

Crossing Borders, Crossing Barriers



A Report from the Western Institute for Organizing and
Leadership Development for Immigrants and Refugees

WESTERN STATES CENTER
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Western States Center

Western States Center's mission is to build a progressive movement for social, economic, racial and environmental justice in the eight Western states of Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Utah, Nevada and Alaska.

Our vision is of a just and equitable society governed by a strong, grassroots democracy. We work on three levels: strengthening grassroots organizing and community-based leadership; building long term, strategic alliances among community, environmental, labor, social justice and other public interest organizations; and developing the capacity of informed communities to participate in the public policy process and in elections.

Executive Summary

The Western Institute for Organizing and Leadership Development for Immigrants and Refugees (WILDIR) is part of Western States Center's commitment to supporting a multi-ethnic immigrant and refugee justice movement in the Pacific Northwest, Northern Rockies and Great Basin. "Crossing Borders, Crossing Barriers" reports on the lessons learned from WILDIR; stories from participants; and recommendations for building a strong, coordinated immigrant and refugee movement.

Western States Center launched WILDIR to build leadership skills, provide peer-to-peer networking and relationship building, and develop shared cross cultural analysis among first generation immigrant and refugee leaders in our region. Fifteen participants from five states came together over the course of a year for four residential retreat sessions that explored topics ranging from government basics to community based leadership to choosing an issue.

Recurrent themes during these sessions included:

- race, racial justice and the immigrant and refugee experience;
- the direct service to community organizing spectrum;
- the ways funding affects how immigrant communities work together; and
- the inherent tension in building a movement that serves both the documented and undocumented immigrant and refugee communities.

The report explores each area, draws on the Center's unique regional perspective, and shares the voices of WILDIR participants.

Finally, the report shares some of the critical values and recommendations that WILDIR participants and Western States Center have learned are important in building a strong multi-ethnic movement for immigrant and refugee justice.

"I came to the United States in February 1985 and I came for survival. My country was at war and I needed to escape the war and look for freedom. Some of my community members came by similar circumstances; others migrated to the Northwest because they already had relatives or friends here."

"I was born in Russia and lived in the Ukraine and Moldova before coming to the United States. As did most members of my community, I came to the Northwest to be reunited with family and to flee religious persecution at home."

"I was working in Mexico and Central America promoting fair trade and sustainable agriculture, while exploring options for increasing my understanding of popular education, community studies and participatory democracy, when a friend mentioned a progressive school in the Northwest that he felt would match my interests. I knew that most people in my home country of Mexico come to the U.S. for economic reasons, to support their families, or to escape war-torn areas of Central America, but I realized once I arrived to the U.S. that very few people back home truly understand the hardships that face immigrants after they arrive here."





Introduction

The stories here help paint a portrait of the many complicated reasons why immigrants and refugees come to the United States. These stories—of people fleeing war or persecution, of seeking opportunity—are ages old and yet every story is a new tale, a different slice of the immigrant experience in America.

The voices of these unique individuals came together at Western States Center's leadership development program during 2006-2007. Since 1993, the Center has run the Western Institute for Organizing and Leadership Development (WILD), a regional organizer training program that intentionally gathers organizers from a variety of constituencies, locations and issue backgrounds to develop critical skills and build lasting relationships.

WILDIR, the Western Institute for Leadership Development for Immigrants and Refugees, was a logical outgrowth of WILD. Built to support first generation immigrant and refugee leaders from around the region, the year-long leadership development program utilized residential training sessions and field work to emphasize the theory and practice of building a strong multi-ethnic immigrant and refugee justice movement.

"I left home when I was seven, and after living in Kenya for four years immigrated to the United States in 1996. My experience echoes the majority of Somali refugees in Seattle who left their country due to civil war that began in late 1991. I began my young adult life in Seattle, close to family who had made the trip before me."

The focus of WILDIR was in supporting the development of first generation immigrant and refugee leaders to build a shared analysis and mutually supportive relationships. WILDIR focused on three key areas: organizing training, skills building, and developing a shared analysis of the regional challenges and opportunities that immigrant and refugee communities face. Participants also completed a local project to apply and refine their skills with the support of the Center's staff.

Our goals for the program were to provide:

- **Skill Building:** Strengthen the capacity and skills of immigrant and refugee leaders to work effectively in the non-profit sector and as community organizers.
- **Cross-Cultural Analysis:** Develop a shared political analysis among immigrant and refugee leaders, and model this process for other groups in the region and nationally.
- **Political Education:** Foster a deeper understanding of political engagement strategies to ensure that immigrant/refugee communities are heard within the political process and can address structural barriers to their participation.

