

PICO: Transforming Immigrants into Engaged Citizens¹

A campaign to naturalize and integrate immigrants, and give all marginalized groups a unified voice to effect local policy changes, began as many efforts do, with a modest first step. In this case, it began with a listening campaign that eventually included the voices of 1,000 immigrants living in the northern reaches of California. When these individuals were asked what their primary concern was, their resounding reply was the burdensome process of naturalization. The early success of this campaign would eventually reverberate down the state, ignite a similar effort in Los Angeles, and inspire seven PICO affiliates in five Bay Area counties to join forces as they now attempt to help immigrants achieve their dream of U.S. citizenship.

Momentum Began in Northern California

The painstaking one-on-one interviews conducted in 1999 mobilized immigrants in Sacramento and Yolo counties, two of the eight counties the North Valley Sponsoring Committee (NVSC) serves—and convinced them that they had a right to be heard. A year later, NVSC rallied 5,000 individuals to march on the Immigration and Naturalization Services building in Sacramento. As they passed in front of the office, they waved pictures of individuals for whom community members—both U.S. citizens and LPRs—had submitted immigration applications while they were children and who, as adults, were still waiting. A few months later, 3,000 gathered at the Sacramento Convention Center where they met with then-INS Director Susan Curda, who agreed to conduct all citizenship tests and interviews at local churches and allow translators, making the process less intimidating.

In 2001, NVSC issued announcements at three member churches in Sacramento and Yolo counties. An estimated 200 people attended a workshop during which attorneys from the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation provided an orientation. Naturalization forms in Spanish were distributed, and one week later approximately 60 percent of the individuals returned. Volunteers from the University of California, Davis helped newcomers transfer the data from the Spanish forms onto the English N-400, which attorneys from CRLA and the Immigrant Legal Resource Center reviewed.

To prepare these newcomers for their tests, adult schools agreed to provide teachers at local churches to teach ESL and civics, with NVSC augmenting that instruction with half-hour sessions on the PICO organizing model. "I teach them that civic participation is a part of becoming a citizen," Alberto Velázquez, NVSC executive director, explains. Volunteers from member congregations also tutored newcomers nervous about their English interviews. In counties where adult education wasn't available, NVSC used volunteers or contracted with teachers and used the adult school system's standard curriculum.

¹ Telephone interviews with Cathy Cha, Evelyn & Walter Haas, Jr. Fund; Adam Kruggel, Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community Organization; Jared Rivera, LA Voice; and Alberto Velázquez, North Valley Sponsoring Committee. A detailed profile of PICO's work on the issues of naturalization and civic participation is available to GCIR members at www.gcir.org.

Velázquez says that the majority of the immigrants they worked with were low-income agricultural workers. Most migrated from countries with very little education, if any at all, and they were mostly Latino, Hmong, or Filipino. Their English proficiency varied from poor to advanced. For individuals with little to no formal education, the six to eight hours of weekly coursework they committed to was rigorous.

Since 2001 when the effort began in earnest, more than 2,500 people have applied for citizenship and of that number, 1,800 have naturalized. With the help of each new group of citizens, the campaign has spread to Colusa, Yuba, Sutter, Tehama, Shasta, Butte, and Glenn counties. They have even helped some immigrants from the San Joaquin Valley.

LA Follows NVSC's Example

Disappointed by the collapse of reform and wanting to hold onto the excitement of the earlier marches, in January 2007, PICO affiliate LA Voice adopted the NVSC model. The organization partnered with Univision's "Ya Es Hora ¡Ciudadanía!" ("It's About Time! Citizenship!") campaign for messaging to reach as wide a Hispanic audience as possible. Other partners included Los Angeles City College, Santa Monica City College, the National Association of Latino Elected Officials (NALEO), the Consejo de Federaciones Mexicana en Norteamérica (COFEM), and the Coalition for Human Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA). Members of LA Voice advertised the campaign through their member congregations in East Los Angeles. Their first orientation drew 200 people, many of whom waited six hours in line to have their papers reviewed. "I'd never seen anything like that before," says Jared Rivera, LA Voice executive director. Rivera says their constituents are 90 percent Latino and 10 percent "multi-ethnic," with the Asian community dominating.

Rivera estimates that 1,000 new citizenship applications have been filed so far. Similar to the NVSC strategy, classes are taught at church venues with LA Voice teaching the PICO organizing model and the congregations providing English tutors. Rivera says immigrants' dedication to the coursework is a testament to the fact that newcomers want to become integrated. "We're seeing thousands and thousands of people investing a year of their time to come to class four hours a week. This paints a different image of who immigrants are in this country," he says.

Engaged Citizens

The NVSC and LA Voice efforts emboldened the Bay Area PICO affiliates to initiate their collaborative project in a region of California rich in diversity. It is an ambitious endeavor that hopes to assist 5,000 lawful permanent residents with the naturalization process and lead to the adoption of immigrant integration policies in two cities.

All three campaigns share one overarching goal: to help immigrants integrate and be effective in addressing local policy issues. To prepare immigrants for this transition, Velázquez says that the organizing curriculum is critical. "At least they start to hear about organizing and realize that they have to become involved in their communities," he says. This is what attracted the support of the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund, says Program Officer Cathy Cha. "I like the way it seamlessly transitions to issues of importance to immigrant families." The Haas, Jr. Fund has

funded PICO projects for the past 15 years and currently supports the LA Voice and Bay Area endeavors. Although the Bay Area campaign is nascent, Cha believes the precedent set in Northern California and LA demonstrate a successful track record.

"When people become citizens," Velázquez says, "they start to see this country as their own and they become more active in the community. Citizenship is a good way to build community leaders."