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# Building Cohesive Communities in an Era of Migration and Change

This is the first in a four-part series of articles that explores what Welcoming America and other national- and local-level thought leaders and practitioners have learned about engaging long-term members of receiving communities to advance immigrant inclusion and build stronger, more cohesive communities. Released in conjunction with Welcoming America's 10-year anniversary, this social cohesion series updates the 2011 *Receiving Communities Toolkit* and examines innovations in contact building, leadership engagement, and positive communications to foster greater belonging for all.



WELCOMING  
AMERICA

BUILDING A NATION OF NEIGHBORS

## Introduction

Like other nations across the globe, the United States is grappling with pivotal social, economic, technological, and demographic changes. One set of challenges in particular—the rising rate of global migration—is changing the face of America and leading to questions about our national identity. In 2017, the foreign-born population in the U.S. peaked to its highest levels in a century, with nearly one in seven Americans now born outside the country. This sweeping change, much of it occurring outside traditional immigrant gateways and over a relatively short period of time, has had profound impacts on every facet of American life and politics. How to incorporate this new generation of Americans in ways that strengthen rather than fray the civic, social, and economic fabric of communities is one of the most important tasks of our time. And in a world on the move, with more than 250 million people globally looking for safety, economic opportunity, to reunify with family, and a fresh start, where they land, under what terms, and whether they are embraced or excluded are critical issues that will have profound consequences domestically and globally. While migration is often thought of as an issue primarily about national borders, local communities are the real nexus for the changes wrought by migration. Communities often struggle with even deeper borders—between opportunity and exclusion, and between “us” and “them.” While some communities have been roiled by fear and “othering” and have contributed to rising xenophobia and nativism, others have responded to these changes with resilience and humanity. The latter represent microcosms of a successful pluralistic democracy, creating inclusive and cohesive environments that lift up newcomers and longtime residents, even at a time of uncertainty and change.

Today, America has the opportunity to achieve what many argue has rarely been accomplished before: to become a dynamic, inclusive, multiethnic society. We are a country of bold visions and ideas, dating back to our nation's inception and the vision of freedom and opportunity that we continue to try and live up to today. We are also a country of social justice movements—

including the abolitionist and civil rights movements—that recognized when we have fallen short of our ideals and have held us accountable, pushing us to be more inclusive and equitable. Today, our leaders find themselves at a historic and urgent crossroads. They must choose between hope and fear—to advance proactive and inclusive policies, programs, and culture—or let anxieties about and “othering” of people who look, speak, or worship differently set the tone, policies, and social contract. Their decisions will shape America’s future.

Fortunately, even in these turbulent times, there are positive signs of democracy at its best in communities large and small, across every region of the country, rural and urban and suburban, where neighbors are modeling ways to work together to build an inclusive society where everyone can fully participate and succeed. These efforts represent a new and more intentionally mutual approach to immigration and immigrant inclusion, because their goal is not simply to provide people with access to resources, but to foster social cohesion by strengthening the well-being and prosperity of all residents, the fabric that binds them together as neighbors and Americans, and our shared vision for the future.

## BACKGROUND

When Welcoming America first released the [\*Receiving Communities Toolkit\*](#) in 2011, it was considered groundbreaking in many ways because it addressed some of the root causes of community fears and backlash around immigration. At the time, providing opportunities for receiving community members to voice their concerns, forge deeper personal connections with newcomers, and help them better understand the changes happening in their communities were not widely used approaches or a field of work. The *Receiving Communities Toolkit* provided a road map for proactively engaging receiving community members with immigrants in order to promote immigrant integration and help residents establish a deeper sense of connection with each other. Rather than focusing solely on direct services or advocacy in support of newcomers, the guide outlined promising practices to build meaningful contact between immigrants and the U.S.-born, promote positive communications, and involve local leaders from a variety of stakeholder groups in such efforts. In many ways, those essential strategies still ring true today.

Since the 2011 toolkit’s release, Welcoming America has continued to convene national and local leaders to create a community of practice around receiving community engagement, inspire new and deeper work in this field, and embed these ideas in communities across the U.S. and internationally. Yet many challenges remain. Bridge-building efforts remain severely under-resourced and under-recognized. Divisions between Americans remain, with many fault lines now even more prominent and pervasive. People may have few opportunities, and less appetite, to find common cause with each other in this highly polarized climate. Immigrants, people of color, and other minorities face increased bullying and hate. Against this backdrop, Welcoming America has circled back to many local and national leaders to take stock of the state of welcoming in communities; learn more about the nature of our current divides; test our original assumptions; and capture the latest learning and thinking from the field about what it takes to make receiving communities more welcoming, stronger, and more socially cohesive.

