

Immigration Community Assessment

Executive Summary

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Immigration has played a critically important role in shaping the demographic reality of the region. Dubuque County's foreign-born population grew by more than 75% between 2010 and 2021, accounting for nearly 20% of the county's population growth during that time. The foreign-born population accounts for 46% of the total population growth in the city of Dubuque, and 97% in the Community Foundation's seven-county region¹ in Northeast Iowa.²

Immigrant individuals and families play a prominent and important role in the community and are crucial in keeping the region vibrant. Immigration has driven economic growth, entrepreneurship, and public service, as well as an increase in the diversity of cultures and viewpoints, adding to the richness of the region. At the same time, there are barriers that prevent immigrant residents from thriving as they should. Research for this community assessment found that many immigrant populations face disproportionately worse outcomes than the general population when seeking access to services, quality job opportunities, and academic success. Foreign-born individuals in Dubuque County are more than twice as likely to live below the poverty line,³ and English language learners in the Dubuque Community School District and the Western Dubuque Community School District are four times less likely to be proficient in reading or math than the student body as a whole.⁴

The Community Foundation's aim in undertaking this community assessment is to capture the experiences and priorities of immigrant communities, as well as those of local service providers and advocates working most closely with immigrants in order to identify key assets in the region, highlight pressing needs, and propose potential models for communities to consider implementing. This Executive Summary Report serves as a condensed overview of the Immigration Community Assessment Implementation Guide, which can be found at www.dbqfoundation.org/pages/immigration-community-assessment.

¹ The Community Foundation serves the following counties: Allamakee, Clayton, Clinton, Delaware, Dubuque, Jackson, and Jones.

² American Community Survey, 2021 and 2010 5-year estimates. Available at: <https://www.census.gov/acs/www/data/data-tables-and-tools/data-profiles/>

³ American Community Survey, 2021 5-year estimates. Available at: <https://www.census.gov/acs/www/data/data-tables-and-tools/data-profiles/>

⁴ Iowa School Performance Profiles, 2022. Available at: <https://www.iaschoolperformance.gov/ECP/Home/Index?y=2022>

Key Findings

While this assessment investigated a wide range of issues, the key findings of this research can be broken down into three primary areas:

- Ongoing collective work on immigration
- Building connections with immigrant community members
- Issues facing immigrant communities

This section will summarize the findings in each of these areas. A fuller discussion and recommendations for consideration are available in the Implementation Guide.

Ongoing Collective Work on Immigration

The barriers faced by immigrant communities are often systemic in nature. By working in partnership and as part of a structured effort, immigrant leaders, local organizations, government agencies, community activists, and other key stakeholders can address systemic challenges.

Forming this type of strategic collaboration presents two major challenges. First, with immigrant communities facing such a wide range of issues, it is difficult for any coordinated effort to handle such a broad mandate. The second challenge relates to confronting the power imbalances and language/cultural barriers that immigrant participants may face. To best meet these challenges, communities should implement a model of collective impact designed around achieving five key goals:

1. Be able to convene stakeholders, carry out initiatives, and demonstrate real progress.
2. Pursue both long-term goals dealing with systemic issues and smaller projects that address pressing needs.
3. Include the participation and leadership of immigrant community members and follow best practices to ensure their full engagement.
4. Keep the larger community of stakeholders informed about issues and progress.
5. Maintain an ability to respond to new challenges and opportunities as they arise.

Building Connections with Immigrant Communities

The challenge that most defines the difficulties faced by immigrant communities in the region is a lack of connection to the larger community. Being disconnected from local systems, customs, and institutions increases feelings of isolation and reduces individuals' ability to access resources and services. Immigrants face barriers related to language, culture, socioeconomic status, and trust that often work to marginalize them within the region. Local organizations and stakeholders struggle to build connections to immigrant populations because they lack the relationships and linguistic/cultural knowledge to conduct successful outreach and service provision in these communities.

Taken together, these barriers to connection can have substantial impacts on the ability of immigrant populations to benefit from local resources. Research for this report uncovered the following examples of these impacts:

- Immigrants are less likely to seek out services.
- Service providers struggle to identify immigrant families to serve, conduct follow-up with immigrant clients, or effectively refer immigrants to other services.
- Even when accessed, services have a reduced impact on immigrant clients.

