

## **ACROSS IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES: SERVING DIVERSE NEEDS AND ADVOCATING FOR POLICY CHANGE**

CAAELII (Coalition of African, Asian, European and Latino Immigrants of Illinois)  
Chicago, IL

*"It was a big and important step for immigrants to stand up for themselves to a government agency."*

A CAAELII Co-Founder

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**SUMMARY:** Dale Asis and his colleagues have built a remarkable **19-member coalition** in the wake of the 1996 federal immigration policy reforms. Cohesion now exists in a community where immigrant groups once worked in isolation. This includes a **shared approach to some service delivery** as well as **policy strategies** and intentional **development of new immigrant leaders**. Asis and CAAELII have used the following framework to build their coalition:

- **Improve INS Services to Immigrants:** An initial campaign to document INS shortcomings and recommend solutions brought diverse communities together with a passion.
- **Include All Members Equally:** Because of a genuine sense of inclusion and acceptance, members trust one another. Gathering and sharing cultural experiences has been remarkably simple and effective in building this trust.
- **Address English Language Skills and Citizenship Testing:** The coalition developed a Teacher's Toolbox for folding U.S. history, civics and fundamental rights into the everyday life of immigrants. This resource is widely used across communities as they all work to prepare immigrants to learn English or to pass citizenship tests.
- **Cultivate Immigrant Leaders:** CAAELII's Community Building Project prepares Community Ambassadors to address local and systemic problems.

The following case example describes how these strategies and others have built power for immigrants, from their diversity:

## **ONE GOAL, ONE VOICE**

### **Coalition of African, Asian, European and Latino Immigrants of Illinois**

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Even after 5 years, a staff member of Centro Romero—an organization made up of immigrants from El Salvador and Central America—still vividly remembers the inaugural celebration of the first grant given to the Coalition of African, Asian, European and Latino Immigrants of Illinois (CAAELII). "Everyone was really excited because they had no idea that there were so many diverse immigrant groups together here in the neighborhood." Centro Romero had been around for 14 years at that point and had never before worked with any other immigrant organization. While Centro Romero was working hard to provide individual services for its specific membership and constituency, there was a sense of isolation and powerlessness when it came to working on larger policies of importance to immigrants; there was no connection with other immigrant groups in the city. "For 14 years we didn't meet with anybody," says a Centro Romero representative.

Such isolation only added to immigrants' difficulties when it came to overcoming barriers ranging from learning English to navigating (or changing) U.S. immigration law and policy. Chicago was "a sea of segregated immigrant neighborhoods," says CAAELII director Dale Asis. Thus fragmented, the immigrant community seemed doomed to struggle as member-service organizations, never affecting the larger policies and practices that negatively impacted the community at large.

It was the anti-immigrant tone of the 1996 federal welfare reform initiative that began to change that. A handful of immigrant groups began to meet informally to discuss ways to work together to enhance their voice in immigrant policy and politics. The group quickly began to coalesce around another issue that all the city's immigrants had in common: the poor and slow service being delivered by the local Chicago INS office. It was a grant issued to the group to study the problem in 1998 that many Chicago immigrant activists saw as the watershed moment when CAAELII made the step from being an ad hoc and reactive collection of groups to a more solid and proactive organization. "Before that we were being reactive," says a co-founder of CAAELII. "So we began to wonder about using the energy gained from the welfare reform fight and put it towards proactive measures."

The coalition decided to focus specifically on immigration law and policy and on helping immigrants navigate the frequently opaque, arcane and unfriendly systems involved in becoming an American citizen. In pursuing such a course, though, the coalition was taking a one-issue stand against one of the federal government's most impenetrable bureaucracies. The question was whether such a limited agenda against such a formidable foe would be the right formula for holding together a coalition of organizations that in the past barely even knew of each other's existence, from the Bosnian-Herzegovinian American Community Center, to Lao American Community Services. "There were obviously multiple barriers to organizing CAAELII's communities," says Dale Asis, the coalition's director. "Most had never been collectively

organized in any consistent way and most are isolated from each other geographically and culturally."