Why this Approach?

Immigrants and refugees are not new to the region, but these communities struggle with many challenges—from accessing basic services to responding to the anti-immigrant movement sweeping the nation. Right Wing groups use the West as a testing ground for many of their issues through media campaigns, anti-immigrant legislation, and ballot measures that create a hostile environment for immigrant and refugee communities. In addition, the progressive movement in the region struggles over how to incorporate and support immigrant and refugee communities especially in an overwhelmingly white part of the country.

As the Center interviewed social service agencies, immigrant rights groups, unions and national groups, a consistent issue that kept surfacing was the lack of leadership or leadership development programs that were grounded in the realities of immigrant communities in the region. Interviewees could point to helpful trainings or workshops, but nothing that helped to develop consistent, ongoing relationships, built organizing skills and approaches, or prepared immigrant and refugee leaders and their organizations to move into organizing.

The Center's staff shaped the WILDIR Program to address these regional challenges while also creating the space to learn how Western States Center could best support a multi-ethnic immigrant and refugee leadership.

As this report goes to print, comprehensive immigration reform is stalled at the federal level. The fight has been picked up locally and at the state level—during the 2007 legislative session, states saw more than 1404 pieces of legislation related to immigrants and immigration introduced. From January to July 2nd 2007, 170 bills became law in 41 states.¹ As we gear up for a presidential election in 2008, with little hope of comprehensive immigration reform at the national level, immigration

¹ "2007 Enacted State Legislation Related to Immigrants and Immigration," National Conference of State Legislatures, July 2007.



FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

WILDIR participants completed individual projects that allowed them to apply the skills from the program to their community. Western States Center staff supported these projects through workplanning and goal setting, telephone check-ins, one on one trainings, and material support. Throughout this report the side bars and feature stories showcase the WILDIR participants' projects. Check them out!

will remain a volatile issue that is used to test candidates, anti-immigrant rhetoric will likely increase, and the tenor of debate will continue to push the extremes.

In this climate, we believe the lessons learned from programs like WILDIR—which seek to support the leadership, voices, and strategies of multi-ethnic immigrant and refugee leaders—are even more pertinent. Supporting immigrant and refugee communities in speaking for themselves, leading from their own place, and forging alliances across race is a critical component of the work ahead.

The Complicated Picture

During the course of the program, several common challenges arose from within the group. WILDIR participants talked about the isolation their communities face, the lack of multi-immigrant community spaces and the relationship between assimilation and cultural preservation. In the end, four critical themes arose from the group that Western States Center explored in some detail:

1. Race, racial justice and the immigrant and refugee experience
2. The spectrum of direct service to community organizing
3. The influence of funding on immigrant community collaboration
4. The inherent tension in building a movement that serves both the documented and undocumented immigrant and refugee communities.



Race, Racial Justice and the Immigrant and Refugee Experience

Throughout the program, participants identified how aspects of a person's individual identity can affect the possibilities they see for successful cross-ethnic organizing. Gender, sexual orientation, class, religious and cultural practices all play roles in how immigrant and refugee communities see each other as potential allies, as well as how they view working with other people of color led organizations.

The Center focuses on race and the immigrant and refugee experience in part because it is the most salient feature of the current political debate around immigration. The coded language and images used in discussing immigration clearly target non-white immigrant communities, and creating space for these communities to share and analyze the similar and divergent experiences they have around race is one place to start the dialogue and organizing.

Immigrant and refugee communities experience race in two very different settings—race in the country of origin and race in the United States.

Race in the USA

Immigrant and refugee communities draw their information about race in the US from many of the same places that all communities do: the media, popular culture, the education system. In addition, many immigrant and refugee communities learn about other racial groups through government service programs and funding directed at supporting immigrants and refugees. Similar to other communities of color, immigrant communities frequently internalize the racist messages that the broader society feeds them.

For WILDIR participants, an important element of the race conversation in the US is that individual ethnicities and nationalities are subsumed under broader racial categories that many immigrant and refugee communities don't identify with.

Many participants expressed their community's discomfort in embracing the framing of race in the US and placing their own immigrant community within this debate/frame. In addition, participants expressed their community's concerns that adopting America's race based framework would hasten the loss of connection to their country and culture of origin.

