

IMMIGRANT FORUM BRIDGES LONG-STANDING GAPS

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Body

Two rows of seats were arranged in an inviting circle. The chairs, even on a snowy morning, were soon occupied by a rainbow of Caucasian, Somali, African-American, Latino, Ethiopian, Hmong and American Indian faces.

This United Nations-like gathering took place Friday at the appropriately named International Institute of Minnesota, a short soccer-ball kick from the State Fairgrounds -- the annual host to the so-called Great Minnesota Get-Together.

The faces on this day belonged to immigrants, legislative aides, representatives from various social service agencies and nonprofits, and a handful of federal immigration officials.

A mix such as this a few years ago would have begun with subdued tension, followed by miscommunication, vented anger, allegations -- true or not -- and finally end with frustration on both sides. Essentially, a verbal food fight where little got accomplished.

"That's basically how most of them went," recalled Curtis Aljets, who recently retired as local district director of the former INS, renamed the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. "It was really frustrating."

Enter Hector Garcia, a former Twin Cities securities executive who approached Aljets with a better idea following a contentious and largely unproductive session at a church in St. Paul.

"They were talking past each other rather than to each other," recalled Garcia, then a member of the National Conference for Community Justice. The group, formerly called the National Conference of Christians and Jews, was founded in the late 1920s as a way to ease tensions between the two groups during a time of heightened anti-Semitism. Garcia believed a similar format with modern day applications was needed.

Four years later, the Immigrant Community Roundtable has grown into a highly constructive venue for both federal officials, immigrants and others to discuss issues, exchange information and find common ground in a productive and respectful setting.

At Friday's session, participants learned about a growing scam in which some landlords are extorting cash bribes between rental payments. Another scam, which involves the multiple use of children's Social Security numbers to fraudulently receive child credit refunds, is currently the subject of an ongoing probe by local IRS investigators.

But another of the roundtable's crowning achievements today is a guide for newly arrived immigrants that is being replicated in New York City and may possibly become a national handout model for immigration offices nationwide.

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The 73-page **Immigrant** Orientation Guide, available online, on video and in print, is a series of primers on immigration status, police and 911 procedures, basic housing, employment and civil rights. The guide is currently available in English, Spanish and Somali.

"Many new residents are vulnerable to scams and ignorant of information that may seem very basic to you and me," said Linda Miller, executive director of Civil Society, a roundtable participant and St. Paul-based nonprofit legal group. "This is a nonstop way for new residents to learn about many things they need to know."

The New York Times and a city museum are underwriting a similar survival-type guide in English, Spanish and Chinese that will become available to newly arrived **immigrants** in the nation's largest city in March.

Although the Big Apple has historically been the gateway for generations of **immigrants**, the Twin Cities have experienced a significant upsurge in the past decade. Overall, foreign-born residents account for 5.3 percent of Minnesota's population, double the percentage in 1990.

Garcia, Aljets and others believe the quarterly roundtable meetings are serving as a way to help defuse the fear and distrust of **immigrants** following the events of Sept. 11, 2001. It almost seems like the word "**immigrant**" has become an exclusive catch phrase for terrorists or undocumented residents.

"I have some fear that a lot of people interpret it that way," says Garcia, who left the corporate executive world to work as a self-employed cultural consultant. "One of the goals we have is to better integrate **immigrants** into the larger society. I don't mean assimilate, but to highlight the contributions of **immigrants**, and how, as throughout our history, they have helped enrich the community."

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FYI

For more information about the **Immigrant** Community Roundtable or the **Immigrant** Orientation Guide, call 952-933-8889.

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