This means that despite the effectiveness of local services, the ability of immigrant communities to successfully utilize them will remain limited as long as these barriers to connection exist. This assessment focuses on four main concepts for removing these barriers:

- **Building capacity and power** within immigrant communities, providing immigrants with additional influence and resources to advocate for their communities.
- **Improving outreach** from social service providers, helping them connect more effectively to a greater number of immigrant families.
- **Increasing navigation** services at key agencies and organizations to help immigrant populations better utilize existing services.
- **Expanding cultural offerings** designed to help the larger community understand and build connections with local immigrant communities.

Issues Facing Immigrant Communities

In the course of this assessment it was necessary to explore a large breadth of subjects. Below is information and recommendations on seven different issue areas:

- 1. Case Management:** The case management provided by service providers, smaller nonprofits, and volunteers is crucial for helping immigrants navigate complex local systems. However, the lack of formal case management systems, and a widespread reliance on untrained volunteers, creates serious vulnerabilities within the community.
- 2. Education and Youth Support:** Many children from immigrant communities struggle with academic achievement. The entire community, and not just local schools, should prioritize providing these young people with improved educational programming.
- 3. Health:** While the expansion of health-care services for immigrant populations has been a major success in recent years, there remain important gaps in these services, particularly in the areas of brain health, translation, and financial support.
- 4. Housing:** Many immigrant families are especially vulnerable to the housing shortage impacting the region. Language, cultural, and trust barriers often further limit their access to available housing. While additional low-cost housing is the primary solution to these challenges, there are a number of strategies that advocates and service providers can undertake to support immigrant communities.
- 5. Legal Assistance:** Immigrants in the United States face a complex system of legal requirements, ranging from burdensome forms and fees to the need for legal representation. While addressing many of these issues requires changes on a federal level, local stakeholders can also support immigrants in meeting legal requirements.
- 6. Translation and Interpretation:** Because language gaps are such a prevalent issue for immigrant communities, providing more resources for translation and interpretation, and creating more formal systems around accessing those resources, is crucial for connecting immigrants to services. In particular, specialized medical, legal, and counseling interpretation is needed.

- 7. Workforce and Employment:** Immigrant populations are key contributors to the region's economy, but they are often underemployed and disconnected from high-quality jobs. Improving connections to workforce development programs and developing a capacity to help employers better hire and retain immigrant employees could provide significant benefits for families and local businesses.

Priority Recommendations

This assessment provides over fifty recommendations, and local stakeholders will need to decide which to prioritize to best address their communities' needs. To assist with this process, the following list offers ten recommendations that can have large near-term impact.

1. Convene a Better Together Committee

One of the key needs identified during this research is having a coordinated and strategic effort between local stakeholders to address issues affecting immigrant communities on a systemic level. A recommended method of meeting this need is through a Better Together Committee, which is a dedicated group of immigrant leaders, community advocates, service providers, government officials, and other stakeholders, who meet regularly to generate concrete progress on systemic issues impacting local immigrant communities. Issues raised in this assessment are often too large for any single organization to tackle, whereas the collective efforts of a Better Together Committee hold the potential to effect real change.

2. Create a Sustainable Immigrant-led Nonprofit Organization

During this research, community members frequently expressed the need for the development of immigrant-led nonprofit organizations focused on serving and advocating for their communities. Such organizations can help to overcome connection barriers while providing leadership opportunities for immigrant community members. Potential benefits of immigrant-led nonprofit organizations include immigrant members being paid for serving and advocating for their community, additional resources and decision-making authority being centered within immigrant populations, the creation of visible points of contact for other local organizations looking to engage with immigrant communities, and a more formal and trusted structure through which community members can elevate concerns or needs.

3. Adopt a Natural Helper Program

Natural Helper programs connect key volunteers with local institutions, provide them with training and resources for answering questions, and then compensate them for their involvement. These programs have been found to give many participants a greater sense of belonging within their communities and strengthen their connection to local organizations and service providers. Natural Helper programs also can help identify leaders for additional civic participation, such as taking roles on boards or advisory committees. A version of this model is currently being piloted by the Northeast Iowa Community College (NICC), who is compensating individuals to connect community members to job training programs.

