



The Synergos Institute

Making Partnership a Habit: Margie McHugh and the New York Immigration Coalition

By Jennifer Dodge
Sonia Ospina
Roy Sparrow

A study of bridging leadership in New York City produced in cooperation with the Wagner School of Public Service, New York University
2004

Introduction

In the summer of 2001, Margie McHugh accepted the Ford Foundation's Leadership for a Changing World Award. McHugh was one of a group of 20 award recipients recognized for "... getting results tackling tough social problems in communities across the United States."¹ Among the qualities that singled out were her "...skills in building consensus among [the New York Immigration Coalition's] members on an array of issues... [and forging] a permanent advocacy force that develops policy stands and carries out effective campaigns on a range of complex immigrant issues."²

During the decade preceding this award, McHugh and her associates at the New York Immigration Coalition (NYIC) had turned a respected, but loose-knit and unfocused Coalition of community-based immigrant organizations into a high-performing, national player in immigration and immigrant policy. The strategies and methods used by NYIC are attracting increased attention for their sustainable collaborative systems that address critical social and economic needs. This case focuses on the evolution of NYIC's successful methods for building bridges across sectors and among a diverse group of immigrant communities, and the leadership approach that made it work.

The bridge-building strategies presented in this case evolved over time as Coalition staff, led by McHugh, experimented with techniques to ensure the commitment of the key actors who would help them achieve their goals. Originally the Coalition's work revolved around filling an institutional gap in New York to address the needs and rights of local immigrants. A central focus of their work was always to help immigrant communities leverage their own power to advocate for themselves. *How* they do this has changed over time, however, as the power of immigrant communities has shifted – from a small group of individual leaders with some power to represent their communities to whole communities with substantial power in their own right. The Coalition has flexibly redefined their approach to keep pace with the growing power of these communities.

For example, the Coalition adapted its approach to governance internally, by shuffling the power dynamics within its own board so that large services providers who once carried the leading voice of the Coalition began to share power and leadership with the smaller, grassroots organizations. It has also developed successful strategies for engaging a diverse group of stakeholders external to the organization, such as a wide array of service providers for which immigration issues were not central concerns, and hospitals, educators, and religious institutions. Sixteen years of successful action have produced a mature organization for which partnership has become a habit. This case describes the story of these significant shifts to illuminate the

¹ Leadership for a Changing World. "Ford Foundation Announces Winners of Leadership Awards" 2001. <<http://leadershipforchange.org/program/press/092001.php3>> (15 Dec. 2003).

² **Leadership for a Changing World.** "*In the Shadow of the #7 Train: A Coalition of New York City Immigrants Speaks in Many Languages and One Voice.*" 2001. <<http://leadershipforchange.org/awardees/awardee.php3?ID=22>> (15 Dec. 2003).

emergence of collaboration and bridge building as key leadership tools that have allowed the Coalition to be effective over an extended period of time and on multiple issues that face immigrants.

The Coalition represents, according to McHugh, a new model to leverage the power of immigrant groups. At the core of their success is the involvement of all members in shaping the agenda and making decisions. They are effective because they help groups who know about a particular issue to bring their voices to policy makers in ways that connect their issues with a broader set of issues that affect the immigrant community. The Coalition has created ways to leverage the energy and power of groups for a whole set of issues that members have come to believe are important for all. Because no single issue in itself will always have the power to unite, the power over the long run comes from the fact that the issue at hand is framed within this larger set of issues, thus creating a much more powerful message to policy makers and politicians.

This case begins with a brief discussion of the Coalition's policy background to set the context of the Coalition's development and present approach to its work. It then provides an overview of the Coalition as it is today, and a brief history of the Coalition to illustrate how it got to its present state. Then, the heart of the case focuses on the internal and external processes in which the Coalition engages to do its work, the key role of bridge building in this context, and the unique and powerful synergy between these dimensions.

Policy Background

For a country that boasts of being a nation of immigrants, U.S. treatment of would-be citizens has long left much to be desired. True, the appeal of the United States has remained powerful over the years. But the need for a helping hand and critical social services has not diminished. Throughout the decades of mass immigration, public opinion and public policy have been inconsistent and contradictory. Depending on one's perspective, immigration is perceived as the bedrock for pluralist democracy and market economics or a threat to democratic pluralism and labor economics. Immigrants are perceived as a blessing and continuing source of renewal of the United States' founding spirit; they advance the country's prosperity often willingly taking the jobs at the lower end of the economic ladder that long-term residents no longer want. But many immigrants, opponents argue, hold on to their customs and languages and at times refuse to embrace pluralist values and practices; immigrants compete with economically disadvantaged residents for jobs; and sometimes illegally violate borders and laws.

Public policy and politics have reflected these alternating moods. Restrictive immigration quota laws, originally enacted in the 1920s, were followed by laws easing and again restricting entry. Political campaigns in border states frequently feature pro and anti immigration themes,

exemplified by California's Proposition 187 that denies public social services, publicly-funded health care, and public education to people who are suspected of being illegal immigrants.³ More recently, citizens are pushing for similar policy in Arizona, called the Arizona Taxpayer and Citizen Protection Act, to eliminate funding for all state and local programs, services and benefits for immigrants, except where federally mandated.⁴ At the national level, welfare reform in 1996 eliminated eligibility of many immigrants for services. Taking a blanket approach that makes immigrants suspects, the Patriot Act of 2002 represents the worst of these restrictive policies because it "seeks to further close our borders to foreign terrorists and to detain and remove those within our borders."⁵ In short, immigration is both welcomed and scorned.

In spite of these contradictions, institutional support of some kind has existed for new immigrants for a good part of the country's history. Beginning over a century ago and persisting well into the 20th century, urban political machines provided support, although often in unsavory ways such as offering jobs for votes. Religious institutions have always offered important spiritual, social and cultural assistance. Some of the nation's most respected nonprofit organizations also began during the enormous period of immigration during the turn of the 20th century; among these the settlement houses are particularly noteworthy. However, these efforts often fell far short of need.

Broadly framed immigrant service and advocacy organizations were virtually absent from the national and local scenes until very recently. Most of the organizations that did come into existence were oriented toward specific immigrant groups and often worked independently of each other in spite of potential common issues. They were also likely to focus narrowly on legal assistance involving citizenship and work permits, for example. This was as true for New York City, the nation's chief port of debarkation for immigrants, as it was for the rest of the country. Muzaffar Chishti, the Director of the Migration Policy Institute at New York University's School of Law and one of the founders of the Coalition, describes the environment in New York prior to the existence of NYIC in the following way:

It is quite astonishing that there existed no immigration coalition in New York prior to 1987. Moreover, the City of New York had no organizational reflection of immigration and immigrant issues until the Dinkins administration [around 1990]. There was no advocacy organization and no governmental representation. A number of national headquarters of organizations concerned with immigration issues were located in New York, but no organization looked after the concerns of local immigrants. Now, by way of contrast, there is a Commissioner of Immigration [for New York City].

³ Alonso, A. "Proposition 187" 1996. <<http://www.soyboricua.com/alonso/Academic/187.html>> (15 Dec. 2003).

⁴ The Sierra Times. "AZ: Proposition 187-Type Initiative Heading for State Wide Ballot" 2003. <http://www.sierratimes.com/03/07/08/article_az.htm> (15 Dec. 2003).

