

CHAMPIONING *the Power & Potential of* ‘NATURAL HELPERS’

a guide

NINE STEPS TO ADVANCE IMMIGRANT
& REFUGEE CIVIC LEADERSHIP
IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES



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Overview

Three communities — Portland, Maine, Lincoln, Nebraska, and Aurora, Colorado — offer ideas and inspiration for others interested in launching innovative programs designed to promote immigrant and refugee civic leadership, access, and engagement, called Natural Helpers and My City Academy. This guide includes step-by-step support and resources to scale these promising models, building inclusive and cohesive communities across the country.

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The Why and How to Engaging New Americans in Civic Leadership

Walk within a mile radius of Aurora, Colorado's Village Exchange Center (VEC), and you'll encounter a pan-African grocery store, a Guatemalan bakery, an Ethiopian cultural center, and a Burmese restaurant — along with an estimated 80% of the refugees resettled in the state, according to Amanda Blaurock, VEC's founder and CEO.

Aurora welcomed more than 2,500 of the [3,167](#) refugees resettled in Colorado in fiscal year 2022 — along with thousands of other immigrants and asylum seekers.

In a place where so many people come from somewhere else — more than [one in five](#) residents was born outside the U.S. and [160 languages](#) are spoken in the city — it's easy to assume that the process of putting down new roots in an unfamiliar community could be simple. Yet, city leaders understand that the endeavor is extremely daunting.

“When newcomers come to the city there are so many new things, it gets overwhelming. And there's not a list of steps...of how to get things done, like how to enroll your children in the school district or how to open your utility account. So newcomers will all have different questions,” said Minsoo Song, who came to Aurora from South Korea two decades ago, and now works in the city's Office of Immigrant and International Affairs (OIIA).

Aurora is now part of a growing network of U.S. communities that have adopted civic engagement models, called Natural Helpers or My City Academy. These programs advance immigrant and refugees' access to local services and shape more representative, inclusive local governments. Natural Helpers programs are built on the understanding that the individuals best equipped to foster immigrant inclusion are often not found at city hall, but rather within newcomer communities themselves.

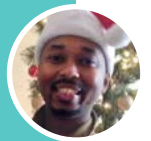
“It doesn't matter whether newcomers came to the city five months ago, five years ago, or 15 years ago, they tend to find help within their communities because they speak a shared language and there's no cultural barriers...and they will rely on fellow community members who have already been through the same challenges,” Song said.

Song participated in the Aurora Natural Helpers cohort in the fall of 2016. Now, she helps administer the program out of the city's OIIA in collaboration with the VEC and other community partners.

Natural Helpers models recognize the crucial role immigrant and refugee leaders fulfill as informal “helpers” in their communities by formalizing, supporting, and expanding this civic leadership with training initiatives. Offerings are tailored to the communities they serve, meaning that no two are alike. Many programs began

“One of my favorite parts of being in the Natural Helpers program is working with others who are trying to solve the same problems that I am trying to solve. Having multiple heads thinking of similar problems makes it easier to find solutions.”

— Yannick Bizimana, Natural Helpers participant in Portland, Maine



during the COVID-19 pandemic and have thrived in digital and hybrid formats, illustrating the model's inherent flexibility and resilience. With varied focuses on economic mobility, workforce development, and community empowerment, the common lens is advancing civic engagement and inclusion. Consensus on these programs is that they work and are ripe for scale in other communities.

This guide presents promising practices and lessons learned from the Natural Helpers communities of practice convened by Welcoming America which include more than 50 members from over 30 communities. Case studies from three distinct communities — Portland, Maine, Lincoln, Nebraska, and Aurora, Colorado — highlight varying structures, followed by steps for starting or strengthening a Natural Helpers program.



Natural Helpers celebrate their completion of the program in a hybrid graduation ceremony in 2022. Credit: City of Portland Office of Economic Opportunity

EXPERT PERSPECTIVES IN THIS GUIDE

Welcoming America thanks the following community leaders for generously sharing their time and expertise through interviews to support the development of this guide. These administrators have successfully developed Natural Helpers and My City Academy models in their communities; their voices, perspectives, and advice are included throughout this guide.

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Welcoming America also thanks the members of the Natural Helpers Community of Practice for thoughtful discussion and shared insights. Participants in the 2022 and 2023 communities of practice are listed at the end of this guide.



