

Strengths

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, 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's community who are their primary focus. They work with immigrants' leaders. They provide a lot of support and train to the immigrant's 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 mobilized 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. Rallies and organisations to educate the public on the danger of those bills 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 a lot of support from governors, mayors of major cities, and legislators.

Recommendations

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.

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.

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.

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. 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.