⁵ Doyle, Charles. "The USA Patriot Act: A Sketch." *CRS Report for Congress*. 2002. <<http://www.fas.org/irp/crs/RS21203.pdf>> (15 Dec. 2003).

What brought on these important changes? First, the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA) was a watershed event. With this legislation, 3 million undocumented workers and aliens and their families became eligible for legal status. This act ushered in the largest decade of immigration in U.S. history, altering the demographic landscape of New York and many other parts of the country. To illustrate, “the foreign-born population in the United States grew by nearly 58 percent in the 1990s. In 2000, 31.1 million immigrants and refugees lived in the United States, constituting the largest number of foreign-born residents in U.S. history.”⁶ In New York, there were almost 4 million foreign-born residents in the state; a 36 percent increase since 1990.⁷ With this increase, immigrants made up 20 percent of the state’s overall population.⁸ This demographic shift – along with the change in the legal status of many immigrants – spawned a new generation of advocates eager to take up the host of new issues that would arise with it.

Prior to the policy reform, most advocates were heavily oriented toward refugees and their issues, an ethos that grew out of the enormous refugee migration during and after WWII. IRCA quickly changed the focus from refugees to the new immigrant-citizens, who were quite different than immigrant groups of the past. Previous waves of immigrants arrived largely from European countries, while this new wave was predominantly Hispanic and Asian, who represented 52 percent and 26 percent of the total immigrant population in the U.S. respectively.⁹ Because most of the immigrant population was now made up of *new* immigrants, they would require more assistance in language skills and workforce integration and training, and other social services.

These changes in New York fueled discussions among a small group of immigration reform advocates, who identified a gap in the institutional make up of those serving immigrants: there was no locally-based advocacy organization to respond to additional needs and rights of the increasing number of immigrants and newly-made citizens. This group began working out of the offices of Lawyers for Human Rights with the intent of figuring out how to fill this gap in New York *and* to respond to downside of IRCA, which was passed to control and deter illegal immigration to the United States.¹⁰ This group helped promote the establishment of the New York Immigration Coalition in 1987 with Mary Ellen Ros as the first director. According to many leaders in this field, the difference in how the advocacy community responded to this gap was largely shaped by the work of NYIC and particularly by the vision of Margie McHugh, who became its third director three years after the Coalition was established.

⁶ Moran, Tyler T. and Daranee Petsod (2003). Newcomers in the American Workplace: Improving Employment Outcomes for Low-Wage Immigrants and Refugees. Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees in Collaboration with Neighborhood Funders Group Working Group on Labor and Community, Sebastopol, California p. 4

⁷ Federation for American Immigration Reform “New York: Census Bureau Data” 2003. <www.fairus.org/html/042nycbu.htm> (8 Dec. 2003). Percentages are rounded to the nearest percent.

⁸ See footnote 8.

⁹ See footnote 7. Percentages are rounded to the nearest percent.

¹⁰ VisaPro. “Immigration Dictionary” 2002. <<http://immigration-dictionary.visapro.com/I8.asp>> (15 Dec. 2003).

NYIC, an Overview

Since its founding, the Coalition has evolved into a powerful advocacy voice, not only in New York State but at the national level, analyzing the impact of immigration policy proposals, promoting and protecting the rights of immigrants and their family members, improving newcomers¹¹ access to services, resolving problems with public agencies, and mobilizing member groups to respond to emerging issues and needs.¹² The Coalition is one of the only local groups that is a powerful player in the national immigrant policy arena.

NYIC has played a pivotal advocacy role on behalf of and in partnership with New York's immigrant population. The Coalition's membership – comprised of nearly 150 New York State-based nonprofits – includes immigrant rights advocates, immigrant community leaders, social service providers, community-based ethnic and non-profit organizations, as well as leaders from labor, academia and the legal professions.¹³ NYIC's mission – to provide a forum for the immigrant community to discuss urgent issues and provide a vehicle for collective action in addressing these issues¹⁴ – conveys a broad, ambitious sense of purpose.

Currently, the Coalition has a full-time staff of 17 and a 22-member working board of directors. Board members represent community-based organizations, unions, service providers and other organizations and individuals working with immigrant communities throughout New York. Over a dozen NYIC working groups inform the focus and priorities of the Coalition's deliberations and actions. Its total budget for the 2003 fiscal year was \$2.2 million of which \$430,000 was subcontracted to community-based agencies for collaborative projects. The core operating budget is approximately \$1.8 million with most of the revenue coming from philanthropic institutions.

The current programmatic branches of the Coalition include the following four areas:¹⁵

?? Policy Analysis and Advocacy. NYIC focuses on practices, policies and laws that affect immigrants and their communities. Current priorities include promoting comprehensive legalization and immigration processing reform measures; addressing the post-9/11 backlash against immigrant and refugee communities; improving the quality of education for newcomer students in New York's public schools; protecting the rights of immigrant workers; increasing affordable and accessible health care services for immigrants; and increasing resources for English instruction, legal services, citizenship assistance and other supports that are vital to the stability of immigrant families.

?? Civic Participation and Voter Education. NYIC promotes the power of immigrant and refugee communities through a large-scale voter registration project, more than 100 voter education events each year, and the recruitment of bilingual poll workers.

¹¹ The Coalition's website uses the term "newcomers" to include immigrants, asylees and refugees.

¹² New York Immigration Coalition, Background Information Fact Sheet.

¹³ NYIC, NYIC's Mission Statement (Fact Sheet)

¹⁴ NYIC, NYIC's Mission Statement (Fact Sheet)

¹⁵ Adapted from NYIC, Background Information Fact Sheet

?? **Immigrant Concerns Training Institute.** NYIC offers an extensive calendar of workshops and seminars on issues that are important to immigrant communities. The Institute, staffed by skilled and experienced attorneys, currently focuses on aspects of immigration and social services law and is preparing to expand into the areas of advocacy skills and organizational development for immigrant-serving nonprofits.

?? **Community Education.** NYIC develops educational materials in as many as twelve languages on issues such as new developments in immigration law, the citizenship process, school registration, health care access, and voting rights. NYIC works with ethnic and mainstream media outlets to disseminate important information to immigrant families.

Among its successes, NYIC has played a leading role in getting Supplemental Security Insurance (SSI) and Food Stamp benefits restored to many immigrants who were barred from these programs after the 1996 welfare reform. Due in part to their efforts, New York State enacted the first Food Stamp replacement program in the nation for elderly, disabled, and child immigrants, providing a model for other states to follow. NYIC also designed and implemented the country's most successful new citizen voter registration project, through which they have registered over 210,000 new citizens to vote. They also worked with roughly 20 community leaders and their organizations to conduct over 125 voter education events in New York's immigrant and refugee communities about key issues that were at stake in the 2000 elections. These groups are now part of a growing network that the Coalition will use to prepare for other immigrant voter education and mobilization campaigns for future elections, including voter reform efforts to end harassment and intimidation at the polls. In addition, as part of its community education work, NYIC has published and distributed over one million copies of dozens of brochures and fact sheets over the past several years.¹⁶

History and Development of the Coalition

How did the Coalition evolve from the small group of committed activists who started it, to the powerful and effective organization that it is today? Part of the answer begins with the foundation laid by its founders. The founders' original vision was to provide a forum and encourage cooperation among immigrant communities, and find ways to build bridges with other leaders in government and native-born communities. From the beginning, there was an understanding that a multiple-issue focus and a long-term perspective were part of an approach that could respond to the needs of large numbers of newcomers. The implications of this understanding would be made clear much later, after McHugh and the Coalition figured out how to effectively implement this idea in practice.