2020 Natural Helpers cohort. Credit: City of Portland Office of Economic Opportunity

Promoting a City-Sponsored Civic Engagement Model

“When the [Office of Economic Opportunity](#) was created in 2018, we set out to fulfill a critical mission: to be the most welcoming city in New England,” said Angelina Klouthis Jean, the office’s former interim director.

Klouthis Jean championed the idea that the office could be a hub for the inclusion of all community members, including the growing population of asylum seekers from Angola and Congo. Portland is the largest city in a state with a [declining workforce and stagnant population growth](#); championing newcomers’ inclusion and civic engagement is critical to the region’s demographic and economic vitality.

“We wanted to go beyond what an ‘immigrant affairs’ office would do, not only to support immigrants and all racial and ethnic minorities in making Portland feel like home, but also expand the scope to include workforce and economic opportunity, civic inclusion, cultural inclusion, and ‘welcome-ability,’” she said.

Klouthis Jean investigated program models, eventually learning about Natural Helpers from leaders in Indianapolis. “It felt like a good fit for us because it wasn’t just about the resources available in city

government, but about the whole picture of the community.”

With modest start-up funds culled from the city budget, Klouthis Jean connected with the University of Southern Maine to develop a flexible curriculum — the model currently consists of a two-day leadership training with the university, followed by two additional days of meetings and relationship-building with city leaders and community partners — and then began the core work of recruitment. The city approached community organizations to nominate potential Natural Helpers and also invited local residents to apply directly.

“We kept the applications pretty light, asking only basic demographic info, along with why people wanted to be a Natural Helper, and what they saw as problems to be addressed in our community,” she explained. “The written application doesn’t tell the whole story. So we invited every single applicant to have a cup of coffee with us. Our mindset was, ‘If someone has taken the time to apply, that’s someone we want to have a relationship with.’”

Portland’s first Natural Helpers cohort included 15 participants, who received a badge in leadership from the University of Southern Maine, along with a stipend. Volunteers then mobilized in their communities, using their training to support newcomers with resources and referrals, logging engagements in an app to receive a second stipend.

Portland has since trained four groups of 12 to 15 Natural Helpers each and currently engages a network of 10 active alumni in a WhatsApp group. The program has received support from the Maine Community Foundation and is now funded via a line item in the city budget.

“There’s so much we can learn from Sudanese [residents] who have been in Portland for 20 years, and also from newer arrivals,” said Klouthis Jean. “When we all come together under the same cohort, we’re really successful at advancing the needs of the whole community.”

“In various ways, I was able to teach other people in my community about resources that are available to them. The community that I work with also began coming to me more as a result of the program. Community members often don’t know how to ask formal agencies for help, but being able to give them a specific contact person has been critical. I have been able to cut the barriers and be a connector to the right source.”

— Aymen, Natural Helpers participant in Portland, Maine

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Our mindset was, ‘If someone has taken the time to apply, that’s someone we want to have a relationship with.’

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Step 1: Establish Program Leadership and Structure

A strength of Natural Helpers is its flexibility. The model's structure varies widely across communities, yet successful offerings share several core commonalities. Here's how to begin planning a program in your community.

EXPLORE DIVERSE MODELS

Some Natural Helpers programs operate as part of local government agencies (Portland, ME), while others were proposed to city leaders by nonprofit organizations to implement in partnership (Lincoln, NE), and still others are coordinated via cross-sector collaborations (Aurora, CO). As part of their initial research, the leaders included in this toolkit intentionally connected with and learned from other communities already administering successful Natural Helpers cohorts. “I did a lot of googling, left a lot of voicemails,” said Klouthis Jean in Portland, who connected with leaders from Indianapolis’ program before beginning the local program. “We sat down for a coffee and had an hour-long conversation about shared challenges in our communities.”

“The sense of belonging is very important for someone that is starting over. New communities are often disconnected from resources. Being a part of the Natural Helpers program will open doors and put our community in the right direction.”

— Vanuza, Natural Helpers participant in Portland, Maine



LAUNCH PROGRAM PLANNING WITH A COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT

With distinct local demographics, communities must fully understand the local contexts that will shape delivery. “It’s important to do an initial assessment of the resources you have in your city and tailor programming to your local reality,” said Ricardo Gambetta, who leads Aurora’s Office of Immigrant and International Affairs and manages the city’s Natural Helpers effort after having built a similar program in Indianapolis. For example, Aurora has developed — and soon plans to expand — a Spanish-language version of Natural Helpers based on local linguistic demography. Of all Aurora residents speaking a language other than English at home, [62%](#) speak Spanish.

