

RURAL COMMUNITIES EQUITY ACTION GUIDE

Based on interviews between Mónica Maria Segura-Schwartz, Growth & Justice Policy and Outreach Consultant, and Fatima Said, Executive Director of Project FINE

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Case Study Five



PROJECT FINE

Welcoming Communities;
Welcoming Community Vitality

Community Equity & Inclusion Focus

Winona's organizational and community collaborations have shown great innovation and leadership in establishing important partnerships to tackle **workforce equity**, respond to demographic change, and promote an inclusive culture, particularly in welcoming and weaving immigrants and refugees into the community and workforce as equal and contributing members.

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Summary

Project FINE serves as a connection point for refugees and immigrants and built a formal partnership between Winona and the Welcoming America organization and its extensive resources. Project FINE (Focus on Integrating Newcomers through Education) is a nonprofit organization that has been serving Winona County and the surrounding area since 1990, helping build contributing individuals, healthy families, and a stronger, more respectful community for all.

Their work helped the City of Winona become the first city in Minnesota to join the Welcoming America movement and its Welcoming International Network which has helped "super-size" Winona and its surrounding areas to transform into a more welcoming place for all newcomers.

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(Note: Welcoming America is a nonpartisan, international nonprofit that leads a growing movement of inclusive communities becoming more prosperous by helping everyone know they belong. It provides a roadmap and support for places to reduce barriers to full participation and build bridges between immigrants and long-time residents through direct contact and dialogue.)

Background

As of the 2010 Census, the only population increase in the Winona area was among diverse individuals. This growth is expected to continue, as will the challenges of cultural and language barriers that prevent newcomers from accessing services, gaining employment, and building connections and a new life in the community.

According to Project FINE Executive Director Fatima Said, "Diversity has grown significantly because there are great jobs in the community. The need for workers has driven the community to ask how to attract more people."

Project FINE began as a program in Winona County, organized by the University of Minnesota Extension Office in 1990 when it received a four-year federal grant to help (mostly Hmong, then) refugees access basic needs, such as food and shelter. Now an independent nonprofit, it is helping refugees and immigrants grow capacity and grow community roots, such as supporting homeownership and/or entrepreneurship.

Project FINE works closely with over 70 community partners to provide information and access to resources such as foreign language interpreters and translators, opportunities for education, information, referral, and empowerment for immigrants, refugees, and established residents.

In 2005, Project FINE was struggling but the need for the organization was still evident. They applied for and received support from United Way to develop a strategic plan, hire new leadership, and breathe new life into the organization. Since that time, they have grown considerably and are funded by a mix of fee for service programs and grants from private foundations.

Process

When Said became Executive Director in 2005, "Project FINE was in a very hard situation: no money, no space, no technology, and worst of all we had no friends." Not many in the community were aware of Project FINE's mission and Fatima thought, "What I am going to do?" Her answer was to start building relationships, one person at a time. "You cannot succeed on your own. You need people. You need partners."

With a board of directors that was generous with its time and support, Said's relationship-building gradually extended to funders who recognized the growing need for Project FINE's existing and proposed capacity-building services. The organization slowly stabilized.

Lesson learned: Relationships are a two-way street: To build relationships, you must share something from you. When you share, you become vulnerable and that is okay.

"I started sharing these success stories with the County Administrator, the Department of Human Services director, the public health director. In formalizing Language Services, we connected with health institutions like Blue Cross Blue Shield of Minnesota and UCare, making sure that our program would meet their requirements for medical interpreters. Now we rent space in the county building and providers in our community can access interpreters easily. They don't have to invest in all that travel time anymore because we are an independent contractor right there," says Fatima.

WealthWorks Capitals

Wealth Works Framework elements at play in the Meander (working towards eventual systems change towards an equitable economic ecosystem):



Individual Capital – immigrants and refugees skills development, integration into community and businesses; strengthening of newcomers' and long-time residents' psychic and physical energy for productive engagement and capacity to use and apply existing knowledge and integrate new learnings and physical and mental healthiness



Social Capital – residents, businesses, community organizations and newcomers bonding & bridging



Intellectual Capital – innovation, creativity, imagination



Natural Capital – array of environmental resources (air, water, land, flora, fauna) on display as visitors "meander" thru region to artist studios, shops, etc.