¹⁶ NYIC, Background Information Fact Sheet.

In the early days, the organization's strength came from the certainty of purpose that the founders brought to the table. Their work centered mostly on responding to the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, which provided a path to citizenship for many immigrants, presaged one of the largest influxes of new immigrants in the country's history, and created greater control over U.S. borders. As Helene Lauffer – one of the founders, and over the years an active board chair and board member – put it,

I think the tone of integrity has just been with the organization since the beginning, and it's very important.... Maybe there was just a certain clarity about the purpose. I mean, we formed in the time of crisis so to speak; it was during the amnesty program, so there was a concrete set of issues that was the focus. And maybe that helped, it wasn't like: "Oh, let's just form [an] immigration coalition 'cause... there're a lot of immigrants in the city." [laughs] There were a set of issues that needed immediate attention then. But the way that it matured and evolved from then has been a very positive development....

After McHugh joined the organization in 1990, this single focus on immigration policy began to shift more explicitly toward the multiple-issues that immigrants faced as residents of the United States. Muzaffar Chishti, a Coalition founder, describes the shifts in this way:

One, we used to think of the debate over immigration as a *national* debate.... There were a number of national organizations actively engaged in this debate. Local issues were largely ignored.... Two, we used to speak of immigration policy, mainly referring to legal status and rights. This began to give way to a notion immigrant policy, meaning what we do for [immigrants] after they are admitted... [in terms of services like] ...education, health, employment, labor law protection, etcetera.... ...[The] local level is critical to this latter concept of policy.

Taking a hard look at immigrant policy issues started in the early 1990s with the City Access Project, a collaboration between the Coalition and the Dinkins' administration to help key city agencies adapt to and better meet the needs of the city's growing immigrant communities. Coalition members formed working groups with government representatives in six city agencies to talk about access problems facing immigrants and to devise solutions to make these agencies more responsive to immigrant residents.

As these efforts to advance immigrant policies that promoted access and opportunity were underway in New York, the opposite approach gathered momentum in California, where a statewide ballot measure known as Proposition 187 was passed. This measure, a cornerstone of then-Governor Pete Wilson's reelection campaign, sought to eliminate access for many immigrant families to state-funded services such as education and health care. The debate over Proposition 187 inflamed passions across the nation and across the political spectrum, and was a regular feature of media news and opinion coverage in the mid-1990s.

To counteract the anti-immigrant tone being set by Proposition 187 proponents, the Coalition urged then-NYS Governor Mario Cuomo to sponsor a program that would lend support to 40 organizations in their efforts to promote citizenship and to play a more prominent role in the national immigrant and immigration policy debates. By promoting New York's welcoming approach to immigrants, McHugh argued, the governor could take a leadership role at the national level and offer a positive model that highlighted the benefits of investing in immigrants and helping them along the path to inclusion in mainstream society.

During this time, McHugh and others at the Coalition recognized that it was essential to "look at immigrants as more than people who needed visas and legal status to survive in the United States. They also needed access to education and health care and opportunities to advance economically and gain power politically." What McHugh saw was people in need of far more than legal rights. "It was the totality of the immigrant experience that needed to be the focus – both because our member groups were leading us in that direction to proactively help today's immigrants achieve the American Dream, and because Proposition 187 signaled that anti-immigrant groups were going to make *immigrant* policy, not just *immigration* policy, a battleground."

Soon these issues hit the national scene in full force with the 1996 Welfare Reform Act, which eliminated critical federal support services such as Medicaid and Food Stamps for non-citizen immigrants, even if they were here legally, had previously been eligible, and even though many paid taxes.¹⁷ According to McHugh, federal action on welfare reform signaled two significant new trends: one, that the U.S. Congress and the President were joining the national debate on immigrant policy, albeit largely in a destructive fashion; and two, that negative attitudes toward undocumented immigrants had jumped a historically significant boundary to engulf popular thinking about legal immigrants and their rights.

Traditionally, once an immigrant had attained Lawful Permanent Resident status (i.e., their "green card") they enjoyed the same rights as U.S. citizens, except that they were unable to vote. The 1996 Welfare Reform turned this thinking on its head by targeting legal immigrants for almost half of the overall cuts in services. This fact is even more striking when one considers that immigrants only accounted for five percent of the distributed benefits at the time of reform. Veronica Thronson, the Director of Training and Legal Services at the Coalition, reflects on this shift at the national level:

When this law was passed in '96 many people were shocked to realize that it wasn't enough for immigrants to have a green card, to have legal status here. That's what the other groups had been advocating for, "just give them a green card and then they would be okay." But that's the

¹⁷ W.K. Kellogg Foundation (2001) "Chapter 8 – IWIC: Immigrant Welfare Implementation Collaborative (IWIC): Immigrant Coalitions Tackle Dual Challenge in Devolution Policies" In [Building Bridges between Policy & People: Devolution in Practice](#) at <http://www.wkkf.org/Pubs/Devolution/Pub3648.pdf>.

point when everyone realized that it wasn't enough to get a green card, because a lot of people were being cut from receiving public benefits even though they were legal permanent residents.

Through the Coalition's efforts, and those of other groups, federal programs like SSI and Food Stamps were restored to immigrant populations. However, these services only covered the elderly, people with disabilities, and children. At the state level, coalitions had some success in getting the state programs – such as Medicaid and CHP (a low-income health care program) – to fill the gap in services for some low-income adults and children. But these victories were not enough for the Coalition.

In reaction to this partial victory, the idea that the Coalition should refocus its political effort started to gain currency after the Welfare Reform effort. According to McHugh, focusing on citizenship and the power of immigrant citizens to shape policy shifted from “a good idea to an urgent necessity.” The argument was that, by making their political work more central, the Coalition would have greater success when issues like the 1996 Welfare Reform would inevitably arise. If Coalition members could strengthen their constituents’ power to shape policy debates, especially around election time, Coalition members and therefore the Coalition as a whole would be in better standing to prevent such regressive policies. Therefore, after working for a year to push the idea, McHugh convened a board retreat to make strategic choices about engaging the Coalition in more decidedly political work. The result of that retreat was the launch of the Coalition’s Newcomer Community Action Program, which would refocus the Coalition on voter registration, voter education and voter mobilization efforts. Thronson explains this work as

...just encouraging people to apply for citizenship and then encouraging them once they are citizens, to register to vote.... Because... every time you give [people] bad news about a piece of legislation or a law that is going to affect them or their community, they want to know, "How can we change this, how can we help, how can we get involved?" And so the first thing is, "If you're not a citizen and if you are able to become one, then do it. And then register and go vote, and learn how your government works, and how these people who are in power are going to affect your community later on with the decisions they make."

This new focus meant “increase[ing] the power that a lot of the smaller groups, that had a constituency, would have within the Coalition.” (For more details on this, see the “Shifting Power to Smaller Member Organizations” section below.)

Efforts of the Coalition to support member organizations had already begun in the 1990s, but due to the shifts in immigrant advocacy work toward immigrant issues (like services), and the explicit shift in the Coalition to take on more political work, the Coalition placed greater attention on developing the capacity of member organizations to do civic outreach and education – an effort which became sizable by the late 90s and continues to grow. This shift comes out of a recognition – from both the Coalition staff and member organizations – that local immigrant organizations needed to take responsibility for their own communication and

advocacy. As one member put it to McHugh, “I need to know what you know” in order to be effective. Working with her staff, and with input from community organizations, McHugh saw that NYIC had to develop local capacity in order for NYIC itself to be effective.