The grouping of multiple ethnic identities into one overarching racial identity has deep impacts on immigrant communities. Immigrants coming from countries in conflict like Pakistan and India or Somalia and Ethiopia are suddenly grouped together by a US framing of race that does not take into account the history of tensions and violence between the two countries. Mainstream US organizations, funders, and the government imagine these groups to be similar in their culture, language and experiences, and frequently expect groups to work together on a joint agenda.

"I was warned away from going to North and Northeast Portland because that is where black people lived. I was told it was a very violent area of town."

- WILDIR participant from West Africa

Meanwhile, groups do not have the space or context to address the community relationship and trust building that is critical to formulating new alliances in a US context. Groups may “go it alone” and work independently of broader racial associations or organizations, but find themselves marginalized. In a part of the country where communities of color make up single digit percentages of the overall population, having a specific ethnic group working alone can mean that the percentage of population represented is so statistically small that the organization cannot build power or move their agenda.

Terms like *people of color* and *minority* also brought up a number of reactions. “Who’s to say that we are the minority? When you look at the whole world, people from Africa, Asia, and Latin America are the majority.” Many WILDIR participants expressed dislike of the term *people of color*, wondered where it came from, and how white Americans fit into this term. Even with additional explanation around the common experience of being targeted and oppressed by racism, *people of color* is a term with which some WILDIR participants remained uncomfortable. **What is clear is that conversations about race and immigration need to incorporate definitions and explanations of terminology and space for immigrant and refugee communities to add their own experience and ideas.**

Participants offered a long list of day-to-day experiences with race ranging from airport screening to speaking in their own language to trying to find food from their culture. In almost every aspect of their lives—accessing services, housing, the school system, employment—immigrants and refugees experience racism.

Some immigrant communities are so isolated that members from their communities only experience race when outside of their own ethnic or racial group. As one person noted, “How does the fish know that it is wet? Only when it leaves the water. Because the Asian community can be so segregated, some people only experience race when they leave their specific Asian community.”

Many participants noted that there are few resources for addressing race and racism in an immigrant or refugee context. Some also expressed hesitation from their communities to complain about racist treatment. One participant noted that “People wonder if they deserve to be discriminated against because as refugees they have come to white people’s land – they are guests.” Internalized oppression also creates barriers for immigrant communities to successfully address race and racism in the US.

“All Latinos regardless of ethnicity or nationality are suddenly united together as one race in America.”

- WILDIR participant on racial categories in the US



AN EXAMPLE OF MULTI ETHNIC COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

In November of 2005, 22 diverse immigrant and refugee leaders met in a Portland restaurant. Although these leaders had been diligently working within their own organizations and cultural groups for years, many of them had not previously met one another, nor had they talked about their shared experiences as immigrants. However, with a new progressive Mayor elected, many felt that there could be some political will for moving a united immigrant and refugee agenda.

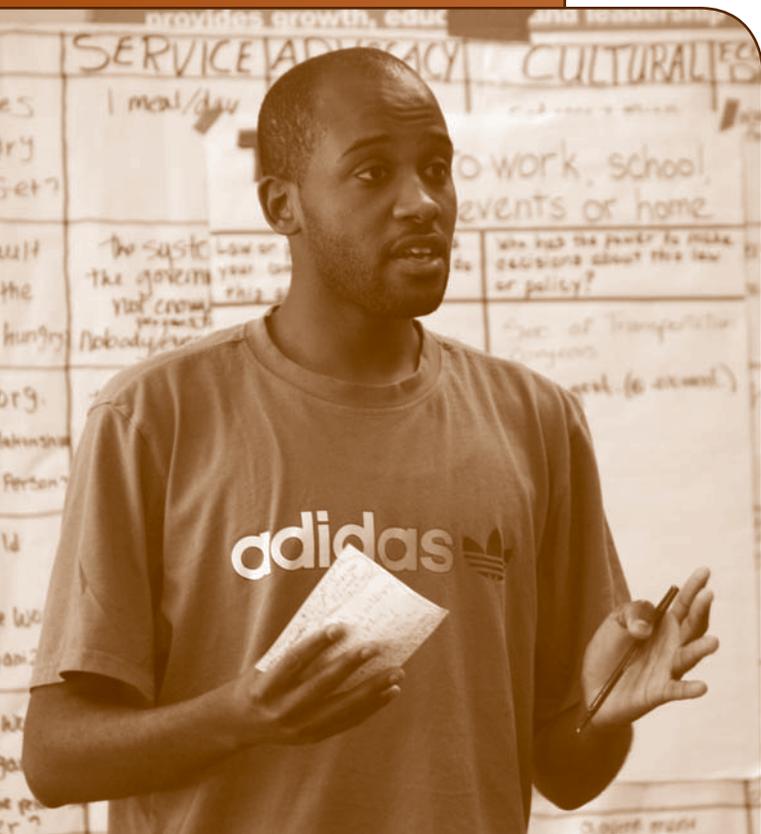
“This was my first chance to meet with different immigrant and refugee organizers and discuss the issues that we’re all facing,” explained Evelyne Ello-Hart of the African Women’s Coalition and a WILDIR participant. *“We soon realized that we had so much in common.”*

