities:

1. Understanding how relationships are created and why trust is important within immigrant communities can help organizations to successfully engage immigrant volunteers.
2. Organizations are more successful if they can establish and articulate the reasons for developing authentic relationships with immigrant volunteers and communities.
3. Find volunteer opportunities that engage and benefit the collective, family-centered system that is prevalent in immigrant communities.
4. Organizations that cultivate a strong sense of social identity for immigrant volunteers are much better at engaging and recruiting this population.
5. Organizations need to assess the changing landscape of volunteerism, including practices and systems that cause barriers to fully engaging immigrant volunteers.
6. Organizations need to assess their capacity and find the adequate resources to successfully engage immigrant volunteers.
7. Know the cultural history and background of immigrant volunteerism, including the cultural competency skills needed to work with immigrant populations.
8. Build on the talents of immigrant volunteers.
9. Engage the whole organization to recognize the importance of volunteers from immigrant communities.
10. Cultivate racial and cultural understanding, sensitivity, and proficiency.

This executive summary reviews a research report conducted by Dr. Mai Moua, Leadership Paradigms, for the **Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration**. For more information about the research or to obtain the full report, please go to www.MAVANetwork.org/diversity or contact office@mavanetwork.org.