### **Battling the bureaucracy**

The call for unity on nitty-gritty immigration issues turned out to be remarkably unifying and motivating. By taking on the INS, the coalition found it had a ready-made rallying point that not only brought diverse groups together, but did so with a passion. "It was a big and important step for immigrants to stand up for themselves to a government agency," says a co-founder of CAAELII. And the initiative would ultimately pay other dividends—it would help spur CAAELII to begin concentrating on key and complementing activities, from actually providing citizenship classes to working hard at developing new leadership throughout the immigrant community in Chicago.

The coalition's first initiative was to document INS shortcomings as a first step to fashioning some concrete strategies for pressuring INS officials to improve service. Through that initial study, CAAELII discovered that more than 1,000 instances of cases were lost or delayed—often for years—without clear cause. "The INS typically has a backlog of nearly 100,000 cases, with applicants waiting up to four years for action on their applications," says Asis. "We clearly quantified the problems, which stemmed from sloppy record keeping and lost files, and to simple things like no mechanism for processing changes of address." Not to mention repeated complaints about the surly or indifferent service generally rendered by INS personnel.

### **Ensuring inclusion**

But to be effective in taking on such issues, CAAELII, itself, had to make sure that its own bureaucracy, policies and decision-making processes were supporting the concept of accepting differences and harboring inclusion. While it sounded complicated and potentially hazardous, in some ways it turned out to be remarkably simple. For active members of the coalition it was really just a process of gathering, of sharing experiences, so that participants in CAAELII could clearly see the issues they shared in common despite their cultural differences – even learning to appreciate their cultural differences in the process. It's that sort of gathering, sharing and acceptance that is at the heart of the CAAELII dynamic says a staff member of Centro Romero. "No member of the coalition ever feels left out. We're all part of it. When we make decisions we all have the same voice, and that's very important to me."

Because of that genuine sense of acceptance and inclusion, say coalition partners, a huge amount of trust now exists among the 19 member groups of the coalition. "I think the wonderful part of CAAELII is that I feel so comfortable calling any of the partner directors and saying, 'I'm struggling a little with this situation. Can you help me?'" says a co-founder of CAAELII. "But also, 'What can I do for you?' We're all doing similar things. We're all facing similar challenges."

### **Putting trust into action**

For an example of how such a transformation in the dynamic of immigrant activism—from fragmented to collective—plays out, one needs to look no further than the coalition's effort early on to fix the local INS office. Both the coalition's newfound ability to galvanize much broader grass-roots action, and its newfound collective political clout at higher levels of government

came in to play. Study results in hand, CAAELII organized a meeting with the Illinois congressional delegation to appraise it of its research findings. At the same time the coalition launched an ambitious petition drive demanding that the INS be held accountable for what the coalition viewed as years and years of bad, even abusive service. In the Congressional contingent, the coalition discovered it had some sympathetic ears, and in high places. Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky, for instance, agreed to help the coalition push for change at the INS. In the petition drive, the coalition discovered a sea of seething discontent. The petition drew a remarkable 19,000 signatures. "Probably 99 percent of the people who signed those petitions were immigrants who'd had problems with the INS," says a staff member at CAAELII. Which wasn't a surprising number, says one of CAAELII's co-founders, "Because 99 percent of the people who dealt with the INS typically had problems. They were either slow or they treated you badly, or both."

As a result of that coalition initiative, and working with lawmakers and INS officials, the coalition helped put together an Independent Monitoring Board (IMB), created in 2000, to monitor the performance of the INS. The fundamental goal of the IMB is to create a database of issues brought to the board's attention by INS clients as a guide for future reforms. To date, the board has collected, and forwarded to elected officials and INS officials, 1,000 documented cases detailing the experiences of immigrants and refugees "caught in a seemingly endless INS backlog," says Asis. The idea behind such exhaustive case monitoring, says a CAAELII liaison with the Independent Monitoring Board, is to fashion policies aimed at vastly improving—and streamlining—INS policies and procedures. "The IMB is very much a policy-oriented board," she says. "We're using real cases as a way to help guide and inform the INS restructuring initiatives currently being considered by Congress and the administration."