## DEFINING THE RECEIVING COMMUNITY

Receiving community members are the long-term residents who comprise a local community. They may come from all socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds; they may or may not have an immigrant background; and they may span the political spectrum. It includes people who seek to actively welcome newcomers; those who may want to be helpful in creating an inclusive community but aren’t sure how to engage and haven’t been asked; and people who have concerns, fears, anxieties, or ambivalence about their community’s changing demographics. Rough estimates are that 60% of Americans would fall into this latter category; their perspectives are not extreme and they are open to considering new perspectives. Each receiving community is unique. Understanding both its complexity and nuance and addressing its members’ diverse lived experience, aspirations, and concerns are the path to inclusion and belonging and the forging of a welcoming community.

# Understanding Today's Challenge

Communities are changing, and change can cause stress, confusion, and discomfort. Communities don't always have the resiliency or tools to fully manage that change well. Creating environments where residents feel a sense of belonging and connection to each other is important for social cohesion, and yet, increases in social isolation and the challenges of long-term inequalities and segregation make opportunities for trust-building and people-to-people connections across differences more limited. As a result, anxieties about people who are perceived as different arise, and can escalate, especially if exploited by political opportunists. A healthy and vibrant democracy and economy must rely on its most valuable resource—its people.

## TODAY'S ANXIETIES ARE NOT NEW

There is widespread agreement that anti-immigrant sentiment and rhetoric have been features of our immigrant nation since its inception. However, rapid demographic change coupled with limited exposure to migrants and the growth of more outspoken validators have given rise to such sentiments growing more public and vocal. Changing norms have given people license to speak up about their feelings with the public more likely now to admit to and voice opinions that once would have been kept private.<sup>3</sup> While rhetoric dating back to the 2016 election season was not necessarily new, it was unleashed at a much larger scale, changing social norms for large numbers of people and emboldening fringe groups such as white supremacists. Perhaps of greatest concern, however, is a growing appeal of hate speech among immigrant skeptics and the potential mainstreaming of hate and prejudice. Inoculating people from falling prey to these destructive attitudes and behaviors is clearly needed.

Communities that have experienced more recent influxes of immigrants, and done so at higher relative rates (not necessarily numbers), tend to be more susceptible to the influences of negative rhetoric.<sup>4</sup> In addition, communities

## DEFINING SOCIAL COHESION

Welcoming America defines social cohesion as the capacity of a society to ensure the well-being of all its members by creating a sense of belonging, promoting trust, working to eliminate disparities and promote equity, and avoiding exclusion and marginalization, fostering opportunity for all. Social cohesion is an essential ingredient for a thriving democracy. This definition is based on those from the Council of Europe<sup>1</sup> and Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.<sup>2</sup>

“These anxieties have always been under the surface, only now they are obvious. President Obama campaigned during the recession and saw firsthand how much middle America was hurting and the anxieties people had that they could not get ahead. He also recognized that the trepidation he witnessed towards immigration was a sign of our nation's long and complicated struggle with accepting it.”

—FELICIA ESCOBAR

Former Special Assistant to the President for Immigration Policy

## ABOUT WELCOMING AMERICA

Welcoming America leads a growing international movement of people and institutions driving change in communities large and small, rural and urban, and across the political spectrum to create more inclusive, vibrant, and prosperous communities. In the U.S., nearly 200 members work in roughly 500 communities from Anchorage to Atlanta, from Dayton to Denver, and beyond. One in eight Americans lives in a community that is part of Welcoming America.

Welcoming America members use an inclusive approach to build bridges between newcomers and longtime residents and deploy positive communications to shift the narrative so that immigrants and refugees are seen as part of “us” and not as “them.” In places that are ready for institutional change, Welcoming America supports leaders in forming multi-sector collaboratives of local government, nonprofits, and private-sector stakeholders to create a comprehensive welcoming plan to advance greater equity and inclusion. In addition, Welcoming America's *Certified Welcoming* program assesses and recognizes local communities that meet the highest bar for having inclusive local policies and practices in place, such as Dayton, Ohio; Louisville, Kentucky; and Salt Lake County, Utah.

