

# Lessons Learned from Community Engagement

## A Presentation from Northwest Immigrant Rights Project

### Background:

Northwest Immigrant Rights Project (NWIRP) is a nationally-recognized legal services organization founded in 1984. Each year, NWIRP provides direct legal assistance in immigration matters to over 10,000 low-income people from over 135 countries, speaking over 60 different languages and dialects. NWIRP also strives to achieve systemic change to policies and practices affecting immigrants through impact litigation, public policy work, and community education. NWIRP serves the community from four offices in Washington State in Seattle, Granger, Tacoma, and Wenatchee.

### 1. How have you engaged, convened, and maintained relationships with your communities?

For the past 34 years, NWIRP has been striving to respond to the urgent need for immigration legal assistance by immigrant communities in Washington State. One of our key objectives has been to engage and maintain relationships with the communities we serve to ensure that the services we deliver are responsive to the needs expressed by our client communities. This engagement has taken many forms but we would highlight that we have found the following elements critical to our approach in engaging the communities we serve:

- **Diversity of Staff and Board:** We believe an essential element of engaging communities has been to have staff and board that are reflective of the communities we serve. Currently, over half of both of our staff and board members are people of color and both our executive director and our board president are immigrants and people of color.
- **Integrated Approach:** Since its founding, NWIRP has identified three components to our mission: direct legal services, systemic advocacy and community education. But while most of our day-to-day work is done in the first component (direct legal services), we understand the other components of our mission as being critical to our overall success. The reason for that is that our direct legal services would not be effective if the communities we serve don't know about the options they might have under our immigration laws or how to access help in pursuing those options. We could be sitting in our office waiting for clients to come but if they either don't know about us or don't know that they have options, we won't be able to provide services to them. For this reason, the community education component of our mission is critical to help share information not only about our services but also help explain to communities the quite complicated and often-changing nature of immigration policy. Finally, when we begin to find problematic patterns in immigration policies that we cannot overcome through our direct legal services, we explore systemic advocacy to try to change those policies. In sum, we see our approach as being integrated in that our community education efforts feed into our direct legal services work which in turn feeds into our systemic advocacy work.

- **Partnerships Key in Outreach:** We are cognizant that many of the communities we seek to serve are reluctant to seek services because they are afraid of being involved with any kind of system. This is particularly the case because of concerns that they will be reported to immigration authorities. We have therefore learned that it is essential to not only build our own trust with the communities we serve but to also build relationships with trusted community entities that will serve as referral resources. We have therefore found it essential to think of our community education efforts as connecting us not only to client communities directly but also to service providers and others who also are in contact with those communities. One of those examples, our Immigration 101 program is described in more detail below.

## **2. How have you co-designed or co-created solutions with your communities?**

As noted earlier, one of the lessons we have learned in our outreach process has been the importance of leveraging our community education efforts by not only focusing on direct outreach to the communities we seek to serve but also focusing on what may be called “indirect” outreach by educating institutions or entities that interact with those communities but lack understanding of the realities of immigration law or local referral resources. One of the things we have found is that frequently there are individuals within those institutions (for instance, schools, faith communities, health care providers) who are themselves members of the community we seek to serve (i.e. immigrants) but who are operating within a larger structure that may not be responsive to the particular needs of the immigrant community. That community member may share with us that their colleagues who are not immigrants may lack the understanding about immigration policy to not only be attuned to the issues but also to identify and refer cases for appropriate follow up.

In light of this feedback, in 2011, we developed a new training/outreach program we call “Immigration 101: A Training for Social Service Providers.” The idea of these Immigration 101 sessions is to serve as an entry point for social service providers from a variety of fields (health care, education, human services, etc...) to get a half-day training on the basics of immigration policy from the perspective of community members they might serve. We help providers understand the avenues people have to secure permanent immigration status if they are undocumented or only have temporary status and also the barriers that prevent many community members from accessing immigration status. We also educate these providers about less-well-known forms of protection under immigration law, such as U visas (for victims of serious crime), T visas (for victims of human trafficking) or Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS, for abused, abandoned and neglected youth under age 21). The ultimate goal is to help these providers become sufficiently educated about these issues where they can make appropriate referrals for services while also ensuring that they don’t provide misinformation that could be harmful to the communities we serve. We have found these trainings to be incredibly useful and very popular among providers, and an example of solutions to issues that were identified by community members themselves.