To begin dialogue with the City, the immigrant and refugee leaders decided to hold a conference at City Hall highlighting the issues and challenges of the area’s immigrant and refugee communities. The event was a huge success. On December 3, 2005, over 200 immigrants and refugees gathered for Bridgetown Voices: Immigrants and Refugees in Portland, a forum designed to explore barriers to newcomer inclusion in civic life. For many communities, the public forum raised hopes that they might finally be heard in City Hall—making immigrants and refugees equal partners in the future of their city.

“It was so empowering to see all the immigrant and refugee communities there, in one space,” said Ello-Hart. *“In Africa, we have a village place, where we meet and discuss our issues. It felt like the first time in our new country, we had our village place. The Mayor was there and the City was listening. We felt powerful.”*

The public forum exposed systemic barriers to immigrant and refugee civic participation in Portland. In his presentation, Mayor Tom Potter shared that “the City does not currently have a comprehensive plan to involve immigrants and refugees in public life.”

Seeking to build on the collaborative work among these diverse communities and the success of the public forum, Ello-Hart and her fellow immigrant



and refugee leaders established an ongoing collaboration called Bridgetown Voices. They began meeting bi-weekly and established a set of goals for their work.

“We thought, if the City of Portland doesn’t have a plan for involving immigrants and refugees, we can start there.”

And they did. Over the subsequent six months, Bridgetown Voices members researched what other cities were doing, calling Minneapolis, Nashville and Seattle. They also knew that the City of Portland would likely do nothing without pressure—and a mechanism for holding them accountable.

“All of us worked behind the scenes to get immigrant and refugee issues on the City Council’s agenda,” said Ello-Hart. On October 18, 2006, Portland City Council responded to the pressure by passing a resolution reaffirming the city’s commitment to the inclusion of immigrants and refugees in civic affairs. The resolution also initiated a task force charged with identifying barriers to participation and exploring workable solutions for the City of Portland. Immigrants, refugees and allies testified in support of the historic resolution, and many provided emotional and touching testimony about the hardships they have experienced in Portland.

Ello-Hart believes that one immigrant or refugee organization or one community alone would never have accomplished the City Hall victory. *“What was so unusual about our collaboration was that the City had never seen Cambodians, Somalis, Vietnamese, Russians, Latinos speaking in one voice. They knew that this was something different. They had to listen.”*



Note: The efficacy of this coalition effort and its impact on the Mayor were seen in his immediate response to a major Immigrant and Customs Enforcement raid on a Portland factory in June 2007. Mayor Potter released a strongly worded statement condemning the raid, clarifying that local police did not participate and calling for comprehensive immigration reform.

“Our nation would be better served if this kind of energy was focused on creating a comprehensive approach to immigration reform that provides a path to citizenship; addresses the immigration backlog that keeps families apart; and provides a safe and legal way for workers to enter our country and be productive workers and taxpayers. Immigrants provide more than mere labor in our community. They have long enriched our history, our culture and our city. My heart goes out to families dealing with the aftermath of this morning.”

- Portland Mayor Tom Potter



Working on race within immigrant communities means addressing the stereotypes perpetuated in the media and popular culture, lack of a social justice analysis in government programs and internalized oppression. It's easy to see how these major issues limit engagement between more established communities of color and new immigrant and refugee communities. Without addressing these head on, building effective coalitions between new immigrant and

refugee communities and established communities of color stands little chance of success. It also speaks to the need to develop curricula, tools and analysis that integrate race and immigration experiences.

Race in Country of Origin

Almost universally, participants noted that the history of colonization had deep impacts on the experience of race in their countries of origin, where standards of beauty and the desirability/preference for light skin create race-based tensions. Many participants noted a correlation in countries of origin between economic status and light skin, with poorer and indigenous communities being notably darker and less well off. Participants also noted that experiences with race differed in their country of origin—for example, in Latin America, a person who would be considered white in their country is labeled Latino or Hispanic in the US.