ENGAGE CROSS-SECTOR & COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS IN PLANNING

A program designed to serve both local government and community needs must engage representatives from both sectors — and beyond — in its development. Lead agencies should solicit cross-sector feedback in a systematic way. “We did an extensive stakeholder engagement process to make sure we had diverse voices in every step of the planning,” said Khenda Mustafa of Lincoln. “We did one-on-one interviews, focus groups, convened a very diverse planning committee with cross-sector stakeholders from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds from the city, county, local nonprofits, community groups, and businesses.”



Step 2: Tap Program Funds and Funders

You now have a vision for offering Natural Helpers or My City Academy in your community. How do you put it into action? Sustainable funding is critical for successful implementation. Fortunately, viable funding streams are as diverse as the programs themselves. Here are tips to connect with funds and funders.

CONNECT PROGRAMS WITH COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

With roots in civic engagement, leadership training, workforce development, and even public health, programs can be pitched to support myriad community and funder priorities. In Nebraska, organizers successfully made the case for My City Academy as a workforce development strategy and secured substantial funding from various national funders. Lincoln's Natural Helpers model began as part of the city's Career Ladder program, which was created out of an initial investment from World Education Services' Skilled Immigrant Integration Program (SIIP), designed to advance immigrant and refugee workforce inclusion. Career Ladder received an infusion of funds from a Google.org grant designed to increase employment opportunities across the state, and now Lincoln's My City Academy is a separate program housed in the city's Commission on Human Rights. In Colorado, the Village Exchange Center (VEC) has successfully leveraged COVID-19 pandemic response funds. "We support [Natural Helpers] via multiple streams, from public health to our funds to support low-wage workers affected by the pandemic," said Blaurock at the VEC in Aurora.

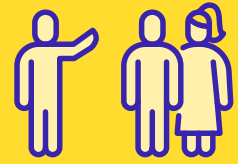
DON'T BE AFRAID TO START SMALL

Many programs, inaugurated during the COVID-19 pandemic with lean budgets, have built robust support and funding over a few years' time. With no line item in Portland's city budget when Natural Helpers began, Klouthis Jean had to be creative about funding. Social distancing protocols meant that cohorts met virtually, which offered cost savings. Klouthis Jean also secured meals — including her own home-baked cookies — to deliver during virtual training sessions. The piecemeal funding approach eventually evolved into a dedicated line item in the city budget. "The ROI to the city is good. If you can find a way to get funding for the first few years, the city will eventually see it as a solid investment," she explained. "If at first you don't succeed, bake your own cookies."

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Step 3: Recruit the Right Participants

Full engagement is at the heart of successful Natural Helpers and My City Academy models. Here's how to drive awareness and interest in local communities, all while prioritizing accessibility in an application process that supports local goals.

TAP COMMUNITY PARTNERS TO SUPPORT RECRUITMENT

A newly launched Natural Helpers program may struggle to attract participants if it is not well-known amongst local newcomer residents. Coordinators in Aurora recognized this challenge and intentionally partnered with an established community center to support recruitment. “Our office was established in 2015; it took us several years to build trust with immigrant communities,” said Song. “Our partnership with the [Village Exchange Center] allows us to tap into existing community networks, where word of mouth is strong.” Across the sites interviewed for this guide, coordinators recognize that relying exclusively on nominations may limit the pool of applicants; leaders engage in consistent efforts to broaden recruitment and encourage direct applications from community leaders.

ENSURE APPLICATIONS ARE ACCESSIBLE

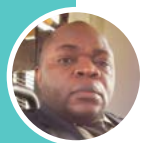
An accessible application with broad requirements is key to ensuring community members feel comfortable signing up. In Lincoln, organizers wanted to include both newly arrived and long-time immigrant residents. “Someone can feel like part of the community and only have been here for a short time, while others may take many years before they decide this is the place where they want to put down roots,” Mustafa explained. Accessibility manifests in varied ways at other sites: Portland offers both paper and online applications, recognizing that technology may present a barrier for some potential applicants. In Aurora, applicants can opt out of a required background check by providing organizers with personal references to contact instead.

FOSTER RELATIONSHIPS AND PIPELINES

Relationship-building is key in driving applications for both immediate and future participation. In Portland, Klouthis Jean meets personally with every Natural Helpers applicant to understand their story and motivations beyond what is included in written applications. The city typically receives more applications than it can accept, so coordinators select participants with an eye to ensuring that cohorts reflect the community. “We send letters to everyone. We stress that some weren't selected yet and encourage them to apply again,” said Klouthis Jean. “We use the application process to create a pipeline for future cohorts and build relationships with rising leaders in the community.”

