

# **NGO Audit Part III: Reflections & Recommendations**

## **Tennessee Immigrant & Refugee Rights Coalition**

PS 5275 NGOs & Non-Profits

Alex Horne

Zineb Jalal

Aminatta Jagne Njie

Abdishakur Mohamed

### **Summary**

The Tennessee Immigrant & Refugee Rights coalition has grown significantly since its inception. Moving forward into the 2020s, the organisation will likely transition into the multi-million dollar budget stratum of the non-profit interest groups, which brings a chance for critical self-reflection. In this section of the report, the authors enumerate the key strengths and weaknesses of TIRRC which have revealed themselves in the last decade. We recommend that the Coalition not shy away from political fights, that they encourage a culture of philanthropy and transparency within the organisation, that they ally with LGBTQ advocacy organisations, and hire unpaid interns filling vacant positions as paid employees. Lastly, the organisation needs to pay devote attention to external and inter-departmental transparency.

### **Strengths**

Lacking more detailed information about the structure and strategic planning process of TIRRC, we can only deduce so much from without. With respect to finance and staffing, however, TIRRC has proven itself to be the very model of a fast-growing regional community interest organisation.

## **Diverse Staff & Board**

The majority of the staff and board members at the Tennessee Immigrants Refugee Rights Coalition (TIRRC) are immigrants or first generation American; an overwhelming majority are also women. The staff composition reflects the immigrant populations of Tennessee, with every major and minor refugee group represented. Apart from the assigning duties, the staff with the immigrant background provide interpretations and translations services to the organization and which saves TIRRC money on hiring out services. The diversity in their staff also improves outreach to immigrant and refugee constituencies; immigrants trust the organisation when they see someone from their country works there. Outside of TIRRC, board officers are professionals, like lawyers, business owners, community leaders, etc. This diversity enhances TIRRC's governance as well as their ability to raise funds.

## **Fund Development Success**

Evidently, TIRRC has successfully capitalised on major opportunities to develop their revenues over last 10 years. They have grant-writing, resources and development positions in their staff. With good retention rates, these staff members have developed a good relationship with the donors, so most of their donors tend to stay with them longer and contribute more. There are many businesses and foundations who are happy with what they are doing and continue to donate; a good example is Nissan. They have memberships and services fees which helped them to generate funds. Recently the coalition secured state and federal grants. Their board is highly trained and managed to succeed to raise more funds. Their board development strategy increases their chances of raising funds and influencing more policies.

## **Good reputation among constituencies served**

TIRCC has a good relationship with the immigrant communities which are their primary focus. They work with immigrants' leaders closely. They provide support and training to the community leaders. They work closely with religious institutions such as churches, mosques and synagogues for better services. Their board members are from different professional backgrounds and helped them to have various stakeholders across the state. They work closely with elected officials, state and city leaders.

## **Good performance track record on legislative fights**

For the last decade, TIRRC defeated many anti-immigrant bills, some of which would have limited refugee admittance. They mobilised many grassroots organizations and individuals who care about the issues. They spend many man-hours persuading Tennessee law makers to vote against the anti-immigrant's bills. They have generated much evidence and supporting materials to defeat those bills. The coalition has also successfully organised rallies and meetings to educate the public on the danger of those laws and encourage them to call their legislators in the Tennessee legislature. Their staff led the fight and fought fiercely in defeating the anti-immigrant bills. Through their efforts, they gained support from governors, mayors of major cities, and legislators.

## **Weaknesses**

Besides the overall transparency issues in communicating with Board Officers and senior staff, there remain areas where TIRRC can improve its work significantly.

### **Financial Transparency**

The financial details from 2017 to 2019 indicate that TIRRC's activities were primarily funded through individual contributions. However, the list of individuals is not provided. The organization was more transparent in its Antioch Pike project. While announcing this campaign, TIRCC indicated that it had secured donations from the Cal Turner Family Foundation, the Joe C. David Foundation, and the Frist Foundation. The three donors helped raise more than 50 percent of the project's budget. Mohamed Shukri-Hassan, the capital campaign chair, called on well-wishers to invest in the project to make it successful. Misinformation has been a significant challenge at the organization, especially when COVID-19 is wreaking havoc. One of TIRRC's employees, Ana Gutierrez, says this lack of enough information puts undocumented refugees at risk. Most of these immigrants believe that they will be asked about their immigration status when they go to testing sites. These individuals are not aware of the resources they can access to help them fight COVID-19.