Building Bridges on the Inside and the Outside

These environmental and organizational shifts help to set the context for the unique approach to bridge building and collaboration that the Coalition has developed over the years. Effective collaborative relationships have emerged from the strategies NYIC used to pursue its goal of building a power base for immigrant communities in New York. McHugh argues that NYIC must address two interdependent strategies simultaneously for effective collaboration to happen. The first is ensuring that the Coalition is a “true” coalition, one that includes all members in decision-making. This means leveling the playing field so that all organizations, small or large, more influential or less visible, have an equal voice at the board table and in other key NYIC working groups, advocacy campaigns and projects. The second strategy is ensuring that the right allies, natural and unlikely ones, are recruited and become partners in moving forward the issue agendas, in other words, to ensure that the Coalition’s job is done effectively. The first strategy requires engaging in bridge building behaviors **inside** the organizational boundaries of the Coalition, and the second requires engaging in collaborative behaviors on the **outside**, aspects that will be the focus of the following sections.

What makes the Coalition so effective is that there is considerable synergy between these two approaches. In other words, the power and effectiveness of the Coalition comes from that fact that it acts as a conduit between its member organizations – who have strong connections to their respective constituent bases – and its external allies from government, other non-profits, and even educational institutions – who have the necessary power and resources to help the Coalition achieve its goals. The following sections look at how the Coalition has leveraged the power of immigrant communities to shape local, state, and federal policies through its bridge building work on the inside and the outside of the Coalition.

On the “inside” it works to build a strong issue-based board that is also inclusive, to create space for small member organizations to have power within the Coalition, to find common-ground issues across members, and to grow member organizations. On the “outside” it works to form stronger ties with groups outside the Coalition, and to link its local work to the national arena. Both the inside and outside dimensions also include aspects of McHugh’s leadership style and how it reflects the broader collaborative approach of the Coalition: as examples of this style, on the inside she gives personal attention to new members, and on the outside she approaches “targets” as potential allies.

Building Bridges on the Inside: Toward Creating a "True" Coalition

The work on the “inside” of the Coalition relates to building bridges among the Coalition’s member organizations -- so that they truly have power to shape the agenda and the direction of the organization: an essential ingredient to what McHugh calls a “true coalition.” The tactics that McHugh and other Coalition staff use to ensure that the board is truly inclusive and participatory are the focus of this section.

Building an Issue-Based and Inclusive Board. When McHugh first joined the Coalition, she devoted considerable energy to building a diverse and active board of directors, and made some critical strategic choices when structuring relationships among board members and staff. Muzaffar Chishti said of this work,

I cannot overstate the importance to her success.... She built a solid base; she developed depth. These characteristics are vital for sustainability. She built a strong organization piece by piece; she did not let substantive issues push aside this priority. For example, she systematically developed a diverse organization, on the board as well as on the staff.

Board members come from member organizations that have a solid connection to a constituent base, valuable expertise, and support for the Coalition’s agenda. McHugh notes that Coalition members represent all the major immigrant groups in New York: Dominican, Former USSR, Chinese, Haitian, South Asian, Central and South American, Korean, Polish and many others. Member organizations include, for example, the National Korean American Service and Education Consortium, the Latin American Integration Center, the Arab-American Family Support Center, and South Asian Youth Action (SAYA!); groups that have relationships to New York’s diverse immigrant populations, but relatively little power or capacity on their own to affect local debates about immigrant policy or social services. Engaging with these organizations in the Coalition strengthens the voices of immigrant organizations – “When you’re on the Board,” says Chung-Wha Hong, Advocacy Director of the NYIC and former staff at the National Korean American Service and Education Consortium, “you’re really represented in all of the activities, [and] that really gives the organization strength.”

The board’s role in the organization is not the typical fiduciary one. It is involved directly in researching policy issues and implementing the various campaigns and programs of the Coalition, both of which require a combination of legal, issue, and public participation expertise. Given this focus, NYIC recently had difficulty finding someone to take over the role of board chair; the perceived demands were too great. As a solution, McHugh and the Board Development Committee expanded and created a team concept for the executive committee, with a chair, three vice-chairs, a secretary and treasurer. Those positions are filled with members who hold the necessary expertise given the strategic choices on the table at any given time.

For decision-making and implementation matters, the board and staff are highly involved, not only in defining issues, but in ongoing interaction. Board members are available to staff for advice and counsel. This involvement importantly adds to the quality of the board members' work: as they struggle with tactical and operational matters, they become educated about the implications of their strategic choices for NYIC and the staff. In other words, as they vote on issues they do so with personal knowledge of the level of support and staff expertise that will be needed to carry out those choices.

Building and maintaining the board was and continues to require considerable time and attention of senior staff at NYIC. Hong asserts that putting the board together and keeping it that way is "...just a huge process that we have, and it took several years for us to get to where we are with our current board members. ...there are still a couple of communities where we don't have as strong a relationship as we would like and that's always something that we try to address."

A large part of the process has to do with putting effort into relationships and communication. In the early years, the then Chairs, Helene Lauffer and Mary Ellen Ros "set an incredible tone." According to McHugh, "We really could have broken apart, as people were mistrustful of each other or would say, 'Let's try and not talk about this in front of so-an-so because they'll be against it.'" She notes that people who are more ideological can attack others one degree to the right or left as if they were the enemy. But because McHugh, Lauffer and Ros set the tone for open communication, and refused to let people get away with such reactions, they were able to diffuse a lot of situations and come up with joint positions. In addition, many of the original members "set the tone from the beginning that this was an inclusive organization." This foundation has helped them to effectively manage tensions that inevitably arise when collaborating across racial, ethnic, language, political, and ideological lines. Their success in managing these tensions partly accounts for the strong commitment to NYIC's goals, its ability to make real progress, and the willingness of board members and staff to confront issues head on.

Shifting Power to Smaller Member Organizations. As the Coalition has matured over the years, there has been a gradual yet marked shift in the power that smaller organizations hold on the board. The shift in power among Coalition members is evident in one of the spin off projects of their political mobilization efforts called the *200,000 in 2000 Campaign*, which was launched in the summer of 1999. What mattered most in this campaign was not big budgets, but connections to a large constituent base through which community organizations could get out the vote. McHugh realized that, "it didn't matter if you were an organization with a \$25 million budget, if you really couldn't show that you were connected to a community base. Whereas, if you had only a \$200,000 budget but a connection to a few thousand people, that was really important."

During the 1998 retreat, when the Coalition made a deliberate decision to take on a more political role, members of the Coalition and its board recognized that this also meant a deliberate

decision to elevate the power of the smaller groups within the Coalition. McHugh is clear that the Coalition equally needs the older, larger and more powerful immigrant organizations and the smaller grassroots organizations who have a closer connection to what is happening on the ground and to the key issues facing, especially, new immigrants. The decision to shift the power within the board and the membership was not meant to reduce the power of the larger groups, but to *elevate* the power of the smaller groups so they would have equal footing within the Coalition. “[I]nstead of trying to take away power or suppress those that were powerful,” says Hong, “emerging, grassroots groups were elevated to be on more on equal grounds. The more established groups remained respected and important partners, so the change in power dynamics didn’t alienate them.”