that are in proximity to locations that have experienced this change—even if they haven’t experienced it themselves—are also at risk for backlash. This is in part because they lack meaningful contact opportunities with new populations and are less likely to have personal connections and social networks that include diverse neighbors, which would typically help dispel their concerns and their negative stereotypes.<sup>5</sup>

## RACE AND RELIGION ARE MORE PROMINENT FAULT LINES

Our country’s difficult history of racism and othering continues to haunt us through the narratives, norms, and policies that shape vastly different outcomes and experiences for many Americans. A history of systemic racism means that people are in many ways still leading segregated lives, that they are susceptible to being pitted against each other, and that much work still remains to change public consciousness, as well as to change the systems and policies that have left groups behind. Rather than stoke fears about winners and losers, a thriving nation finds ways to address these inequities and open up opportunity for all, bolstering our social cohesion in the process. There is no question that the process of demographic change can be an alienating one that leaves newcomers and longtime residents feeling like strangers in their own community. The question is whether this becomes a wellspring for advancing collective belonging and participation or is exploited as a wedge to further entrench animosity and exclusion.

Among the key challenges in tackling racism and othering in America is that many white Americans have become more susceptible to narratives that tap into natural anxieties and concerns provoked by demographic change. Some of these narratives may find their origins in more extreme views being propagated by those with more explicit white supremacist and white nationalist agendas. This creates an even greater need to inoculate communities against such messages, while also addressing complicated narratives, such as the view now prevalent among more than half of Republicans, who believe that white Americans experience more discrimination than minority groups.<sup>6</sup> Many white Americans are experiencing cultural anxiety as their numbers decline, which is contributing to changing election patterns, where cultural anxiety, immigration, and economic fatalism are fueling voter attitudes.<sup>7</sup> The significant decline in the percentage of white Christian Americans is also having ripple effects as evangelicals in particular begin to experience a loss of influence and nearly 25% of Americans do not identify with any religion—a huge change in just the past decade.<sup>8</sup>

## DEEPLY ENTRENCHED PARTISANSHIP IS TAKING A TOLL

There is little room for meaningful dialogue when identities become more singularly defined. Rather than examining specific issues one-by-one, there has been an increased tendency for people to identify with their own “in-group.” This means that the other group’s gain becomes your group’s loss, and there is a tendency for the in-group to grow more extreme as stronger in-group policing takes hold, allowing less room for compromise. At the same time, research points to the fact that most Americans are more moderate in their opinions and are growing increasingly disengaged and frustrated by the polarization and a sense that they don’t fit with extreme positions. One study showed that while a third of Americans fall into one of these groups, about two-thirds are more in the middle in their political leanings, holding moderate views about issues like immigration’s benefit to the country.<sup>9</sup>

## EVEN OUR VOCABULARY IS A SOURCE OF CONFLICT

In the past few years, many words frequently used by immigrant integration leaders have taken on an exaggerated meaning and are seen as liberal code. Conversely, those with more ambivalent views towards immigration may

“As the campaigns heated up for the 2016 election, the political rhetoric and national media began to pit people against each other more. Here in Michigan, refugee resettlement became more controversial and some people worried their government benefits would be cut in order to help refugees. There was a growing fear of the other and a sense that people were fighting over the same piece of the pie. While those who were supportive are even more supportive now, the negative voices are much louder and spreading hate.”

—CHRISTINE SAUVÉ  
Welcoming Michigan

“The average person hates the polarization in DC, but when we dig deeper, we see that we are part of that polarization in our local communities and personal lives.”

—CHRIS CRAWFORD  
Democracy Fund

use terms that make integration leaders bristle. Words such as “diversity,” “assimilation,” “supremacy,” and “undocumented” mean different things to different audiences. Snap judgments about each other’s intentions are made based on vocabulary. These lexicon wars are just more evidence of how hard it is to foster genuine dialogue rather than coded debate.

## Adopting Strategies to Address Divides

### A NEW EMPHASIS ON SOCIAL COHESION

Examining inclusion and immigrant integration through a social cohesion lens helps foster whole-of-community approaches, addresses needs that diverse community members have in common, and avoids unintentionally pitting different groups against each other. Ensuring that inclusion work is truly inclusive is a start to healing our divisions and developing a more optimistic, shared future together.

While the pace of demographic change can evoke concerns, in the longer term, ongoing contact and interactions between people of different backgrounds show promise in overcoming such hurdles. Lessons from California demonstrate how rapid demographic change may cause short-term disruptions, but in the longer term, as people develop relationships and have more interactions with each other, greater inclusivity can result.<sup>10</sup>

Increasingly, communities are using the conversation about welcoming immigrants to explore how to be more welcoming to all. For instance, in Anchorage, Alaska, and Siouxland, community members are advancing plans that explicitly advance welcoming for First Nations people.