“I was first drawn to the program when I saw the word ‘helper,’ because I naturally like to help. As someone who is typically quiet, I was interested in the leadership training to help me learn and grow and become a more confident leader. The program helps me help my community.”

— Birindwa Ruhamia, Natural Helpers participant in Portland, Maine





In Lincoln, the My City Academy class of fall 2022 celebrates their achievements. Credit: Nebraska Appleseed

Growing a statewide network of civic leaders

Nebraska’s civic engagement program was borne out of a chance meeting in a taxi in Nashville.

En route to a conference on immigrant inclusion in Tennessee, two leaders from the nonprofit [Nebraska Appleseed](#) struck up a conversation with their driver, a newcomer from an immigrant background, and asked him what made Nashville feel like home. When the driver spoke highly about a model called My City Academy, his passengers were intrigued. They later read up on the model and presented it to Lincoln’s [New Americans Task Force](#) — a community network that supports the city in advancing immigrant inclusion.

Since then, four Nebraska communities — Crete, Grand Island, Lincoln, and Omaha — have adopted the model, and programs are in varied phases of development. Lincoln’s is the most established, administered via a partnership between Nebraska Appleseed, the City of Lincoln’s Commission on Human Rights, and the Asian Community and Cultural Center.

Lincoln’s participation in the 2019 cohort of World Education Services’ Skilled Immigrant Integration Program (SIIP) provided scaffolding for its present-day My City Academy offering. With technical assistance from SIIP, Lincoln created [Career Ladder](#), which offers networking, training, and resources

to advance immigrants' economic mobility and workforce inclusion. Coordination and funding for My City Academy began via Career Ladder.

“The program is part of a suite that is focused on professional development, but we think of it more as civic and community engagement,” said Khenda Mustafa of Nebraska Appleseed. “We designed it through a stakeholder engagement process where we asked long-time and newer immigrant residents about the kinds of information that would have been helpful when they first arrived and the kind of questions they’re hearing in their communities. From there, we created the current curriculum and eight-week training structure.”

Each week, My City Academy participants hear presentations from two community organizations or government agencies. The cohort provides input on topics of interest — recent requests include sessions on entrepreneurship and financial literacy — while presenters report receiving great value and insights from the experience.

“There’s multi-directional learning that happens. This is a unique opportunity for government and agency representatives to connect with a diverse cohort that wants to be engaged in the community. When the police department came to present, for example, the group asked great questions that the department had never considered. There were lots of moments of empathy and understanding,” Mustafa explained. “Additionally, participants learn from each other. Many graduates have told us that if it weren’t for this program, they would never have met and built relationships with people from so many different immigrant backgrounds.”

The first two cohorts of Lincoln’s My City Academy were held virtually due to COVID-19 public health protocols. Coordinators provided laptops to facilitate participation, which participants were able to keep. Many of Lincoln’s alumni are now engaged in various activities of the city’s New Americans Task Force and provide input to shape the My City Academy program. As of this writing, Lincoln has hosted four cohorts, including two in-person.

Since completing My City Academy, two alumni have served on local boards, one used a new connection to start her own business, and yet another completed the full Career Pathways program and is now working with a local law practice.

“Even though the program is young and small, I love the fact that we’re able to have a big impact on individuals’ lives,” said Mustafa.

“
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Step 4: Craft a Community Curriculum

Natural Helpers and My City Academy approach training with a plan in place, but flexibility and adaptability are key to success. Here are tips to craft an effective curriculum.

STUDY AND ADAPT MODELS FROM OTHER COMMUNITIES

Program curricula should be tailored to local communities' needs, but that does not mean that organizers need to start from scratch in developing materials. In Lincoln, Mustafa's team "drew heavily" from My City Academy materials in other cities. "When we realized there was a community of practice as well, we got to talk to and learn from more people who had built My City Academies," she said.

PARTNER WITH LOCAL UNIVERSITIES OR CURRICULUM WRITERS

Training specialists and content writers can tailor existing resources to meet local communities' needs, and in some cases, serve as instructional partners. In Portland, Klouthis Jean shared ideas with a curriculum writer at the University of Southern Maine, who then brought the vision to life. "We highlight different definitions of leadership — like delegation, communication, community listening — skills that apply to being a Natural Helper and also life beyond the program," she said. Similarly, Gambetta partnered with Purdue University to write curricula for both Indianapolis and Aurora.

