



America's Newspapers

Immigrants empowered to be citizens

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SUMMARY: Engage '08 | An IRCO program encourages people to share their strengths through civic engagement

Immigrants empowered to be citizens Advisory post,

budget forums

await students

GOSIA WOZNIACKA

When the mayor said, "Welcome to your building, welcome to your house," a city hall filled to the brim quieted with surprise. Then, Portland Mayor Tom Potter pointed to the commissioners' chairs and said: "Go try them out, maybe one day you will be sitting in one of them."

The audience --made up of Metro area immigrants and refugees --literally gasped in unison. Someone let out "Oh, my God" in heavily accented English. At the end of the meeting, men and women rushed to sit in the chairs.

Many of these people from Africa, the former Soviet Union, Asia and the Pacific Islands had never stepped inside a city hall. They simply never thought it possible, or were too afraid of or disillusioned with the authoritarian, often extremely violent governments in their countries of birth.

Engage '08, a yearlong project run by the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization (IRCO), is working to change that bad perception. During the past four months, a group of immigrant and refugee community elders and activists --many of whom live in east Multnomah County --have attended civic workshops, visited City Hall and met with various local government leaders.

The goal of the training, funded by Portland's Office of Neighborhood Involvement, is to open opportunities that immigrants have not had historically, so they, too, can participate and eventually become leaders. The training will culminate with placement on citizens advisory boards or budget review forums affecting the city services most urgently needed by newcomer families.

"There are no kings"

"Think of local government as a kitchen table," Engage '08 coordinator Ronault LS. Catalani told the group. "There are no kings here. Back home we had them and they had guns. But here, we're family."

It is an American ideal, one that flies in the face of voter and civic apathy.

"The power to serve," Catalani said, "this is different than the power back home."

The baggage from home is often hard to overcome: Many of Oregon's immigrants and refugees have seen governments murder their relatives, destroy their homes or threaten them with jail for voicing an opinion. They fled those governments. Their fear is deeply ingrained.

"In Africa, everything was run by a regime," African community leader Djimet Dogo said. "When people tried to express themselves, government killed them."

Engage '08 gathers existing immigrant community organizations --which rarely venture into the mainstream --and focuses on organizing them, building a comfort level with local government and creating leadership around civic engagement. Many immigrants are citizens, but are not engaged in the democratic process.

"I think there is a voice lacking, our voice," said Lulit Mesfin, a business owner from Ethiopia and training participant who has lived in Portland for 40 years. "The immigrant population is invisible in the local politics, but we have a lot to offer!"

Women as leaders

Most Engage '08 participants, like Mesfin, are women --unlike most leaders in their home countries. During the training sessions, they learned about how government works, who is in charge of what and who are the prominent personalities at a city hall. They met politicians and city staff, learned advocacy skills and lobbying strategies, and considered issues important to their communities.

"At City Hall, it felt scary to stand in front of everyone, because our community was raised with the fear of authority," said May Cha, a Hmong refugee from Laos who works as youth gang prevention case manager for the Asian Family Center. "This training helped me to become an American communicator, to be direct with what I want. It helped eliminate fear."

"Our old methods of talking softly and waiting your turn don't work in America," she added. "Because here, to be heard you've got to say things."

Cha and others listed their common needs: culturally specific after-school and summer programs for youth, better community policing, access to city jobs and contracts, city support for a community center and immigrant media, as well as cross-cultural capacity in city services.

But participants also underlined that their main goal is not asking for city services, rather contributing their knowledge and skills.

"We're not here because we're needy," Catalani said. "We have huge spiritual, social and cultural capital. And we're going to make the cities we live in a brighter place."

That means sitting on city committees, seeking city jobs and even running for office. Participants "graduated" from Engage '08 last week, and they now plan to visit city officials in their offices and follow up on the issues raised during the training.

"What looked to many immigrants and refugees as an intangible --this 'civic engagement' thing --has become practical," Catalani said. "We're going to do it, they tell me. All we needed is someone to say, 'This is your city.' "

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