Elevating the power of the smaller groups within the Coalition also positioned them to have a stronger voice and the capacity to negotiate directly with the decision makers on the outside that they were trying to influence. As Hong describes it, “...we can work toward making sure that we’re always dealt with directly in other issues too, that we’re not wrapped up as part of some other bigger group or bigger kind of industry, or groups.” Distributing the power among the board and member groups had to do with empowering immigrant communities to exercise their voice, deepening their understanding of the issues, and giving them the space to push for the issues themselves so that their voices and their positions would not get subsumed under a more powerful organization’s agenda. Saramaria Archila¹⁸, the former Executive Director of the Latin American Integration Center and former Coalition Board Member, argues that the Coalition is in the process of “building a democracy”:

At this moment, it is very important because many, many immigrants are coming from places where they don't have... to be conscious of that. And wanting that, give the agencies more power. And when you go to Albany or to Washington or here in the City we say, "Our agenda." And "our" is many organizations in the back. It's different if you go and say, "My agenda is this." So I think that, thanks to the Coalition, we have now a stronger voice, we are more close to the capacity to negotiate. That is what we really need.

The shift within the Coalition is clear in a story about the board’s debate around term limits for city officials. The New York City Council was contemplating ways to maneuver out of the term limits that would apply to their jobs, yet that had already been approved by voters. The city council was against term limits because, they argued, if the people continue to vote for a representative, then they should be able to remain in office. Many members within the Coalition preferred term limits because they allowed greater opportunities for different individuals to take up those roles. During one of the Coalition’s board meeting, a well-respected board member, who played key roles at the national level on immigrant issues and was “revered in the immigration rights movements as one of the smartest people in the country on immigrant

¹⁸ At the time of the interviews, Ms. Archila was the Executive Director of the Latin American Integration Center and a Coalition Board Member. Due to health complications, Ms. Archila passed away in January 2004. The Latin American Integration Center continues to work with NYIC.

issues,” argued on the side of the city council. Archila fought back. According to McHugh, she passionately argued,

"No, this is democracy! (Pounding fist on the table).... We've been working for so long to tell people that this is a democracy and that these votes matter. How can we tell them now that their votes should be overridden and that term limits should be ignored?" And I was almost unable to follow the conversation because it struck me at that moment how much our organization and board dynamics had changed. Here we had local activists with no national prestige or profile going toe-to-toe with one of the most respected national figures in the movement, arguing about how to best promote democracy and the power of immigrant voters. The playing field had truly been leveled.

For McHugh this story illustrates how successful this transition to shift power to the smaller, more grassroots organizations within the Coalition has been.

I just loved that period in our work. I knew that we had truly evolved as an organization. We had remarkably diverse people and organizations sitting side by side, sharing power, sharing the Coalition, and sharing in the development of its work.

Several staff and member groups look back on this period surprised that the transition – to make room for smaller groups with fewer resources to share equally in setting the agenda for the Coalition – seemed to occur with relative ease. However, according to Hong, the current Advocacy Director, a peaceful transition took lots of work because, while the Coalition was trying to elevate the power of the smaller groups, they were also,

...facilitating that process [with other board members].... It's harder; it takes a lot more work.... I mean... a lot of people when they try to diversify their Board, [they] just bring in somebody and don't do all of the extra work to help them understand the group's dynamics and the leadership role they are expected to play. You just get a couple of names . . . and you place them on the Board. As a member of the Board Development Committee for many years, I know how much work it took. It's hard to find people who can do a great job representing their particular community or area of expertise, and at the same time respect that that community or area of expertise is just one piece of the mosaic the Coalition has to respond to in a place as diverse and complicated as New York.

McHugh also credits the older and more powerful Coalition members with working hard to make this transition work for their organizations and their constituents. She says,

...the bottom line for most of the older organizations that traditionally had more power in the Coalition – religious groups, some labor unions and large service providers – has always been

how do we make life better for today's immigrants and refugees? So, rather than fighting the shifts in power within the organization, they actually promoted them, because they trusted the organization and they saw that it would make our collective efforts stronger in the long run.

Ultimately, what made it work were efforts by McHugh and key leaders on the board to win the trust and commitment of both larger institutions and smaller grassroots groups; they came to understand that it was the right direction for the Coalition.

Finding Common-Ground Issues. To sustain a successful coalition a critical challenge lies in creating a common vision and a culture of mutual support. Prior to the NYIC, New York was home to scores of organizations working in isolation to serve the needs and represent the interests of specific immigrant groups. There existed no common ground where the host of concerns these groups shared could be assimilated. As Archila put it, "...in some way it's like we are in separate ghettos in our own nationalities, so that we need this integration and ...the Coalition gave the possibility to us." McHugh saw from the outset that the strength of a coalition is rooted in all of its members, and while New York's immigrant communities indeed shared many common concerns, there were divisive issues that could threaten their unity. Occasionally this meant that issues attractive to some member organizations must be omitted from the agenda because unity across the membership does not exist. One such issue was school vouchers. Said McHugh, "It would have really been a make or break issue for [some of our members], and we just decided that vouchers wasn't an important enough issue on our agenda for us to lose major players of the Coalition over it...."

The vitality of NYIC is based on the success of its advocacy and its ability to influence governmental decision-making on behalf of immigrants. The strength of the Coalition's performance so far has depended on the care with which issues are selected, developed, and advocated. Knowing the importance of issue selection both in terms of performance and coalition maintenance, McHugh leaves little to chance. When issues surface McHugh guides the processes of issue development, research, and choice to ensure that those involved in decision-making are fully aware of all dimensions of the substance of the issue, as well as the politics involved.

Some issues, though divisive, are salient enough for the Coalition to exert considerable energy to develop them and try to find common ground. The racially charged events that followed the attacks on the World Trade Center are a perfect example, where Muslims, Arabs, and South Asians were subject to profiling and abuse. The Coalition was able to use its cooperative, collaborative culture and a high degree of sophistication in working across multiple sectors and communities, to deal with these issues. During these trying times, McHugh came to realize very explicitly that the pooling of member strength was a key aspect of success. "Post-911, for example, we mounted protests over the treatment of Muslims, Arabs, and South Asians. In a narrow sense these activities sought to protect only a part of our membership. In a larger sense it was seen as important to all immigrant groups, since under different circumstances any group could be the focus of discrimination."

Throughout many late night sessions to develop a strategy after 9/11, participating members – from these groups and others – evidenced a “broad appreciation that this was an important matter for the membership generally.” As McHugh explains, “[w]e chose to emphasize the abuses of the Patriot Act and the need for us to act to get other immigrant groups to see that [Attorney General] Ashcroft’s approach would harm them as well.” Through numerous media and community education events, the Coalition and its members are making it clear to the different immigrant groups that “your struggle is my struggle, and one attack on a specific immigrant group is an attack on immigrants overall.” McHugh knew that the successful functioning of the Coalition required a willingness of members to act on behalf of others. By way of example she pointed to NYIC’s successful effort to involve the leadership of Dominican, Russian and Central American groups in their post-9/11 work; work that these groups could have assumed related only to Muslim, Arab, and South Asian immigrants.

Another example of how the members set and implement a shared agenda revolves around their choice to get more directly involved in voter education and mobilization after the 1996 welfare reform. There were many risks to taking this step. First, many members worried that the organization was too young and inexperienced in this field to do it right. McHugh asked herself, “Could we keep ourselves from getting in trouble politically? [Could we make] sure that the work was really really clean, [with] the right blend of being hard-enough edged in terms of the voter education, but never stepping over the line?” There were also detractors, mostly established political interests who wanted to claim these votes as their own and have voter blocks that aligned with their causes. McHugh knew that taking on a new program area involving voter registration, education, mobilization and electoral reform work would represent a major shift in focus for the NYIC, and that it would require the commitment of major institutional and financial resources.