FOCUS ON BOTH "WHAT" AND "WHO"

While official curricula tend to focus on leadership development, many communities' training also includes a focus on connecting directly with leaders from city hall, local government agencies, and cultural institutions. "I call it the 'who's who,' like I'm handing over my Rolodex," said Klouthis Jean. Coordinators invite guest speakers to present to and engage with Natural Helpers and My City Academy participants, building the relationships that are critical to supporting integration and inclusion. "It's about building social capital," said Blaurock in Aurora. "It's knowing that I can call the mayor right now, and he'll pick up."

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Step 5: Manage and Maximize Participation

Natural Helpers and My City Academy participants are both volunteers and extensions of local government, a role that can be challenging to define. While some sites have formalized agreements that outline the role, others take a more informal approach. Across sites, here's how program coordinators have set expectations.

ENCOURAGE FULL PARTICIPATION

Informal, verbal participation agreements have served many communities well, matching the flexible, innovative nature of Natural Helpers and My City Academy. “We frame it as, you get out of the program what you put into it,” says Mustafa, “Without making it too rigid, we want to ensure people are committed to coming. We have small cohorts so the energy in the room is very different pending participation.” In Aurora, the role is defined as a volunteer opportunity. “We tell participants, ‘You now have 25 hours of information and training — we’d love to see you giving advice and making referrals.’” Aurora’s Natural Helpers receive stipends based on referrals.



In Aurora, a group of participants in the city’s Natural Helpers program pose with their certificates of completion.
Credit: City of Aurora Office of International and Immigrant Affairs

PROTECT EVERYONE’S INTERESTS WITH FORMALIZED AGREEMENTS

As programs grow and mature, other communities have drafted more comprehensive agreements that advance both participation and protection. Portland includes a formalized agreement that outlines terms and conditions for being a Natural Helper, ensuring that participants agree to the volunteer scope of the role, protect the privacy of community members, and do not use the role for personal or financial gain. “Natural Helpers are official city representatives during their term of service in many ways,” explained Klouthis Jean. “Clear guidelines are essential to help lift up the leaders in our program.”



Step 6: Compensate Local Leaders

Participants' investments of time and energy are critical to cohorts' success — and they should be remunerated as such. Natural Helpers and My City Academy offer a way to professionalize, acknowledge, and compensate a role that immigrant leaders are often asked to play without support or recognition by agencies and governments. From volunteer stipends to in-kind childcare, here's how to build a compensation model to fit your budget.

RECOGNIZE PARTICIPANTS' INVESTMENT

Several sites offer participants cash stipends or gift cards, often distributed over the course of their engagement, to acknowledge their investment of time and energy. In Portland, Natural Helpers receive a \$125 stipend after completing training, and another \$125 after logging a required number of volunteer hours in the aforementioned app. In Aurora, volunteers similarly receive a cash stipend upon completing training — and then are compensated on a per-program basis for engaging in VEC activities, ranging from \$20 to conduct community screenings to a flat fee of \$599 for work on the center's urban farm. "My personal belief is that being a volunteer is a privilege. Not everyone can do it, and we need to pay people wherever we can," said Blaurock.

PROVIDE IN-KIND BENEFITS AND SUPPORT

In other communities, compensation takes forms other than cash. Lincoln's inaugural My City Academy participants received an in-kind gift of laptops — along with technical assistance — to support online participation. Coordinators plan to offer transportation, on-site childcare, meals, and cash stipends to future cohorts. "We're committed to valuing the gift of time that they share with us and making that apparent," said Mustafa.

CELEBRATE OTHER BENEFITS

Across sites, volunteers are also motivated by being recognized for their work with credentials, connections, and letters of introduction. Several sites, particularly those affiliated with local universities and city government, provide official certificates of completion. Administrators — like Song, a Natural Helpers alumni who now coordinates the program in Aurora's city hall — share multiple examples of alumni parlaying the experience into career opportunities and positions on local boards and commissions, ensuring a two-way benefit for both participants and their communities.



Graduates of Aurora's 13th Natural Helpers cohort. Credit: City of Aurora Office of International and Immigrant Affairs

Leveraging the Power of Cross-Sector Partnerships

Aurora is the only city in Colorado — and among only a handful in the nation — with a comprehensive immigrant integration plan.

The first version, published in 2015, informed the current iteration, titled “Aurora is Open to the World,” which outlines a city-wide vision for inclusion from 2020–2030. Central to the success of these plans is robust immigrant and refugee civic engagement.