## **3. How have you addressed systemic inequities that affect health (such as power differentials or racism) as part of your community engagement work?**

NWIRP is deeply conscious that our immigration system is built upon a foundation of racism and inequity that operates in multiple levels. We have therefore sought to structure all of our work in ways that seek to address and mitigate the impact of that racism and those inequities.

One way that we have sought to do this is to work hard to make sure that we do not work to reinforce narratives of who is deserving or not deserving of living in the United States. In practice, this means ensuring that our services are open even to those who are politically unpopular, such as people who have had criminal convictions in the past. We are cognizant that immigrants as a whole and undocumented immigrants in particular are often the target of attacks in the political sphere. However, even with this group, there are those who are seen as more “acceptable”: survivors of domestic violence, children, “Dreamers.” We certainly provide services to these groups, especially since there are often forms of protection available to them precisely because of their being more popular in the political sphere. However, we are conscious that this means other groups, such as undocumented individuals who have had criminal convictions or who have been involved with gangs are among the most disfavored group in our society. And much of this disfavor is built on racism and inequity that often led to individuals in these categories to be disproportionately targeted by the criminal justice system.

We therefore have placed special emphasis in devoting resources to serving those members of our community who are disfavored. This is true even though this frequently creates tension with some of our donors and funders, some of whom would prefer that we devote unrestricted resources to help survivors of domestic violence rather than someone who has been accused or convicted of domestic violence. We of course understand why they might feel this way but our approach is human-rights based and so we do not feel it is our role to make judgments of which individuals are “deserving” of our services. If one of our clients has a case to present before the immigration judge, we will not turn them down because their past actions.

We have also been very conscious of the power differential that is inherent in the relationship we have with our clients. As a legal services organization, we know that we have privilege, expertise and access that can be used to help our clients achieve our goals but which also creates an imbalance in the relationship. We therefore seek to mitigate this imbalance by making it clear to clients that they are our bosses and by creating an internal culture that is client-centric.

4. What about your organization’s way of working has made you successful? How has your organizational culture or structure changed to allow for authentic community relationships? Include examples of how your staff and board (if relevant) contributed to the culture and values that enabled your success.

We believe that NWIRP has been successful over the past 34 years because we have been focused, responsive, and uncompromising.

We have been **focused** because our work has been concentrated in providing assistance in the immigration legal field. We are often asked by community members (both from the communities we serve as well as from the broader community) as to whether we could tackle other legal areas or other

issues that affect the communities we serve (for instance, family law issues, wage theft, etc...). However, we have made a decision that if we start focusing on other issues beyond immigration law, we will begin to lose our effectiveness, particularly when the demand for immigration legal services is so intense and serves as a tremendous barrier to accessing other services. We are cognizant that there's a tension here between being focused and being responsive to community needs but we have found that the key is for us to be clear with the communities we serve as to the role we play. We think it would be more damaging if we tried to be responsive to every need but were ineffective in actually addressing any need.

We also believe we have been **responsive** to the evolving needs of the community we seek to serve. Immigration policy is a constantly changing field and while we have decided to focus on the field of immigration law, we have also sought to be flexible within that field to the needs of the community. Thus, as new forms of immigration protection have emerged over the years (for instance, self-petitions under the Violence Against Women Act in 1994; U and T visas in 2000; the DACA program in 2012), we have created new service delivery programs and mechanisms to respond to those needs. We have also tried to make a concerted effort to retain unrestricted funding as a major component of our funding mix so we can quickly reallocate staff and services to new emerging needs. One recent example of this was the transfer by immigration authorities of over 200 asylum seekers to the Federal Detention Center in SeaTac, Washington, including several dozen parents who had been separated from their children at the border. We did not have a program focused on this particular client population but had to put a program in place in a very short period of time. Having access to unrestricted resources was critical to being able to create this response.

