

PROGRAM UPDATE: NEW YORK CITY

Conclusion of the Civic and Political Participation of Immigrant Communities Portfolio

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Background

In November 2010, Rockefeller Brothers Fund trustees approved a new democratic practice goal for the New York City program focused on advancing the civic and political participation of immigrant communities.

The Fund's support for immigrant communities followed its long involvement in supporting community leadership, development and planning, community organizing, and education reform in New York. The new focus on immigrant communities recognized the city's changing demographics and the roles that immigrants were playing, and could play, in the city's future. The Fund realized that fostering and supporting the civic participation of immigrant populations were important to the city's future vitality. Throughout history, foreign migration to New York has helped the city weather periods of de-industrialization and de-urbanization, and it remains one of the primary drivers of the city's growth over the past several decades.

Over the last five years, staff pursued the following grantmaking strategies:

- Strengthening the organizational capacity of a limited number of key community-based and immigrant-led groups to advance citywide social and political equity issues.
- Supporting collaborations and new networks among immigrants, established community groups, and public institutions to improve local government accountability, access, and services. A special interest of the Fund was strengthening citywide multigroup collaboration and strategic alliances to advance public education advocacy efforts that promote accountability, transparency, and equal access for all institutions.
- Connecting immigrant groups with citywide, national, and international networks and campaigns for joint action on immigration issues, mutual support, and leadership development. Special attention was given to projects that aligned with RBF-related thematic areas.

See the Appendix for the indicators of progress associated with these strategies.

From 2010 to 2014, the Fund made 44 grants totaling \$3.4 million under this New York City Pivotal Place democratic practice portfolio. With an average of \$845,000 in annual giving, this portfolio accounted for approximately 15 percent of the New York City grantmaking portfolio. Over the last five years, the Fund has supported immigration forums, new partnerships and collaborations, academic research, new tools for dissemination of best practices, innovative citizenship outreach models, and new leadership that has helped establish a positive perspective on the many contributions New York's immigrant communities make to its economy and civic dynamism.

A Strategic Focus: The Role of Local Leadership and the National Immigration Debate

One major factor staff considered as it embarked on grantmaking aimed at advancing immigrant civic and political participation was the inability of the federal government to pass comprehensive immigration reform. The vacuum created by the federal government left cities and states to respond to local immigration challenges. Staff was hopeful that local groups could play a positive role and influence the national debate for the better. RBF grantees such as the [New York Immigration Coalition](#), [Make the Road New York](#), the [Center for Popular Democracy](#), and the Immigrant Legal Resource Center's [New Americans Campaign](#) helped bring local voices and innovative thinking to the national immigration discussion.

One interesting and positive surprise has been the role that local elected officials can play with regard to immigration. Mayors and governors have demonstrated a tremendous ability to enact and champion (or not) welcoming immigration policies. Some of our elected officials rose to the challenge, while others did not. Some cities and states created hostile unfriendly policies for immigrants. Immigration laws passed in Arizona and Alabama in 2010 and 2011, respectively, seemed to be created to punish and marginalize new immigrants. Other cities and states recognized that immigrants, regardless of legal status, are residents of cities, and all residents need and deserve equal access to services and resources.

New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg became an advocate for comprehensive immigration reform and pointed to New York City as a model for immigrant-friendly policies. As a result, elected leaders from across the country reached out to the city of New York for assistance in better understanding its efforts to integrate immigrant communities. Specifically, they asked for assistance in crafting similar policies and programs that support immigrant integration. Interestingly, this thinking reflects the understanding that local economies benefit tremendously from the diversity, vibrancy, and entrepreneurship of immigrants, and that local governments have a responsibility to facilitate immigrant integration.

An RBF grant to the [Mayor's Fund for New York City](#) helped create [material that allowed the city government to share its immigrant policies and programs](#) with peers around the country, furthering New York's leadership role. The Fund worked closely with Commissioner for Immigrant Affairs Fatima Shama to create the materials and to provide opportunities for dissemination with other grantees including the New York Immigration Coalition and the [Americas Society](#).

RBF Grantee Highlights and Accomplishments

RBF grants to **Americas Society** in 2011 supported an immigration summit that brought together key groups from throughout the city as well as partner institutions from gateway cities across the country. During the two-day convening, experts analyzed the impacts of restrictive and nonrestrictive immigration policies and helped create a new network of like-minded immigration advocates to promote a more positive dialogue on immigration. Summit participants—both from new gateway cities and New York—saw a need to bring lessons learned from New York City to new gateway cities across the country and share best practices and challenges among cities. Subsequently, in 2012 the Fund provided a planning and implementation grant to help Americas Society build on its immigration and integration initiatives and leverage its achievements with new research and activities that sought to positively influence national public opinion toward immigrants. Americas Society research on immigrant housing ownership was cited by President Barack Obama during a speech he made in August 2013.

Americas Society helped mobilize stakeholders around the importance of immigrants at the local, regional, and national levels, and collaborated with others to advance the positive experiences of New York City municipal government policies and initiatives. It fostered connections among leaders from the public and private sectors and nonprofits that are actively working to create more opportunities for civic and economic involvement of immigrants in cities across the United States. Americas Society's will continue to play an important leadership role on immigration policy and integration.