Built Capital – transportation and communications infrastructure, schools, business structures



Political Capital – shift in how immigrants and refugees in region are seen – as entrepreneurs as well as skilled workforce, shift in cultural appreciation, increasing voice, access, inclusion in decision-making of traditionally underrepresented community members



Financial Capital – investment in skills building and inclusion by local businesses and organizations, increase in income and tax revenues as more businesses are started, retained, expanded



Cultural Capital – changing dynamics, knowledge of who is known and what heritages are valued, collaboration across races, ethnicities, generations

"We build relationships with agencies whose patients and clients are also refugees and immigrants and share with them what we can do together to help them deliver their services more effectively."

Lesson learned: Being a good partner and making sure that you deliver what you say you will confer dignity and respect upon all stakeholders. "It is all about respect. It is all about respect."

In 2011, Project FINE was approached by Welcoming America to be featured in their upcoming publication of success stories and to be a resource for similar organizations. Said agreed to the offer.

"After that, I started to research them [Welcoming America] more and use them as a resource. We started becoming a part of their network: I learned from other people around the nation and they started learning from us. This is the beauty of this work when you are networking and sharing and collecting information."

Lesson learned: You are not alone in this work. No matter how far away your partners are, they are there for you.

In 2013, after partnering on various initiatives and attending their conference, Said was selected by Welcoming America to represent Project FINE and Winona as a Champion of Change at the White House.

Results

The partnerships helped Said's organization and its stakeholders build traction locally. Several years ago, Project FINE approached Winona's city administrator. They proposed that the city join Welcoming America's formal network as a way of intentionally recognizing the community's efforts to be inclusive. The City Council then passed a proclamation.

"We became the first officially welcoming city in Minnesota. I was so happy I cannot tell you." The city of Austin passed its own proclamation a few days later.

Being part of a national community of welcoming cities motivated Project FINE and the community to move to the next level. They began to host community celebrations on Citizenship and Constitution Day in September, engaging naturalized citizens, elected officials, and community residents to celebrate.

"We invited all citizens to come and share their stories and be together and have the elected officials welcoming those new citizens to the community. We invited the League of Women Voters to register them to vote."



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After several years, Project FINE approached the city for ideas about how to make the celebration an even bigger event. Last year's week-long celebration attracted 1,200 people.

"We did something different every day during Welcoming Week. Celebrations in the park with live music and dancing, our Citizenship Day Celebration, film screenings, all with the same purpose: bringing people together from different cultures and backgrounds to get to know one another and build relationships."

Lesson learned: Celebrations are places of sharing, community building, and getting to know each other. The whole community grows and benefits.

It was not just about the large attendance. "It was a huge success because so many people worked together." They printed two booklets of refugee and immigrant stories which the Winona Daily News published digitally. "When we share stories, we begin to know each other." "We are all the product of the environment where we grow up. You have to keep trying to send the positive message and share your story. It may be hard at times, but you have to swallow your pride and keep working."

Lesson learned: Work with everyone, even the leaders with whom you disagree.

"Hearing the Voices," was published as a series in 2015 in the Winona Daily News. In it, Fatima shares her reflections on the project: "Fear, sadness, hurt, courage, hope, and contentment. Those of us who are newcomers faced these emotions and many more on our journey to the United States. Some of us came for education or love and others because of war or traumatic circumstances. All of us have had challenges and struggles, but greatly appreciate the opportunity to build a new life."

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Reflections

This mission is not only Project FINE's mission. It is Said's personal mission; she came to this country 26 years ago from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

"I love to see the accomplishments of those we serve - their smiles when they overcome barriers and start buying houses, putting their children through college. I know the feeling of that because I came with two children and two bags and nothing else."

"You come here as a refugee and you appreciate what the community did for you. It's my motivation and my inspiration to do for others what they did for me through this work with a new generation of refugees and immigrants. I really appreciate our partners and people in community. Just recently, I had a conversation with the League of Cities, and we are looking into becoming a Southeast MN Welcoming Region.

"We come to this country because we want to live a better life. And there is no better life without work, right? So, you work, day and night, to build a better life. I really enjoy giving back to the state and the country that invested in me and my family so much. And I never will stop."



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