Participants noted that because of the impact of skin color, conversations about 'race' can feel stunted or limited in their countries of origin. In fact, race in countries of origin frequently incorporates differences in ethnicity, tribal status and indigenous status that complicate a 'simple' race frame. They also highlighted a lack of resources for discussing race in their countries of origin, and the lack of tools for organizers to use in stimulating this critical dialogue. **One participant noted, "We lack tools. For Latinos that are Indigenous or Mestizos—there is no curriculum to work around race."**

Discrimination and oppression derived from countries of origin also affects immigrant and refugees' work in the United States. WILDIR participants noted that ethnic group, caste or tribal status create prejudices that are obstacles that must be overcome in the US in order to work with one's entire community or to create solidarity among immigrants from a particular country.

"There's a lot of racism that people bring from home countries, where indigenous and people with darker skin are looked down upon or patronized."

- WILDIR participant on race in country of origin

Direct Service to Community Organizing Spectrum

Nearly 75% of WILDIR participants work in social service agencies. From housing development to health care access to employment specialists, participants were generally working within their communities to meet the needs of immigrants and refugees.

Immigrant and refugee service organizations provide valuable and important direct services to individuals and families who lack access to resources, and whose needs and cultural context are often overlooked or ignored by mainstream organizations. From housing to health care to employment, these agencies help immigrant and refugee communities navigate the US system, create community and learn to survive. Crisis based service provision is not limited to immigrant and refugee service providers, but crosses all providers who work with underserved or marginalized constituencies.

At the same time, human service agencies are frequently limited by their funding and mission to focusing on immediate and direct needs—or crisis based needs—rather than long term social change that addresses structural inequality and injustice. In addition, community organizing strategies—in which affected communities determine and play an active role in crafting solutions to the problems they face—remain uneven in immigrant and refugee communities across the region.

Three Challenges Facing Social Service Providers

Many social service providers in the region discuss the tensions between serving documented and undocumented immigrants within their programs. By and large, social service providers rely on government grants or contracts to fund their work, and these monies come with strings attached—strings like not using federal or state funding to serve undocumented immigrants or funding that is restricted to working only with refugees.

Another tension for social service providers is meeting the needs of multiple ethnic communities. With smaller numbers of immigrants and refugees in our region, providers are often in the position of meeting multiple ethnic communities' needs. One provider stated, *“Our agency serves Somali, Russian, Ukrainian, Bosnian, Cambodian, Laotian, Vietnamese, Chinese, Ethiopian and Eritrean communities. We see some immigrants from the Korean or Spanish speaking communities as well.”*

Unlike more densely populated urban areas of the country where individual agencies would serve each of these communities or where communities that share a language may find services together, the vast majority of social service providers in the West must meet the needs of multiple and very disparate communities.

“If we want to work with undocumented immigrants, the government won't fund it.”

- Social service provider in Seattle, WA



A final challenge facing social service providers is finding the funding and the capacity to support community organizing or leadership development. Few service providers in the region run leadership development programs or classes that help their clients explore their leadership in the community—primarily because funding restricts them to direct service provision and case management. Many providers recognize the need for such additional programs. As one provider said, “In order for a car to run, we have to fix all the parts of the car, we have to look overall, not just fix the engine. Leadership programs are an important part of the overall picture.”²

Uneven Community Organizing Infrastructure

In looking to address the systemic issues facing immigrant and refugee communities—and recognizing the important but limited role that social service providers can play—it is clear that infrastructure for community organizing groups in the region is uneven at best.

In the Pacific Northwest, historic organizing in the Latino community through farm worker outreach and service provision has developed an experienced and sophisticated analysis and organizing approach. Similarly, work in Seattle after 9/11 has helped to mobilize multi-ethnic community organizing that serves as a strong regional resource. However, new immigrant communities in Utah, Idaho, Nevada, and other areas of the region remain under-organized and under-represented in providing vision and direction to the regional immigrant and refugee justice movement. In many states in the region, only one or two organizations work with immigrant and refugee constituencies using an organizing approach or strategy. Even fewer of these organizations are multi-ethnic, creating gaps in new immigrant and refugee communities.

Funding trends contribute to this problem, as the primary focus of immigration funding is in the major urban centers like Los Angeles, Chicago, New York or Miami. What little funding is available for other regions of the country tends to reinforce the strength of an existing handful of organizations rather than building capacity in new immigrant and refugee communities to develop their own independent organizations that can represent their interests over the long haul.

Funding is also frequently directed at organizations that can produce campaign output around the national debate for comprehensive immigration reform. For organizations struggling to develop their own organizing, respond to community needs, and access relevant community organizing training, this funding strategy leaves little opportunity to develop capacity.