“We believe that city government should play an important role in facilitating these inclusion processes, but the community should be the ones to run the program on a daily basis,” said Ricardo Gambetta, head of Aurora’s Office of International and Immigrant Affairs (OIIA), explaining the strategy behind the successful cross-sector model that has powered the city’s Natural Helpers program since 2016.

When the city sought a community organization to host Natural Helpers cohorts, the Village Exchange Center (VEC) emerged as an ideal partner. A multifaith, multicultural community center with a vision rooted in inclusion and empowerment, VEC serves 5,000 people, representing 30-plus countries of origin, each week.

“We look at Natural Helpers as the glue to our organization and as a bridge to the community,” said Amanda Blaurock, VEC’s co-founder, CEO, and executive director. “We’ve made it a core part of our other program offerings.”

Gambetta hired a Purdue University-based consultant, the person who had crafted Indianapolis’ Natural Helpers curriculum, to develop a customized training model for Aurora. That curriculum has been refined consistently over the past six years, and is now shaped with input from participants. Through both focus groups and informal conversations, VEC asks participants how the curriculum can be modified or strengthened, and what new or emerging topics need to be addressed.

“We are a community center, so we are well-positioned to engage the community and get feedback, to ask, ‘Who do you want to know?’ and, ‘What do you want to know?’” Blaurock said.

VEC offers leadership and civic engagement training to cohorts of 20-25 Natural Helpers twice a year, and then puts the training into action by engaging volunteers in providing community referrals to other resources, including vaccine clinics, a low-wage workers’ relief fund, food pantries, and community farms. Natural Helpers receive stipends and referral fees as compensation for their time. With more than 21,000 volunteer hours logged by Natural Helpers in 2021, the center has invested more than \$1.1 million back into Aurora’s immigrant and refugee communities via pass-through grants.

The VEC’s success in administering and growing Natural Helpers has opened space to offer a sister project, Natural Leaders, geared to teens. In partnership with Aurora Public Schools and the Anti-Defamation League, Natural Leaders caters to bilingual, multicultural youth and tackles relevant topics like bullying.

Aurora’s OIIA also works with other community partners to offer Natural Helpers training in Spanish. Prior to the pandemic, the city partnered with Aurora Community Connections (ACC), a respected local nonprofit focused on health, wellness, and education services for local Spanish-speaking residents, to coordinate the program on-site. While the effort paused during the pandemic, it is set to relaunch in spring 2023 with ACC alumni serving as trainers. The Spanish-language model will be offered on-site at the Amigos de Mexico nonprofit and will operate in a volunteer-run capacity.

Natural Helpers alumni also support city hall efforts, including the production of multilingual PSA campaigns focused on Census engagement and public health campaigns.

“We now have a small army of volunteers that we can deploy for any emergency or city-wide project that comes our way,” Gambetta said.

“The Natural Helpers program is very important because it gives information about where to go, who to ask if you have questions. It’s important for newcomers and those who are willing to help them. Aurora is an area of many cultures and languages, people from all over the world, and the program is inclusive of everyone.”

— Clementine Gasimba, Natural Helpers participant in Aurora, Colorado





Step 7: Ensure Accessibility

The strongest Natural Helpers and My City Academy offerings engage participants that reflect their communities, including a variety of languages and cultural backgrounds. Consider these emerging best practices in calibrating language requirements, along with other tips to ensure program accessibility.

SET LANGUAGE REQUIREMENTS BASED ON COMMUNITY NEEDS

English proficiency is a requirement for participation at many sites, given the liaison role that Natural Helpers play in their communities. “You want to recruit leaders who can build a bridge, and that often includes translation,” said Blaurock. However, coordinators are cognizant that language requirements can limit program participation — and sometimes may not reflect community needs. In Aurora, where [51%](#) of immigrant residents are from Latin America, Gambetta has coordinated successful Spanish-language Natural Helpers cohorts that deepen connections between local immigrant communities and city hall, provide in-language resources, and open the program to new groups of civic leaders. Moving forward, both community members and funders are interested in offering future cohorts in additional languages, including French.

ENSURE THAT TECH DOES NOT POSE A BARRIER TO PARTICIPATION

As the digital divide affects immigrant households [disproportionately](#), coordinators anticipate and address potential tech barriers at all stages, from application to participation to alumni engagement. Portland offers both paper and online applications; Lincoln provided laptops to facilitate participation in COVID-era virtual trainings, engaging a local nonprofit in offering technical assistance. Instead of email, several sites utilize WhatsApp, a free instant messaging platform, to engage cohorts on mobile phones.