### BUILD MEANINGFUL CONTACT

In too many cases, people of different backgrounds have little significant interaction with each other. Research suggests that interpersonal contact reduces misperceptions by helping people understand and build relationships with those who are different than they are. Finding ways to bring individuals together around areas of common interest is strategic for building long-term relationships and tackling local issues. Convening people from different walks of life who share an interest in advancing a living wage, securing good childcare, improving local schools, or tackling an environmental problem provides an opportunity to work together in common cause.

Well-designed dialogues and contact-building activities that bring people together across race, ethnicity, and immigration background continue to hold promise, though making sure these groups truly reflect the diversity of the community takes serious intentionality and extra time. [\*Building Meaningful Contact: A How-To Guide\*](#) provides one methodology used in Macomb County, Michigan, that successfully worked to bridge some of these divides.

Cultural celebrations are also a time to lift up not only what makes us unique, but also commonalities. A cultural celebration that honors the contributions of Norwegian pioneers in the Midwest can also explore the migration stories of more recent arrivals from other parts of the world.

We’ll explore additional new and innovative strategies for building meaningful contact in future articles in this series.

“We need to start having conversations with people we think we have nothing in common with. We need to reclaim spaces for people to connect around common goals—to work together on local, concrete projects that affect people’s lives and that they care about.”

—RACHEL BROWN  
Over Zero

“The first step is a personal reckoning that helps people understand the past and make sense of the present. The next is recognizing that a different future is possible and envisioning what that would look like together. For example, for established immigrants who aren’t supportive of newer immigrants, helping them explore what it is about their immigrant experience that makes them want to distance themselves from new immigrants could be helpful.”

—BRIDGIT ANTOINETTE EVANS  
Pop Culture Collaborative

## ENGAGE A NEW SET OF LEADERS AS CHAMPIONS FOR SOCIAL COHESION

Leaders continue to set the tone—for better or for worse—in communities. Whether people feel they belong or feel their contributions aren't valued can come down to the standard leaders set in their actions and their words. As one example of increasingly strong and visible proponents for inclusion, mayors and county executives recognize the strength of their office and stature for promoting welcoming communities. Many have not only pushed back vehemently against hate speech when it has arisen, but are actively promoting a welcoming community, establishing special boards and commissions, creating strategic welcoming plans, and developing new policies and programs such as legal defense funds to make sure no segment of their community is left behind.

Local elected officials aren't the only influential leaders who are increasingly engaged in cohesion-building work. Faith leaders, school administrators, chambers of commerce, civic associations, and grassroots leaders each recognize the imperative—albeit through different lenses—of being inclusive. Additional inspirational leadership examples from around the country will be shared in future articles in this series.

## COMMUNICATE A POSITIVE MESSAGE

We need to establish a narrative of opportunity and belonging for all. A narrative based around shared ideals that is tailored to the values important to local communities has been an effective strategy to counter backlash and underpins proactive welcoming work today. Aspirational messages, that people can see themselves in, continue to show the most promise in reaching the receiving community and helping reinforce social cohesion. While it's important to lift up positive stories of immigrants and refugees and the many contributions they make to our community, it's important to do so in a way that doesn't imply that they are better or more deserving than other populations. Narratives that inadvertently advance immigrant exceptionalism should be revised to advance a larger, more inclusive narrative that connects to all.

At the same time, there are very real challenges that cannot go ignored in crafting positive narratives. While we may start with an inclusive message to connect with our audience, those messages may feel shallow, reinforce existing biases, and fail to connect meaningfully and authentically if they don't also address the tough and uncomfortable issues in our communities. Our inclusion work shouldn't shy away from acknowledging the challenges of navigating change, or from discussing race and racism. Despite the fact that these may be uncomfortable subjects, they exist as part of the mental models people hold and that are being activated in ways that are counter to our goals. Instead, when we are able to openly speak to these issues while activating community members' better instincts in the way they confront these challenges, we're the better for it. Many people are not engaged in the dialogue about bias out of fear of saying the wrong thing or not having a space to talk about these issues. Helping people find ways to acknowledge their fears, biases, and behaviors and work to address them is critical in order to do the work of creating a more equitable community.