4. Recruit Additional Navigators

Understanding and accessing support systems can be extremely challenging for immigrant families who struggle with language barriers, unfamiliarity with local systems, and the fear of cultural or societal stigma. Navigators are individuals employed by service providers to help community members access services. The best navigators are trained in the requirements of service systems and come from the communities they serve, meaning they have the language and cultural knowledge to effectively connect with immigrant families. By leveraging trust and relationships within immigrant communities, navigators can help ensure that a greater number of people are able access important services.

5. Invest in Additional Case Management Support & "Networks"

Social service organizations, smaller nonprofits, and volunteers often play a key role in providing case management to help immigrant families navigate unfamiliar systems and access resources. However, the current environment of case management in the region raises serious issues, such as a lack of training, a risk of burnout, and the potential for predatory behavior. One solution is to invest in case management capacity, which could involve hiring additional case managers at local service providers that work with immigrant communities, as well as better resourcing the small nonprofits that often handle case management. Another option is to link a series of organizations and volunteers into case management "networks." Because these networks connect immigrant families to multiple organizations and individuals, they provide a more robust support system and wider access to knowledge and resources.

6. Reinstate the Guatemalan Mentor Program

The Guatemalan mentor program, previously a partnership between the Dubuque Community School District, NICC, and the Community Foundation, with additional support from Catholic Charities and a private donor, was created in response to the challenges that unaccompanied Guatemalan minors face in local schools. A Guatemalan mentor who spoke Ixil (the most commonly spoken dialect in Dubuque) was placed in a local high school, where they supported Guatemalan students during class and served as an important point of connection between the school and the students and their families. Where too often there had been a lack of communication, this mentor elevated challenges, passed along information, and helped create mutual understanding.

7. Create an Expanded Marshallese Student Group

One of the more successful initiatives in the region aimed at immigrant youth in the past several years is the Pacific Islander Club at Hempstead and Dubuque Senior high schools. Expanding this group, or creating a similar group open to all students but focused on the priorities of the Marshallese community, would empower immigrant youth to take an active civic role by undertaking projects of their own design and aimed at benefitting their community. This student group would partner with local organizations to raise awareness among students about issues that are important to their community, support student involvement in the development of programming around those issues, and supply venues for

carrying out that programming. This club could also be leveraged to provide academic support, a way to engage Marshallese youth and other young people around Marshallese culture, and a means for connecting more young people to local organizations.

8. Train Community Members in Medical Translation and Interpretation

One significant gap in the region is the availability of licensed medical interpreters and translators, especially for languages like Marshallese that are not commonly spoken in the United States. Many health-care providers employ certified medical translators to correctly translate the technical terms used by staff. However, in many instances these interpreters are not available, and so providers rely on untrained community members for interpretation. By offering local immigrants access to medical translation and interpretation training and certification, the region can improve the quality of care provided to non-English speakers as well as compensate local community members for providing a valuable service.

9. Provide Employer Toolkits and Assistance

The region could do more to equip local employers with the skills and resources to successfully hire and retain immigrant employees. There have been several recent instances where local employers made efforts to hire immigrants, only to struggle with retention of those employees. Employer expectations may not align with the realities of life for immigrant workers. To assist employers with hiring and retaining immigrants—and to ensure that immigrant employees are able to thrive and succeed professionally—the Dubuque region should develop toolkits and/or a consulting capacity to help businesses improve their systems, institute new practices, and gain connections to local immigrant populations.

10. Increase International Student Retention

Dubuque's higher education institutions are a major asset for the region, and their international students are a valuable part of the community. However, there are barriers that limit the ability of international students to build long-term careers in the region, including insufficient support for navigating legal requirements and a disconnect from larger regional life and culture. The region should work to help retain international students by establishing a resource to help students and businesses build connections and navigate the legal requirements for continued employment. Arts and culture organizations should also conduct outreach to international students to help build a connection to the larger community.

Conclusion

Immigrant communities are important drivers of demographic, cultural, and economic growth, and if current trends continue, they will play an even larger role in building the vibrancy of local communities. Yet this growth will remain limited as long as the barriers described in this assessment constrain immigrant families. By working collaboratively to build relationships and address systemic barriers, this region can create a more welcoming home for everyone who resides here. A truly successful community is one where everyone—no matter who they are, where they come from, or what they look like—is able to thrive.