### **Pooling power**

While the coalition has worked hard on changing policies and processes among the government bureaucracies that handle immigration, such action and activism is only half the CAAELII story. At the same time, the coalition is devoting significant resources to helping immigrants themselves adjust to life in the U.S., whether it's learning English or prepping for citizenship tests. Indeed, the whole area of testing provided another clear focal point for cooperation early on, says Asis.

In the past, different immigrant groups were developing citizenship-training courses in isolation from one another, instead of sharing ideas and tactics for successfully readying test takers. "I would find myself making copies of the Korean curriculum and sending it to the Instituto del Progreso Latino and vice versa," says Asis. And so an ongoing initiative of the coalition has been to do teacher and curriculum development. "Now agencies pool resources and ideas on teaching citizenship," says Asis. In 2000 alone, CAAELII member agencies taught 2,100 immigrants and refugees the basics of U.S. history and civics. According to Asis, the coalition has developed the "Teacher's Toolbox," a curriculum that folds history and civics into the everyday life of immigrants. The toolbox not only makes those lessons more relevant, but also instructs immigrants in their civic rights and responsibilities, from voting to other forms of political or community activism. "We've expanded the curriculum to include a wide variety of issues," says a CAAELII staff member. "We've developed lesson plans that will expand people's horizons beyond just citizenship as defined by the INS. We want to make people active participants in their communities." And so the new curriculum includes lesson plans on everything from

contacting your elected representative and dealing with the local school council, to a special emphasis on the Bill of Rights and what those rights mean to citizens.

To expand its ability to reach and teach, the coalition is building its own technology capacity along with a multilingual website through a \$100,000 America Online Foundation grant. The idea, says Asis, "is to bridge the digital divide among immigrants and refugees." The coalition has also launched a "portable computer classroom," using laptops circulating through various ethnic neighborhoods as a way not only to introduce immigrants to technology, but to use technology as tool to teach and to inform. "The technology project will create another space for immigrant and refugee agencies and community members to work together, share, collaborate and understand each other's issues and needs," says Asis. And it is another example of the coalition's remarkable knack for pursuing policies and projects that pay multiple dividends – teaching immigrants everything from English to citizenship, teaching them about the policies that impact them, offering them a way to respond positively and proactively, all the while supporting the ultimate concept of a more politically cohesive immigrant community.

### **Leadership and a dream**

But if there is one ongoing effort to which CAAELII devotes itself most rigorously it is in developing new blood and new leadership within the immigrant community. "The potential of creating community leaders who are able to speak for themselves on issues affecting their own communities is enormous," says Asis. "We're training new leaders, immigrants who live out in the neighborhoods who want to build their leadership and problem-solving skills," adds a staff member of the Chinese American Service League (CASL).

While CAAELII's actions and efforts are generally focused on giving immigrants new power, there are ongoing and more specific leadership building programs, as well. Part of that direct effort is CAAELII's Community Building Project, a partnership of 10 agencies working to build grassroots immigrant leadership throughout Chicago. CAAELII calls the graduates of the training "Community Ambassadors" who meet monthly as a group to address issues of mutual concern or even to brainstorm ideas for solving individual neighborhood problems. In some meetings they'll be tackling problems related to the Chicago INS office, in another they'll take on a more local issue. For example, community ambassadors came up with the idea for and successfully lobbied local officials to implement a system of longer red light sequences in a neighborhood where senior citizens were having a tough time crossing intersections.

Ultimately it is a mix and a dynamic, and a set of programs and people based on the maxim that there is great strength in diversity. When that is focused on an ultimate and unifying theme it makes for real power: "This coalition is about the future of immigrants. About helping them become citizens and helping them participate; about helping them harness their dream to the democratic process."

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