Finally, we also believe that being **uncompromising** in our work has been critical to our success. What we mean by this is that we have not shied away from taking on work that is unpopular or could jeopardize our funding. We explained earlier how our organization has made a point of representing those who are seen as politically unpopular (for instance, community members who have been convicted of criminal offenses), even though we know this has meant we may have lost the support of some donors who would prefer we focus on more sympathetic groups. Another example of being uncompromising has related to our systemic advocacy: in some cases where we find that our direct representation work cannot achieve our clients' goals, we have undertaken litigation efforts. Some of these efforts have actually targeted entities that fund other aspects of our work. For instance, some of our community education efforts for people who are in immigration detention are funded by the Department of Justice's Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR). However, in 2010, we found ourselves in the situation of having to file a class action lawsuit against this very agency for its policy and practice of not providing legal representation to individuals with mental disabilities facing deportation proceedings in immigration court. Many organizations would have had a hard time making the decision to file a lawsuit against a funder but we did not shy away from it even though it understandably created a lot of tension with that agency. At the end of the day, however, we did not lose the funding and we also prevailed in the litigation and secured a judicial decision that even today requires the government to provide representation to people with mental disabilities in our region.

##### **5. What have been your most significant challenges, obstacles, missteps?**

As an organization, we are conscious that we can make mistakes and we are constantly trying to improve our practices and the delivery of our services. One significant ongoing challenge is how to strike the right balance between conducting outreach and delivering program services. In many of our program areas, the need for services significantly exceeds our capacity to deliver services. This means that we have to resort to mechanisms such as waitlists to manage the excess. This often leads to questions about whether it makes sense for us to be conducting outreach to identify even more clients when we are unable to promptly serve the clients who have already been identified. Our current response to that question is that we want as much of the need to be identified as possible both because this helps us make the case for more funding but also because community members deserve to have that information even if we cannot provide services to them right away. We therefore continue to engage in outreach activities even when our direct service capacity is still insufficient.

Another significant obstacle is the fact that immigration policy is moving in a direction that requires more time and resources in order to achieve the same outcome for a client. This is already a challenge as many funders are focused primarily on the total number of people who can be served by a particular investment and are disappointed that the cost per person served by our organization is significantly higher than it is for many nonprofits. And this issue is heightened given our commitment to serve community members who might be particularly disfavored (who might require even more of a “fight” to get through the system) and those who require more intensive attention (e.g. community members with mental disabilities). We seek to overcome this challenge by educating funders about the long-term impact of the services we provide. When we are able to achieve immigration status for someone, we not only secure their ability to remain in the U.S., but we open up opportunities in employment, education and financial support. We therefore ask funders to consider the long-term impact rather than the short-term numbers but this is an ongoing education effort.

#### **6. What changes have you seen that give you hope about a future that is more equitable?**

We have to admit that the current policy environment is one that is particularly challenging to the communities we serve and that hope for an equitable future seems particularly distant for many of the people we serve. Nonetheless, most of the staff and board involved with NWIRP would not be part of this social justice movement if we did not believe that, over the long run, our societies are moving in a direction of increasing equity and decreased oppression.

I think one of the changes we are seeing in the past few years and especially in the past two years has been increasing cross-sector collaboration and understanding of intersectionality. There is obviously a lot more work to be done in this area but we have seen an increasing recognition of the value of leveraging expertise in other fields and to cross boundaries among different groups and entities. One example of this in our region has been the emergence of the Washington Immigrant Solidarity Network (WAISN), which came together after the 2016 election to coordinate responses to the new policy environment affecting immigrant communities. The WAISN collaboration includes a wide range of organizations and individuals working a number of fields and this type of collaborative does give us hope for the future.