Starting conversations with broad messages of inclusion and then leaning into race is a strategy further explored in [\*America Needs All of Us: A Toolkit for Talking About Bias, Race, and Change\*](#). We'll delve deeper into what's working in advancing an inclusive narrative in future papers in this series.

## Recommendations

For too long, the U.S. has taken its social cohesion for granted. Unlike our European counterparts, who've seen firsthand what happens when divisions are sown and given the space and fuel to grow, there is little U.S. investment in finding ways to build community across difference—certainly not at the federal level, and few state, local, or philanthropic funding streams support this type of effort. Rather, the U.S. relies on a groundswell of concerned individuals, loosely tied grassroots groups, motivated municipalities, and forward-thinking nonprofit organizations to lead work that focuses on unity over divisiveness and overcoming the toxic mix of fear, cultural anxiety, and political opportunism that threaten our social fabric. In short, we need a comprehensive strategy to bridge differences and the funding to bring good local work to scale.



We conclude with a handful of recommendations:

- **Whole-of-community approaches need greater adoption.**

We need to find ways to advance an agenda that is focused not just on immigrants, but on issues that impact a broader cross section of people in receiving communities. Emphasizing shared values, aspirations, and needs will help engage a more diverse set of people in common action.

- **Cohesion work requires organizational change.**

There are very practical, concrete ways for leaders and practitioners to start to make this shift towards advancing social cohesion, starting internally within their own organizations. Reexamining the messages that are used in everyday communications about the work—and checking their inclusivity—is one place to start. Aspiring to build a greater set of partnerships with a wider range of community organizations and lifting up a new set of local leaders to work with together on a common purpose will also move cohesion efforts in the right direction. Making these shifts is a process, and it isn't always easy to progress from an intellectual conversation on inclusion to instituting the organizational shifts and changes that are more responsive to the moment we are in. This is hard work.

- **Americans across the political spectrum should be engaged.**

Working with more politically diverse populations in the receiving community will challenge assumptions and unintended biases and build a broader base of support for the important policy and cultural shifts that are critical for advancing inclusion. While there will be areas of disagreement, there will also be opportunities to build relationships and identify areas of common interest. Many Americans across the political spectrum are deeply disturbed by today's polarization and want to be involved in solutions—they just need to be asked.

- **A comprehensive approach that includes good policy, practice, and meaningful culture change is needed to advance social cohesion and to ensure that inclusion isn't just a slogan but is foundational to all we do.**

Inclusive policies help ensure the enduring sustainability of these efforts. Welcoming programs and practices also continue to advance this important on-the-ground work. Both policy and program work need to be supported so they can continue to grow, making a meaningful impact on people's lives. Culture change work is a third component that is often overlooked. Culture change that influences our social norms, values, and traits will help alter the perceptions and behaviors of the public and our institutions, a requirement for achieving a lasting vision of inclusion.

- **Funding streams need to support social cohesion.**

Community building that brings people together across lines of difference should be seen as a foundational aspect for tackling a host of policies beyond immigrant integration and inclusion, such as health, education, environment, and preserving our democracy itself. Relationships and trust are the essential building blocks for civic action and problem solving, but they are rarely supported with the same intensity as policy solutions, advocacy, or organizing. In communities undergoing rapid demographic change, establishing this “bridging capital” is not a luxury—it's vital work that undergirds any broad community change effort. It's hard to achieve meaningful progress on the important issues of our time without first establishing common ground, expanding our constituencies, and overcoming attempts to pit groups against one another, a tactic that ultimately distracts us from the important task of building stronger and more vibrant communities. Defenders of democracy, health care funders, environmentalists, human service agencies, and state and federal governments, among so many others, need to prioritize funding strategies that focus on bringing people together across difference to tackle challenging issues and build more social cohesion. This will ultimately make our communities more resilient to disruptions such as the arrival of new immigrants or refugees, hate crimes, or nativist rhetoric.

- **We need to focus on this work now, with or without the funding.**

When efforts to build empathy and connection continue to grow and show promise and impact, those efforts can in turn influence the allocation of resources that is so critical for scaling and sustaining this work. We can't wait for the funding mechanisms to align. This is the time to double down on work to tackle fears and ambivalence around the “other” and to draw people closer together. The nation's polarization is deeply troubling and must be addressed. The answers for how to overcome divides are well documented. We need to stop debating and start scaling this work. When it becomes the norm in our communities to be inclusive—in the neighborhood, in our schools, in the workforce, and across civil society—then we will have a truly Welcoming America.

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