² For additional analysis of the role of service providers in social justice work, see the Building Movement Project’s “Social Service and Social Change: A Process Guide.” For additional information about Washington state, see “Opening a Dialogue: An Invitation for Community Action,” a joint project of Nonprofit Assistance Center, Social Justice Fund NW and Western States Center (December 2004).



Documented, Undocumented and the Tensions Between

One cannot talk about immigrant and refugee communities without the tensions between documented and undocumented communities being raised. In addition, the differences between the refugee and immigrant experiences—and misconceptions between these communities—make it difficult to find common ground. While the number of immigrants in the region has increased dramatically in the past fifteen years, the number of refugees has likewise increased. Between 1993 and 2003, more than 150,000 refugees were resettled in our eight state region from countries ranging from Russia to the Sudan to Yugoslavia and Vietnam. Thus, it was critical for WILDIR participants to spend time learning about and strategizing on ways to bridge the divide between the different parts of all immigrant and refugee communities.

WILDIR participants knew very little about one another and the realities of immigrants who come as refugees or the reality of immigrants who come without documentation. During the last session of the program, Western States Center created a curriculum to explore these issues, with resounding results. The curriculum explored terminology, legal status and rights, and provided an opportunity to discuss the perceptions and realities for both undocumented and refugee individuals. One participant noted, *“This is exactly what was needed especially for someone who works in communities where there is huge very hurtful division between immigrants and refugees.”*

Time and time again, WILDIR participants noted that very little opportunity exists for refugees to interact with immigrants—documented or undocumented—and that the lack of communication between the two communities contributes to misunderstandings. Participants noted language and culture issues, lack of knowledge, and the dominant power structure that frequently pits these two communities against one another as primary obstacles for cross community collaboration.

“When I think of my community and my thoughts about it, before coming to WILDIR [I believed] that Latinos coming from other countries are always immigrants. The word refugee is kind of new when it comes to talking about people from Latin America. Now, I realize that there are immigrants and refugees among the broader spectrum of what we call Latinos. To me, refugees was a term used for other communities coming from very far away.”

- WILDIR participant



“It is a challenge to talk about refugees in our community since their numbers are small and there’s the prejudice that all refugees get handouts and have a way better life than others.”

- WILDIR participant

EDUCATION ACCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

Mohamed Ali Roble works for Seattle Public Schools (SPS) and used his individual project to get SPS to commit additional funding for refugee students. Seattle Public Schools is the largest public school system in Washington, and the 44th largest in the United States. More than 97 schools serve 45,800 students. School children speak more than 90 different foreign languages and dialects, the top five of which are Spanish, Vietnamese, Chinese, Somali and Tagalog.

After speaking with the Superintendent, Roble learned that there could be as much as \$100,000 in unused federal funds available for refugee children. Earmarked for newly arrived refugees, these monies had restrictions on who could be served. Students needed to be refugees in the United States less than five years. Roble wrote a proposal and was awarded the funds to commence a six-month refugee impact project.

“When we applied, the grant was divided into three different subjects: academics, parent education and training,” said Roble. Work would be carried out by community based organizations with strong ties to refugee communities.

After a competitive proposal process, Roble considered how limited resources can create conflicts among refugee communities and designed a selection process that could mitigate tensions between competing refugee organizations.

“First, we focused on communities that had the largest numbers of new immigrants. Then we considered the

communities with the most need. For example, some of the Asian communities that have been here longer are generally more academically advanced, or there are mutual assistance organizations available to help students.”



The final six community based organizations chosen were equally concerned about receiving a fair share of the funds.

“People complained that some communities’ needs were greater,” said Roble, *“but we decided to split the money evenly among the organizations to avoid problems. We told them: we understand but this is what we are going to do. If you are successful, we will help you find other funding later.”*

Roble’s refugee impact project goes well beyond academics, supporting family literacy and parent outreach through art, story telling and oral histories—program elements designed to promote parent and community involvement. Roble believes the use of culturally relevant outreach and involvement techniques are essential to the program’s success. *“This is very important,”* explains Roble, *“because parents don’t know about the Washington Assessment of Student Learning [standardized test] and how it is tied to graduation. We have to reach them in ways they understand.”*

The project has been so successful that it was extended for a full year.

Impact of WILDIR

The program evaluations show that WILDIR clearly helped participants learn new skills, acquire new analysis and build relationships with other immigrant rights leaders in the region.