In spite of the risks, several board members were already sold on the idea to take a more political approach to the work – a prerequisite in McHugh’s view to pushing it. During the April 1998 retreat, NYIC’s board and staff led an energetic discussion where people expressed their discomfort about taking on this new work. Yet, they also expressed a commitment to it, because it was “where we needed to go to win,” says McHugh. Doing so “meant that the organizations really saw themselves differently.” McHugh summarizes the experience in this way:

We didn’t really have a plan in ‘98 when we agreed on all this. We just said: “Okay, . . . it’s definitely there intellectually, the analysis is correct. Practically speaking, who knows what it’s really going to take to make this happen? These are the rules you have to operate within in doing it; and, yes, we agree that this is the direction that we should go in.”

The effect has been electric.

The great thing is, internally, we've got at least 20 or 25 grassroots groups that have a tremendous sense of ownership of this work. They are doing community education events all the time, out there with civic education materials.... [They] have helped many tens of thousands of people through the citizenship process, so they know that this belongs to them.... That's where the work draws its energy from and...where it's real inside the Coalition.

The Coalition showed tremendous flexibility and adaptability when it chose to change its focus so dramatically – even without knowing how to go about making this change. Instead of continuing on the same path – a bureaucratic step that many organizations take – it showed an ability to respond to the changing needs of those it serves. As Lauffer put it, "...in retrospect, it's again another very clear and fairly large step in the maturing process of the organization. To look outward in a different way and to say we're going to consciously change our focus, because that's what we need to do to be more relevant to the debate and more effective."

Growth of Member Organizations. When the Coalition committed to raise money to help member organizations do the political work, for example, in the *200,000 in 2000 Campaign*, member organizations mobilized even before the funds were committed.

All these leadership groups just said, "Yes, we're going to do it. We're each going to get 5000 signatures from people who say they're going to become informed and vote. And we're going to do door knocking, community education events, leafleting and get-out-the-vote work...." And then all these groups did this just incredible work over that following year.¹⁹

The Coalition has since committed to building the capacity of member organizations in ways that go beyond providing funding. As part of its Training Institute, NYIC offers a "packed calendar" of workshops focusing on aspects of immigration and social services law, and advocacy skills and organizational development. In recent years, the Coalition has raised sufficient funding to enable it to provide resources for member organizations to undertake initiatives on their own. Ten groups were funded recently to engage in an extensive training program to educate grantees on the local political structure, strategies for civic participation and voter registration campaigns, and critical organizational, community and governmental issues. Each organization had the option of choosing the mix that best fit their circumstances.

Extending its philosophy of partnership, NYIC has also developed issue-based collaborative structures on education, health care and other issues. These projects provide funding for community-based organizations to participate in collaborative efforts to improve services for immigrants, refugees, and their families while simultaneously helping them build their own capacity to do policy advocacy on key community issues. Providing funding for advocacy fills a significant institutional gap: private foundations and government agencies are more likely to give these groups funding to provide services to individuals in their communities, and rarely – if ever

¹⁹ Interview with McHugh.

– fund advocacy. By raising money for grassroots groups to join together and engage in sustained advocacy and policy work, NYIC leverages the expertise these groups have on the issues that affect their lives. The Immigrant Health Care Access and Advocacy Collaborative is a prime example of this kind of partnership.²⁰ It brings together five community-based organizations along with NYIC and the Legal Aid Society to develop an in-depth understanding of the barriers to health services that immigrants, refugees and their families face so they can take steps to eliminate immigrant access barriers more systematically through education and advocacy. It also provides case assistance and legal advocacy to help individuals overcome barriers, and conducts extensive community education and outreach to help immigrants navigate health care programs and services.

While the collaborative aims to improve access to affordable health care, a “specific intention... is also to build the policy advocacy capacity of immigrant-serving community organizations in the area of health access.”²¹ So, for example, members of the collaborative have conducted surveys at local hospitals and Medicaid offices to gain an in-depth understanding of the problems immigrants face in attempting to access services. They have then used this information in their roles as lead witnesses and spokespersons at hearings, press conferences and protests.

McHugh sees these projects and the Coalition as a sort of training ground for leaders in its network, a place where they can gain valuable skills and experience, especially in areas that may not be of primary focus in their organizations. Of this work, McHugh says,

...one of the really exciting strategies we are using right now is a very deliberate type of partnership that allows us to support a number of immigrant community organizations in building their knowledge, leadership and skills so they can jump into the public debate on key issues affecting their communities. For example, many immigrant community groups don't have funding to run major programs in healthcare or education, yet these are prime needs for which people in their communities are turning to them for help. We try to set up a two-way partnership with them where they get information they need to help individuals in their communities and they agree to not just provide one-on-one assistance but to join the public debate and fight for systemic changes that help everyone.

²⁰ Other examples include the Equity Monitoring Project for Immigrant and Refugee Education (EMPIRE) and the New American Leaders Project (NAL). EMPIRE is designed to improve education services to immigrant and refugee students through a partnership between NYIC, Advocates for Children (AFC), and 8 community-based organizations. NAL is a leaders fellowship program, sponsored by the Coro New York Leadership Center and NYIC, that hopes to “provide an insider’s view [for fellows] of how New York City’s government, political and civic institutions work, and equip participants with insights and strategies to maximize their community’s effectiveness in influencing these institutions” (from Coro and NYIC’s information flyer “*New American Leaders: A Fellowship Program for Leaders of Immigrant Communities in New York City*”).

²¹ NYIC’s Request for Proposals for the Immigrant Health Care Access and Advocacy Collaborative, May 2003.

One thing is certain. The Coalition operates with the belief that the strength of each of the member organizations builds the strength of the Coalition to fight for enduring policy change for immigrants of New York, and the nation.

McHugh's Leadership Style: Growing the Membership One Relationship at a Time.

Because McHugh recognizes the strength that each potential member organization can bring to the Coalition, she pays a lot of attention when she sees an organization getting seriously involved in the work. Chung-Wha Hong, the Coalition's Advocacy Director, tells a story about how her organization first got involved with the NYIC, and how McHugh impressed her with the attention she gave to building relationships with her and her organization. Hong had been working with the National Korean American Service and Education Consortium, a small grassroots organization of which Hong was the first English-speaking staff member. They had been organizing in relative isolation against some key legislation in 1995 that would mean "death" to the immigrant community, but because they were so small they were not making much progress. Although she had not known about the Coalition, she soon found out about it at a meeting and saw an opportunity to make her work stronger by joining.

Once the organization joined, members began receiving critical mailings with information about "a big petition campaign to oppose one of the pieces of legislation" that was important them, recalls Hong. "And so we thought, 'this is exactly what we want to oppose and here is a petition campaign that the Coalition is doing.' So we got involved." Without even calling NYIC, staff and volunteers began setting up tables in the streets and collecting signatures to send back to the Coalition. McHugh immediately noticed that they had collected more signatures than many of the other Coalition members, and took the time to send a personal note welcoming them to the Coalition and thanking them for their hard work. Hong was taken aback, "I just didn't expect the executive director of this large, broad-based group to be doing that, so I felt like she was really welcoming and seeking out our involvement."