CONSIDER OPPORTUNITIES IN VIRTUAL PROGRAMMING

The recent pivot to virtual meetings has opened opportunities to ensure greater accessibility. Offering virtual, and potentially asynchronous, training allows participation at varied times of day, better accommodating participants’ work and childcare needs. In Aurora, coordinators add translated subtitles to recorded sessions, expanding access to individuals who speak different languages.



Step 8: Engage Alumni Networks

A key feature of Natural Helpers is continued engagement — either formally or informally — after training ends. In either case, alumni can help shape future cohorts and grow the next generation of civic leaders in their communities. Here’s how.

SOLICIT ALUMNI FEEDBACK FOR FUTURE PROGRAMMING

Among the most effective ways to grow and improve civic engagement efforts is to request feedback from participants themselves, and site coordinators have used methods as informal as WhatsApp messaging to more formalized surveys and listening sessions. Sites also host in-person alumni events to celebrate the cohort’s successes and solicit feedback.

ENGAGE IN EXISTING INCLUSION INFRASTRUCTURE

Several communities have ready-made opportunities for alumni to continue to engage in immigrant inclusion and integration efforts. My City Academy alumni now serve on Lincoln’s New Americans Task Force, for example. In Aurora, VEC leaders plan to engage Natural Helpers in a newly-formed statewide Community Navigator program. “This is a paid position instead of a volunteer opportunity,” said Blaurock, “We see it as an upskilling opportunity.”

BUILD NEW GENERATIONS OF CIVIC LEADERS

A goal of many Natural Helpers and My City Academy sites is robust alumni engagement in civic life. Gambetta’s team has engaged alumni in short-term opportunities like “being the face and voice” of city-sponsored PSAs, along with longer-term commitments to city boards, commissions, and elected positions. “They have the knowledge of how we operate as a city, and that’s critical in creating the next generation of leaders,” he said. Aurora alumni have successfully bid for city council and school board positions; Song, who completed the program in 2016, now helps lead the city’s Natural Helpers offerings as an international community outreach coordinator.

“I knew I would be connecting with community resources, but I didn’t know how much we would be resources to each other. It is one of the beauties of the program; now I have a team behind me and I don’t feel like I am doing the world alone.”

— Theary Ryder, Natural Helpers participant in Portland, Maine



MANAGE EXPECTATIONS FOR FULL OR CONSISTENT ENGAGEMENT

Keeping people actively engaged in post-training activities “is hard,” conceded Klouthis Jean in Portland, especially as alumni parlay their experience to pursue work opportunities or relocate to other communities. Yet coordinators stress that attending meetings is not a proxy for impact. “Even if they’re not actively engaged, they’re consistently sharing information with their networks, which we can’t always measure, but we know has an impact,” said Song.



Step 9: Evaluate, Recalibrate, and Grow

Measuring the full impact of a cross-sector, community-focused effort like Natural Helpers or My City Academy can be challenging, but gathering regular feedback and data is critical to ensuring sustainable funding and growth. Here's how to approach both qualitative and quantitative evaluation.

CREATE FLEXIBLE PLANS THAT INCORPORATE PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

As Natural Helpers and My City Academies are new in many communities, curricula and training techniques are still evolving — a reality that helps foster stronger cohorts, according to Mustafa. “We’re building the ship as we go, and that gives us a chance to constantly incorporate feedback,” she said. Across sites, coordinators have learned that participants, many of whom are non-native English speakers, respond best to interactive training sessions that emphasize plain language, rather than lecture-style presentations and technical jargon. Other sites have responded to repeated requests for printed versions of training materials. “The curriculum is the basis for training and then it serves as a resource for Natural Helpers to volunteer in their communities,” explained Blaurock. “It’s important to keep it updated [and] include the right person’s name and contact information.”

GATHER BOTH QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE DATA

Identifying outcomes — what you hope will come out of the program for both participants and for your organization — is a good way to understand what kind of data you need to gather in order to strengthen your curriculum. To supplement the qualitative feedback gathered in spaces like meetings, potlucks, and listening sessions, Nebraska Appleseed organizers have partnered with the University of Nebraska at Lincoln to create a formalized survey tool to measure impact. Administered at the beginning and end of each cohort, questions like “What number do you call in the event of an emergency?” help coordinators measure what participants have learned in training.