We can't stress strongly enough just how important such relationships are—not only with other immigrant rights leaders but with other progressive and mainstream institutions as well. **The relatively small size and the isolation of immigrant and refugee communities places a heavy burden on leaders who can successfully navigate and negotiate relationships both inside and outside of their communities.** These leaders' skills as bridge builders are both increasingly vital and severely tested in times like the present, when the political debate on immigration has reached a fever pitch and ICE raids are placing even further strains on communities.

In their own words, program participants said the following of WILDIR:

"It helped me to realize that we are not alone, that the Vietnamese community is not alone. There are other people out there—like the Latinos, Koreans, Chinese—other people who are the same as us. It was so important to listen to the stories at WILDIR, seeing the hardships and difficulties they're facing. And with current immigration policies being proposed, it made me feel that we need to stand together as a group."

"Upon completion of the WILDIR program I began to feel more confident in taking on leadership roles. I had felt that it was important to facilitate in the development of leaders and to let the people most affected by the issues speak for themselves, but began to realize that I too could be one of these leaders, as part of the immigrant rights movement. I also have begun to feel that as a Latina, within the current context of a strong Latin@-driven movement, I bear a higher level of responsibility for learning more about the struggles of non-Latin@ immigrants. I especially appreciated the learnings from WILDIR around the experience of refugees. I saw in one workshop how many of the issues that each community faces do overlap and that there are multiple shared interests."

"I worked with other immigrant and refugee communities prior to the WILDIR trainings because of my agency's work and my involvement [in the community where I live], but WILDIR really changed my perspective and it made me realize that although we come from different backgrounds and cultures, we have to look for common ground and common goals."



Values that Support Multi-Ethnic Immigrant and Refugee Organizing

During WILDIR, conversations about building a strong, multi-ethnic immigrant and refugee movement always came back to “How?” Knowing that a strong, collective and multi-ethnic movement is necessary and knowing how to build it seem like two very separate conversations. However, as the question deepened over the four sessions of the program, a set of values began to surface that WILDIR participants felt answered the question of “How?” The values include:

1. Work to increase the “portion of the pie” that supports immigrant and refugee communities

Because of the limited resources available to support cross community organizing and sharing, our communities are frequently pitted against one another. We feel that we must show funders why our community deserves more funding than other immigrant or refugee communities. A strong multi-ethnic immigrant and refugee movement recognizes that we should not be in competition with one another, and that our solidarity is important.

2. Look for concrete projects that share commonality among immigrant and refugee communities to begin cross-ethnic collaborations

Our movement is stronger when we work together on concrete projects that improve the lives and conditions of all of our communities. In seeking specific and immediate projects on which to collaborate, we can offer concrete ways for our communities to learn about one another and support one another.

3. Recognize implications of attacks on certain parts of the immigrant and refugee communities as an attack on all

Immigrant and refugee communities are often pitted against one another around issues like access to services, documentation status and

civil liberties. Strong multi-ethnic immigrant and refugee organizing recognizes that an attack on one part of our community is an attack on immigrants and refugees more broadly speaking and seeks to reframe issues to undermine their ability to wedge us.

4. Recognize connections of immigrant and refugee movements to historic and global struggles

A strong immigrant and refugee movement in the United States should also be grounded in global and historic struggles. These struggles help us bring the context of our multi-national families and communities together, and also place our work in a broader fight for social justice that has been going on for years.

5. Shared value in solidarity across immigrant and refugee communities and other communities in struggle

We are not just fighting for a more just world for immigrant and refugees; we recognize that the liberation of all communities is critical to creating social justice. We will stand in solidarity with other communities—people of color, LGBT communities, women, youth and others that struggle for justice.

6. Intergenerational leadership is an important part of our struggle

Our cultures bring a tradition of respect for our elders, who play significant and important leadership roles in our communities. We believe that many individuals in our communities have skills to offer, leadership roles to play and help to bear in our fight. A strong immigrant and refugee movement creates space for intergenerational leadership that engages the first and second generations.

7. Immigrant and refugee leadership comes from within and is accountable to our own communities

Immigrant and refugee organizing must support the leadership of individuals from within our own communities, to raise the visibility of our organizations and networks. Supporting immigrant and refugee leadership also ensures that our movement is led by the people most affected by anti-immigrant policies. In addition, we seek to build leaders who are accountable and grounded in the needs and demands of our community.