The **New York Immigration Coalition** (NYIC) is another important partner in this work. The recipient of several capacity-building grants, the NYIC has become a leader on immigration reform in New York state and nationally. It has mobilized, created research, and helped move policy at many levels to support immigrant integration policies.

Most recently, NYIC and its partners were instrumental in getting the New York City Council to [allocate \\$10.3 million](#) to expand several key programs for more than three million New York City immigrants. In July 2014, Mayor Bill de Blasio signed into law groundbreaking City Council legislation to [create a new municipal identification program](#) for all New Yorkers along with critical financial support for key programs.

Highlights of these major victories for the city's immigrant communities include:

- **The New York City Identity Card**, to facilitate [the opening of bank accounts](#), filing of police reports, access to government buildings, leasing of apartments, and more, will be available to all New Yorkers regardless of immigration status starting January 2015.
- **The Immigrant Opportunities Initiative**, which provides critically needed services that are a lifeline for immigrant communities, received \$5.3 million for expanded adult literacy and ESL programs and legal services.
- **The New York Immigrant Family Unity Project**, a groundbreaking initiative to provide free legal representation to New Yorkers detained by immigration authorities, received \$4.9 million, making New York the first city in the nation to have such a public defender program.
- **CUNY Citizenship Now! Legal Services** received \$1 million to provide on-site immigration and naturalization services at the offices of City Council members and throughout the city.
- **The Adult Literacy Council Initiative** was enhanced with an additional \$750,000 for a total of \$2.25 million to expand opportunities for hard-working New Yorkers to continue their education.
- **The Cultural Immigrant Initiative** received \$1.5 million to support cultural organizations to provide programming based on the vibrant cultural heritage of the city's immigrant communities and increase access to unique cultural offerings.

Other RBF grants to the [Restaurant Opportunities Corporation \(ROC\)](#) and **Make the Road New York** helped further workers' rights within the food and car wash industries, and in national store chains. In the restaurant industry, ROC was successful in helping workers to recoup almost \$6 million in unpaid wages, and has implemented grievance procedures and other protections for workers. ROC-NY's Restaurant Worker Organizing and Leadership Institute, piloted in 2011 with support from the RBF, continues to train restaurant workers to become effective organizers and leaders in their workplaces and communities. Make the Road's workers' rights agenda improved working conditions for low-wage workers in the car wash industry and in domestic and national chain stores.

Future Considerations for RBF's New York City Program

The success at the local level in New York and the contribution of New York City organizations and leaders to the national debate is clear. There has been some discernable progress on nearly all of the indicators staff had proposed as well as some unanticipated positive developments. However, for all of the local successes, there are still many unresolved issues impacting immigrant communities. It also is abundantly clear that national immigration reform legislation will not come about anytime soon.

Recognizing the accomplishments and the scope of ongoing challenges of securing national immigration reform, and the nature of local needs—that are now more focused on basic legal and social services—Fund staff believe that the time is right to phase out our grantmaking in this area. To support the transition, RBF trustees have approved phase-out support to several grantees that have been leaders in the field and important partners in our immigration work: Americas Society, the New York Immigration Coalition, and the Center for Popular Democracy.

The [revised guidelines](#) were presented and approved by the board of trustees at its November 2014 meeting.

APPENDIX: Indicators of Progress

New York City Program

Advancing the Civic and Political Participation of Immigrant Communities

New York City has the potential to be a model 21st century sustainable urban community that nourishes neighborhoods and civic life, encourages immigrant civic and political participation, supports individual achievement and artistic expression, generates widely shared prosperity, and preserves and enhances its built and natural environments. Linked as it is to the region, the nation, and the world, New York City can become a beacon of excellence and a force for positive change both within and well beyond its boundaries.

Goal: Democratic Practice: Advancing the Civic and Political Participation of Immigrant Communities	
Strategies	Key Indicators of Progress in 3–5 Years
1. Strengthening the organizational capacity of a limited number of key community-based and immigrant-led groups to advance citywide social and political equity issues.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Groups are engaged in electoral-related work• New immigrant leaders are in place in key institutions and advocacy efforts
2. Supporting collaborations and new networks among immigrants, established community groups, and public institutions to improve local government accountability, access, and services.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A strong cohort of immigrant-led advocacy groups representing different communities is working together on a wide range of immigrant and social inequity issues in NYC
3. Connecting immigrant groups with citywide, national, and international networks and campaigns for joint action on immigration issues, mutual support, and leadership development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• New York Immigration Coalition playing an increasingly important role in New York state and nationally• Incorporation and ongoing greater involvement of new citizens in the civic life of the City—new citizens involved in local politics, elections, community advocacy, multi-group campaigns, and coalitions (newcomers and long-time residents)• Greater public discourse on immigration leading to inclusive policies at the local and state levels, including national immigration reform, equal employment rights, access to health services, access to education, and pathways to citizenship for undocumented immigrants