Hong has since become the Coalition's Advocacy Director, and sees that McHugh regularly recognizes small groups with potential. "If it looks like a really good group with not a lot of resources," she says, "you almost get a little personalized plan from Margie... to be part of the healthcare collaborative or the voter participation campaign." The personal attention that McHugh gives to new member organizations and local leaders encourages them to become and stay part of the Coalition. As Hong recalls, "nobody knew me, we didn't know anybody and here she is writing us a letter... inviting us to be part of it, to be more active.... So just putting in that time to cultivate relationships and to take the time to have the conversations, I just feel it's a really important style."

Building Bridges on the Outside: Getting Things Done with the Right Allies

NYIC's efforts to be inclusive on the "inside" are complemented with its efforts on the "outside" to build bridges with organizations external to the Coalition's boundaries. The Coalition's work has often involved building bridges across sectors, with organizations from government and higher education for example, and within the non-profit sector with organizations that may not have direct links to immigration and immigrant issues. These external connections, coupled with their internal strength, have helped the Coalition to be effective on multiple issues over a long period of time.

Involving External Stakeholders in Issue Development. As discussed above, the strength of the Coalition's performance depends largely on the care with which issues are selected, developed, and advocated. This is as true for the Coalition's partnerships on the outside as it is for those on the inside. On the outside, issue development partly involves spending time checking with external stakeholders well beyond the Board and NYIC, as in the example of mental health services and immigrants. After the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center, "the federal government, private relief agencies and charities mobilized hundreds of millions of dollars to help meet the pressing need for mental health services in New York."²² Yet there were significant gaps in programs and services, coupled with access barriers, for immigrants.

In response, NYIC staff members contacted a diverse set of stakeholders whose support and participation would be important to implementing any programmatic initiatives chosen by NYIC. They convened several conversations among these organizations, including policy, legal, governmental, and service providing stakeholders, and sought to understand whether and how immigrant mental health needs were being met. Rather than making these groups feel defensive about work that they clearly did not have the capacity to perform, McHugh and NYIC staff pulled them together to develop an analysis that would expose the weaknesses in the current service structures and to come to a joint agreement on how to address those weaknesses. Together they developed a series of recommendations for addressing the unmet needs for mental health services that immigrants faced post-September 11, many of which related to large pre-existing gaps in culturally and linguistically appropriate programs and services.

Forming Stronger Ties with Groups Outside of Immigration. Over the years, NYIC has developed a wider array of relationships with organizations outside of the Coalition. These relationships span across sectors and touch upon a wide range of policy issues. NYIC's participation in the struggle over welfare reform helps to illustrate its bridge building with local non-profit organizations in New York who viewed themselves as unconnected to immigrant issues.

²² NYIC's information sheet: "Bridging the Gap: The September 11th Disaster Response and Immigrants' Access to Mental Health Services in New York City.

Because of her connection to national players, McHugh understood before most local service providers that the changes in welfare laws would have a huge impact on immigrant communities. NYIC, at the forefront of spreading the news, drew 200 people from immigrant and non-immigrant related fields and government to a meeting just to get more information. Services providers in nursing homes and hospitals, and social workers in non-health-related fields didn't believe that the changes would affect their work because most of their clients were citizens, or so they thought. But NYIC drew on their local ties to recruit several of these providers to attend a conference in D.C. to fully understand the implications of the legal changes for all these groups. Several service providers became part of a "Speaker's Bureau" – a collection of people prepared and dispatched to go around New York to educate other providers on the impact of the changes, and how to advocate for their clients. The Speakers Bureau sponsored "a few hundred events" in an eighteen-month period, some of which drew in hundreds of people, including state legislators, city council members, and managers of city and state social service agencies.

An important effect of this community building strategy was NYIC's ability to enlist service providers – who had direct connections to immigrants in various communities – to collect stories to put a human face on the policy issue. They learned that a lot of elderly immigrants were suffering from heart attacks and strokes that were attributed to the fear – and the reality – that they were losing their benefits and would be put out on the streets. They also uncovered the fact that many of these immigrants were Holocaust survivors. This fact caused Al D'Amato, the then New York State Senator and 1998 Republican Candidate for New York Senator (at the federal level), to change his position on welfare reform. According to McHugh,

New York played an incredibly important role nationally, with having one of the first Republicans break ranks and seek to rescind the immigrant SSI cut. A driving force in getting the policy rolled back was putting a human face on the cuts. The work we and others did made the general public and people like Senator D'Amato realize that the cuts were a crushing blow to elderly Russian Jewish refugees who had been resettled in New York, as well as hundreds of thousands of elderly Chinese and Latino immigrants. When the public saw that so many elderly people were about to be thrown out on the streets, the debate turned around – it suddenly became a big problem politically for people like Senator D'Amato who had voted for the cuts and were trying to campaign in New York.

Through this work, NYIC developed ties and relationships with individuals and organizations that worked outside of the immigration field. "We had fantastic leadership from the Council of Senior Center and Services in New York, UJA Federation, and the like. We had all of the pieces of our network come together: Catholic, Jewish, Latino, Asian.... Everybody was on the same page working for this, so it was an incredible time," says McHugh. When asked how these relationships developed, Thronson, the Director of Training and Legal Services, said,

I don't think it was out of choice, but out of need, that all these people had to be involved. Because all of a sudden..., for example, the nursing home realized that they weren't going to get paid for these people who were living there because there were not going to be any benefits. So

[service providers] didn't know all the implications with the immigration law and the welfare law. ...These other groups, like social workers, hospitals, nursing homes, the senior centers, all of them, had to become part of the network because they were being affected, not only financially, but also emotionally. ...it was very, very sad to see that the elderly were going to be, all of a sudden, put on the street.

Reflecting on the impact that these ties had on the Coalition, Lauffer, a Coalition founder, says,

...forming of stronger ties with groups outside the immigration world was a big milestone... in the maturing process of the Coalition. And that's proven to be very useful on lots of other issues over time... So I think the Coalition keeps branching out, and every time that happens, the Coalition and the Coalition's issues get taken more seriously by legislators and by policymakers. ...That's been organizationally important. I think because... Margie and the staff use those relationships now on other issues. And then they expand it further....

Linking the Local Work to the National Arena. The story over welfare reform also sheds light on how the Coalition links the local work in New York with national organizations that often have little connection to locally-based non-profits. During the same period that NYIC was building relationships with non-immigrant service providers in New York, it also helped found the Immigrant Welfare Implementation Collaborative (IWIC) – a national collaborative made up of local immigrant coalitions across the country and several national organizations. Creating IWIC “has helped coalitions establish vital links with national research organizations, mainstream advocacy groups, and funders to increase the scope of work on immigrant issues in a devolved environment.”²³ These kinds of relationships involve mutual benefits. For example, researchers and policy advocates in other fields learned about the specific issues confronting a particularly hard-hit population, so their work became more informed. The Coalition got more exposure for their issues and was able to influence the kinds of questions that researchers ask in their research. Their research in turn, educated funders about priorities, and eventually helped to shape policy.