EVALUATE COMPREHENSIVE IMPACT

Natural Helpers’ impacts can also be measured as part of organizational evaluation efforts, and quantified in terms of the number of volunteers involved, number of service hours, reach, and impact. In 2021, Aurora’s VEC recorded 21,421 service hours invested by Natural Helpers across five program areas.

Conclusion

TAKE THE NEXT STEP: INVESTING IN IMMIGRANT & REFUGEE CIVIC LEADERS

Against the backdrop of ongoing economic volatility, public health challenges, workforce disruptions, and growing levels of migration and displacement, efforts to institute Natural Helpers and My City Academy cohorts may seem daunting — but have perhaps never been more timely or urgent.

“Despite all the challenges [of recent years], Natural Helpers is the one thing that everyone knows and celebrates,” said Klouthis Jean of Portland’s effort.

A growing network of civic leaders understands that ensuring all residents can access basic civic services benefits everyone in the community. Natural Helpers and My City Academy offer a promising blueprint to other localities invested in advancing full civic engagement and building representative, resilient, and inclusive communities.



APPENDIX

Natural Helpers Communities of Practice Participants

Key: Community of Practice Leader = ★ | Welcoming America staff leads = 🤝

2023 COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Adriana Portillo, City of Dallas, Texas
Alaric Bien, City of Redmond, Washington
Alivia Haibach, Welcoming America 🤝
Dr. Andre Boyer, Culturingua
Autumn Macias, Conexiones
Bryan Wright, Cincinnati Compass
Carolina Salinas, County of San Mateo, California
Christina da Silva, City of Dallas, Texas
Dara Marquez, La Casa de Amistad
Dina Ali, YMCA at Virginia Tech
Elizabeth Jones, The Welcoming Center
Elizabeth Troyer-Miller, Heartland United Way
Eric Garcia-Mendez, Heartland United Way
Eulalia Gallegos, City of Boise, Idaho
Francisca Beltran, Nebraska Human Rights Commission
George Zavala, Welcoming America 🤝
Hollin De La Cruz, Kent County, Michigan
Isabel Gereda Taylor,
Lexington Fayette Government, Kentucky
Jeannette Horwitz, Welcome Dayton
(City of Dayton, Ohio) ★
Jessica Hendricks, Leadership Unlimited
Jordyn Kapustka, YMCA of the Roses - Lancaster
Joseph Genda, Salt Lake County, Utah
Karen Cervera, The Welcoming Center
Katie Hedrick, City of Roanoke, Virginia
Khenda Mustafa, Nebraska Appleseed ★
Lauro A. Zuniga, Center for Healing and Hope
Leyda M. Becker, City of Bowling Green, Kentucky
Lisa Stockberger, Welcoming Michiana
Maria Elissetche, St. Joseph County, Indiana
Megan Iverson, RefugeeConnect
Melissa Bertolo, Welcoming America 🤝
Minsoo Song, City of Aurora, Colorado ★
Niken Astari Carpenter, City of Erie, Pennsylvania

Sarah Dewitt-Feldman, County of San Mateo, California
Sergio Roldan, Immigrant Welcome Center
Sofialyn Durusan, Ohio History Connection
Tami Buell, West Avenue Compassion
Tinamaria Fernandez, Hope-Esperanza
Yushan Chou, The Welcoming Center

2022 COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Alivia Haibach, Welcoming America 🤝
Amanda Blaurock, Village Exchange Center
Amos Izerimana, Louisville Metro Government, Kentucky
Angelina Klouthis Jean, City of Portland, Maine ★
Ben Anthony, Ohio History
Bryan Wright, Cincinnati Compass
Cesar Sanchez, Tennessee Immigrant & Refugee
Rights Coalition
Christa Yoakum, Nebraska Appleseed
Elizabeth Alvarado, Immigrant Welcome Center
Elizabeth Cusma, Global Cleveland
Francisca Beltran, City of Lincoln, Nebraska
José Gomez, Village Exchange Center
Julia Schmidt, Center for Healing & Hope
Katie Hedrick, City of Roanoke, Virginia
Khenda Mustafa, Nebraska Appleseed ★
Kristin Burgoyne, Refugee Connect
Lee Kreimer, Lincoln Asian Center
Leyda M. Becker, City of Bowling Green, Kentucky
Mairead McCarthy, City of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
Manuel Portillo, The Welcoming Center
Melissa Bertolo, Welcoming America 🤝
Minsoo Song, City of Aurora, Colorado
Mireya Davila, Aurora Community Connection
Robin Waterman, Aurora Community Connection
Sofialyn Durusan, Ohio History
Supriya Tamag, Global Cleveland