8. Immigrant and refugee communities recognize the importance and need for having allies in non-immigrant communities

Our organizing also recognizes the important role that allies play in our communities in moving other non-immigrant allies and addressing anti-immigrant sentiment. Allies can play a supportive role in creating space for and taking direction from immigrant and refugee leaders as well as identifying concrete ways allies can move/support a broad pro-immigrant and refugee agenda.

9. Ensure that each culture is respected in multi-ethnic spaces

When we work together in multi-ethnic collaborations we must ensure that each culture

is respected and honored. Our multi-ethnic immigrant and refugee movement will honor the food, clothing, cultural and religious practices of all the communities that are represented in order to make community members feel welcome and respected.

10. Build relationships and trust before the crisis hits and after

In order to move beyond crisis management, we must prioritize creating and building relationships when our communities are not in crisis. Rather than waiting for funding cuts, a violent incident, or community tensions to escalate, immigrants and refugees must come together to create and renew relationships.

11. Support spaces for immigrant and refugee organizations to develop and evolve their own solutions

Immigrant and refugee communities must be provided venues and spaces to create their own agenda, language and messages from which to begin their organizing efforts. Immigrant communities must go through their own processes that reflect the culture, history and experience of their community in order to lead in the struggle. Non-immigrants and refugees can support these spaces and this evolution in a number of critical ways as allies.



Recommendations for Next Steps

The values on the previous pages encapsulate some of the ways WILDIR participants and Western States Center would hope that we can operate by and structure our work. As has been said by others before us, the road of justice is long and the journey even longer. We strive to uphold values that help us to walk our talk and build sustainably not just for specific communities, but for all of our communities. To that end, WILDIR participants offer the following recommendations for practical next steps to help our communities and organizations get from where they are now to where they can be the powerful and honored participants of a just society they seek to be.

Building a multi-ethnic, multi-racial movement for immigrant and refugee justice will happen in a sustainable and strategic manner by:

- Creating spaces where immigrants and refugees can get to know each other, each other's community histories, reasons for migration, as well as their cultural traditions.
- Immigrant and refugee communities want more information on the basics of government decision-making, including how and by whom decisions are made, so they can make informed choices about their organizing campaigns.
- Creating opportunities (including funding) to work on local organizing campaigns before becoming part of federal campaigns would strengthen emerging groups' confidence and power to be effective players.



ENGAGING AT THE BALLOT BOX

Tatyana Koshevaya, a participant from Tacoma, used her WILDIR project to organize the first ever voter's forum at her church for the November 2006 elections.



The forum took place prior to services at church and attracted more than 100 people. Speakers included the League of Women Voters and Western States Center. They addressed topics like the initiative and referendum process and how it affects Washington residents; where to get additional information about voting; and who is qualified to vote in US elections.

"My goal was to explain the election process and its importance. It was a very successful event, with nearly one hundred people in attendance. I received an abundance of positive feedback, but was most struck by the number of people who simply had not voted in the past because they were afraid they would not understand how to fill out the ballot."

- Fostering discussions on the impact of race and racism, both for allied (mostly white) groups and immigrant and refugee groups will be important in order to expose and resolve rifts that keep groups apart.
- Organizational relations are fostered through individual connections. Opening spaces for individual leaders to learn about other immigrant and refugee communities and strengthen their own leadership and organizational development skills are needed.
- Profile and support those models of immigrant and refugee organizing that are successfully building across ethnic, cultural and status lines. While good models exist, often those groups are too busy to be able to support smaller organizations interested in using their models.
- Organizations that are not based in immigrant/refugee communities need to be good allies by taking the lead from those most affected by the issues. Allied organizations are critical to the struggle for justice and all have an important role to play. Allied organizations also need to engage not just with individual community members, but with leaders based in organizations and accountable to immigrant and refugee communities.
- Individuals and communities who have come to the US have rich traditions of organizing and working for equality from which others can learn. Cultural celebrations and sharing stories of struggle and victories can shine a light on future collaborations for justice.

Participants in WILDIR

Organizations listed for identification only

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Chad

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Mohamed Ali Roble (Seattle, WA)

Somalia

Seattle Public Schools

Halima Dahir (Seattle, WA)

Somalia

Student

Tatyana Koshevaya (Tacoma, WA)

Russia and Ukraine

Tacoma Community House

Patricia Vazquez Gomez (Olympia, WA)

Mexico

Jefferson Center

Evelyne Ello-Hart (Portland, OR)

Côte d'Ivoire

African Women's Coalition

Maru Mora Villalpando (Seattle, WA)

Mexico

Washington Community Action Network

Florentino Lopez (Seattle, WA)

Mexico

Entre Hermanos

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*Building the Progressive
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