In another way, NYIC affects national policy by creating advocacy agendas and getting them out to broader audiences early in the development of an issue. Their connection to local groups helps them define the critical issues on the ground, and they use that knowledge to develop policy approaches to education, healthcare, and a variety of issues that can be pushed at the national level. As Hong describes it,

²³ W.K. Kellogg Foundation (2001) “Chapter 8 – IWIC: Immigrant Welfare Implementation Collaborative (IWIC): Immigrant Coalitions Tackle Dual Challenge in Devolution Policies” In [Building Bridges between Policy & People: Devolution in Practice](#) p. 97 at <http://www.wkkf.org/Pubs/Devolution/Pub3648.pdf>.

...we were pretty unique in getting the work on healthcare and education and other immigrant policy issues started early. Not many local groups have the capacity or positioning to develop issues and make them part of the national agenda. But I feel that one of the good things about the New York Immigration Coalition is we jump-started several model initiatives that later [were supported by] other coalitions or national groups.

McHugh shared what this process has been like on education issues.

...we're one of the only groups in the country that's really taking on immigrant student education issues, and it can be messy and ugly. For example, we don't all agree about bi-lingual ed. We don't all agree on how to do a good job with increasing the quantity and quality of English language instruction. And so we've been trying hard to do our homework, have good research and policy development processes, and then, to try to start up a national movement around those issues. Our attempts to influence what other people take serious nationally is a deliberate aspect of our work to push, cajole, and goad other coalitions or other players around the country to expand their definition of immigration issues to include issues like education.

This work extends beyond immigrant education issues. The Coalition tries to push the national debate regarding all its critical issues, from housing to voter mobilization, from Medicaid restoration to mental health. McHugh makes that point that "there's a whole aspect of our immigrant work that's both national as well as local that I think is part of the story." McHugh role as a board member of the National Immigration Forum and member of national initiatives like the Immigrant Welfare Implementation Collaborative help bring local lessons to the national scene.

Margie's Leadership Style: Approach "Targets" as Potential Allies. An important ingredient to taking a bridge-building and collaborative approach to advocacy involves reaching "opponents" with openness and a sincere wish to work together to achieve coalition goals, but also being willing to take a critical position if things are not moving forward. McHugh acknowledges that

...the hardest thing about being an advocacy organization is that you're no good to anybody if you're someone's friend all the time. But you're also no good if you're the enemy all the time. You're just as irrelevant if you're in someone's pocket, as you are if you're on the outside constantly screaming and attacking them. And so I think the nature of doing this advocacy coalition work is: how do you intelligently and ethically strike the balance between maintaining relationships... and at the same time being... critical... and getting them to do what you want them to do?

McHugh and the Coalition found this balance when trying to get the Immigration and Naturalization Service, a “natural enemy” in the eyes of most immigrant advocates, to address a huge backlog of citizen applications. Thronson recalls that,

...our member groups were just ready to go protest in front of the INS because so many thousands of people were waiting for their citizenship applications to be processed. And then our attitude was, ‘it’s not the district office’s fault. It’s that they don’t have enough personnel to process all these applications....’ It wasn’t that the cases were just sitting there, or that they didn’t want to process the cases, it’s just that they didn’t have enough resources to go over all that.

McHugh notes that INS has had some serious structural problems especially concerning the links between local and national offices that complicate the resolution of these issues. The Coalition identified 120,000 cases that were backlogged, and found that the source of the problem originated in a processing center in Vermont, over which the local New York office had little control. The Coalition “could have done the easy thing of protesting down here,” says McHugh, but instead, with other immigrant groups “we wound up being an advocate for the New York District right up to the level of the [federal] INS Commissioner Doris Meissner.” Their work was aimed at getting the federal government to do what was needed to take care of the backlog for the New York office, and other offices affected by the bottlenecks occurring at the national processing centers.

Along with other advocates around the country, the Coalition did eventually have to stage local protests. But in keeping with the balance between befriending and criticizing their targets – in this case with their unlikely allies at the local INS office – their message was clearly about the national backlog, not the local office. McHugh says,

...we had already done all of our work with the district office to say, “This is not about you. Listen carefully to what we say in the media. We’re not going to say that you guys are incompetent; we’re not going to say that you’re lazy and you don’t know what you’re doing. This is about the national issue with the backlog....” But the public face of it was that we were complaining about the INS. It was hard to make sure that we did it right, so that we didn’t burn bridges, but that we were able to put the pressure on nationally, and maintain our relationships with the district.

In fact, the Coalition partnered with the local INS office to inform their demands for the federal commissioner. They also encouraged the local INS office to give tours to some congressional members that the Coalition had brought to a press conference. This tour brought the issue to their attention, and showed them the solidarity between NYIC and the district office on the issue.

The importance of maintaining this balance between being a friend and a critic relates directly to making sure that the Coalition stays effective in achieving its goals. As Lauffer puts it, this approach

...has to do with integrity of your commitment and your message, and what you're aiming for. And I think that people *within* the Coalition had faith that what the Coalition [was] doing has integrity, that it's for everyone's good that there is no one's personal agenda.... And then the people that we were partnering *outside* with, or were adversaries with like INS, also assume that there's integrity in terms of what the Coalition is trying to achieve. And I think that's something that has been built up over many years and repeatedly reinforced by the way we take positions, and the way that we advocate. And that goes a long way in terms of our effectiveness. And Margie, as the public face of the Coalition, really embodies that.

Lauffer emphasizes that establishing positive relationships with partners and targets keeps channels open for later work, and maintains the Coalition's reputation for fighting the good fight, from the perspective of both sides. A powerful position, no doubt, in a complex context like New York.

Conclusion: Partnership as a Habit

The strength of NYIC comes from the fact that it successfully attends to its partnerships on the inside as well as those on the outside of the Coalition. On the inside, the Coalition is a "true" coalition because it successfully creates shared power among New York's immigrant organizations no matter how small or large, visible or obscure, independently powerful or struggling. Establishing these partnerships on the inside, so that members come to recognize the strength in sharing power and in joining together across immigrant issues, even if not directly related to one's own constituency, has made it possible to leverage the power of the immigrant community to assert a direct voice in policy debates. Getting there has taken a lot of work. The NYIC has deliberately built relationships, set a tone for open communication and airing of issues, and strategically chosen issues that members can get behind in a true demonstration of collective force.

On the outside, the Coalition has linked up the voices of their various member organizations to key policy makers, allies who lend resources and support to make their goals happen, and even "opponents" who, in the process of becoming allies, have helped the Coalition to shape appropriate messages for getting the work done. This work has required a sensitive balance of collaboration and critiquing that is delivered with integrity and a clear sense of purpose. The powerful combination of building bridges within the Coalition and outside of it has positioned NYIC to be an effective force for shaping immigration and immigrant policy locally, regionally and nationally. Its work bridges local communities to national debates, immigrant groups and non-immigrant groups, policy analysts to community organizers, and academics to people with real issues and needs at the community level.

Through a combination of strategic decisions around key issues, sensitivity to developing processes and activities to achieve results, and persistence in implementing goals, the culture of NYIC has evolved. Partnership has become a habit for many. There is broad recognition that common action advances the goals of all.

This case was written by a team of researchers from the Wagner School of Public Policy, New York University, under the supervision of Prof. Sonia Ospina. The project coordinator is Steven Pierce, Senior Advisor, The Synergos Institute. All case materials are prepared solely for the purposes of research and class discussion. They are neither designed nor intended to illustrate the correct management of problems or issues contained in the case. Copyright 2004, the Synergos Institute, New York. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, used in a report or spreadsheet, or transmitted in any form or by any means – electronics, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise – without consent from the Synergos Institute. This case was made possible through a grant from the Synergos Institute.