

# First Talk, Then Action: Increasing Civic Involvement in the Immigrant Community

By [Kerri Provost](#), July 20, 2011 5:35 pm

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Three hours later, the two dozen volunteer participants were asked to describe – in one or two words – their experience with the pilot community dialogue. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive and several people were eager to put their ideas into action.

The National Leadership Grant from the [Institute for Museum and Library Services](#) provides funds (\$637,896) for the Immigrant Civic Engagement Initiative of which this pilot dialogue was a part. [Everyday](#)

[Democracy](#) is partnering with the [Hartford Public Library](#) on this three-year initiative. The hope is that the Immigrant Advisory Group will take a leadership role in continuing the *Community Dialogue* work after the grant dries up.

A cultural brokering program, which pairs a newcomer family with someone who acts as an advocate and mentor, is another component of this initiative. The cultural brokers and families will meet for a minimum of three hours each week at the Hartford Public Library, over the course of twelve weeks. The library was selected as a meeting place because of its central location, neutral setting, resources, and history of serving the immigrant community. This service is for families who have been in the United States for less than two years.

The need for advocacy was spelled out by Homa Naficy, the Multicultural Education and Outreach Manager, and Nancy Caddigan, the Intercultural Liaison, at the Hartford Public Library. They spoke about newcomers who, though learning English, were still confronted with the daily challenge of language barriers. Some suffered health issues because they did not understand doctors' diagnoses, or were unsure of what medication they were given to treat ailments. Other barriers that cultural brokers might help families navigate include employment, education, and civic/community involvement.

Separate from cultural brokering are the *Community Dialogues*, slated to begin in early 2012. The pilot discussion on Tuesday was a [compression of how these dialogues](#) would play out. Instead of spending two hours on a discussion activity, groups were given twenty minutes.



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After dividing participants into two groups and briefly describing the initiative, the guidelines (ex.: “Some of what we talk about will be very personal. We will not tell these stories to other people unless we all say it is OK”) were read through. Facilitators asked if there was anything not on the list that should be, or anything that was that should not.

Groups worked their way through the ten-page packet of activities during the next several hours, beginning with a smaller group exercise intended for participants to learn more about one another.

From there, the activities moved away from individual identity and into a discussion prompted by several statements about why immigrants' involvement in the community may be hindered. Participants were asked if there were any opinions on the list with which they especially agreed or disagreed. During this time, some shared their own anecdotes to illustrate why some viewpoint statements were more or less true than others.

Participants were asked to brainstorm their vision of a perfect Hartford. Ideas were transferred to a flip-chart, and even with such a diverse group, there was considerable agreement on what would make for a good place to live. After narrowing this list down to four or five priority items, individuals were invited to create specific action ideas — what people could do on their own, in groups, or with the government — to work toward achieving these visions of a perfect city. Then, they were asked to identify assets in the community. The final step was to prioritize these action ideas, enabling activists to have some early successes, gaining momentum as they worked toward accomplishing more complex goals.

During just one evening, participants identified education, safety, diversity, neighborliness, reliable transportation, affordable health care, neighborhoods united as a network, community building, resilience, no employment discrimination, and more, as desirable characteristics of a community.

In a quick brainstorm, some action ideas emerged. One participant wanted to see ESL and citizenship classes offered in places of employment. Another reported that Hartford, while promoting “school choice,” does not provide transportation or vouchers to students wishing to attend a school outside of their district of the city. Someone else suggested the creation of a cultural center co-owned by multiple immigrant groups in which they could meet, interact, and socialize with one another; it was noted that some immigrant groups isolate by ethnicity. Another person noticed that there is free meeting space available on evenings and weekends; it was suggested that such space, found at schools, colleges, and churches, be used by the community. Others, ranging in importance and feasibility, surfaced during the session.

When asked for feedback in the wrap-up period, people said they liked the experience because it was a chance to “discuss real problems.” Others described the dialogue as leaving them “inspired” and “hopeful.”

Those in attendance were urged to recruit future dialogue participants. Organizers would like to see 200 people involved in the *Community Dialogues*, and indicated a need for representation from those who are in the receiving community and invested (children in school system, homeowners, etc.) in Hartford. The Immigrant Advisory Group next meets at 4:30pm on July 26th in the **Hartford Public Library**.

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