## **Staff Vacancies**

One of TIRRC's weaknesses was evidenced when former co-directors Lindsey Harris and Stephanie Teatro stepped down. They had previously co-led TIRRC since 2014. These senior staff members were replaced by an internal candidate, Lisa Sherman-Nikolaus. This transition came at a time when TIRRC needed the experience of the two leaders. There was an impending U.S. Supreme Court decision on the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program and the construction of new headquarters for the organization. Replacing experienced leaders with an internal candidate, while commendable from a staff development point of view, was ill-timed and the transition could have been smoother. The pressure of completing projects, some of which had taken more than two years of planning, would weigh heavily on Sherman-Nikolaus.

The organization has grown from nine to 25 staff members since it was established. Other participants include 700 volunteers and about 1,000 member donors. The organization intends to fulfill its mission in a society that is ever-growing. This organization even assists approximately 5,000 individuals in overcoming specific barriers to integration. These barriers may include the inability to speak English for immigrants who wish to apply for citizenship. TIRRC receives an average of 25,000 individuals who are referred through third parties. Therefore, this organization is overwhelmed. In other words, there is a perennial shortage of staff that should be addressed for TIRRC to achieve its objectives.

## **LGBTQ Issues**

Although TIRRC advocate for the immigrant LGBTQ rights in the community by supporting legislation that benefits LGBTQ people, they lack specific programs that focus on LGBTQ immigrants, such as (LGBTQ) counseling services, support groups, and community education that promotes the acceptance of these marginalized groups. Not having these services can further alienate LGBTQ immigrants because they may not be able to find resources that aid them in their survival and adjustment to their new environment. Many LGBTQ people, especially, Black trans women, experience homelessness, workplace discrimination, and violence; immigrant and, or refugee status can exacerbate these issues.

## **Recommendations**

### **More Involvement in Electoral & Legislative Process**

The authors of this report have considered whether and how it would be possible for TIRRC to take the legislative initiative in the political struggles which affect immigrants and refugees. The coalition has done remarkable work lobbying the state house to prevent the passage of anti-immigrant bills, but TIRRC's own efforts to advance positive legislation in the house came short by a narrow margin (on allowing undocumented students to pay in-state college tuition rates). Despite the naturally reactive posture that an immigrant-advocate has to take in Tennessee's political climate, TIRRC can still take the initiative by getting involved in more elections through voting registration drives and focus on low-turnout elections.

### **Ally with LGBTQ networks**

TIRRC's speciality is not LGBTQ issues, and any honest assessment would indicate that TIRRC should rely on other NGOs as partners in this area rather than construct their own support system. TIRRC should seek out LGBTQ advocacy organisations in Tennessee and build a relationship of mutual support, since immigrant rights and anti-racism are also complimentary to the LGBTQ cause.

### **Board officers as Fund-raising Ambassadors**

TIRRC's success in fund-development over the last decade deserves commendation; sustaining that level of growth will be difficult. The governing board should remain realistic about variability in revenues from grants and donations in the future and plan accordingly. TIRRC's board members can contribute more in this regard, but this requires further investment in board training.

### **Hire Volunteers as Paid Employees**

While TIRRC claims to have an 89% staff retention rate, the vacant positions are perennially vacant. The coalition already has interns filling the roles on a temporary semester-to-semester basis, so the solution is simple: engage these interns early on and make clear that TIRRC would prefer to hire from within rather

than use interns to patch over a gap in staffing. Even if budgetary limitations only permit hiring one or two employees Part-Time, the organisation stands to benefit more from staff retention than from relying on free labour as a crutch.

### **Greater Public Transparency**

Lastly, greater public transparency is needed within TIRRC. As more of their activities pivot towards lobbying, any reasonable organisation would become more tight-lipped about their operations, plans, &c.; however, over the course of this audit, the only senior staff we successfully managed to reach were on long-term leaves of absence. In correspondence with those who responded, they offered conflicting or outdated information that provided little meaningful insight to the organisation's mission and operations. Either the staff are too overworked to respond to public communications or it is unclear to staff whose responsibility it would be. As many of the communications-related posts are filled by interns, we suspect it is a combination of both. The organisation relies more on public PR supplied by newspaper coverage, which sacrifices some control over their messaging, but they are also reluctant to share information to non-reporters (perhaps out of political savvy). By promoting a culture of transparency and encouraging different departments to integrate with one another's work, TIRRC can make every employee a well-informed ambassador for the organisation.