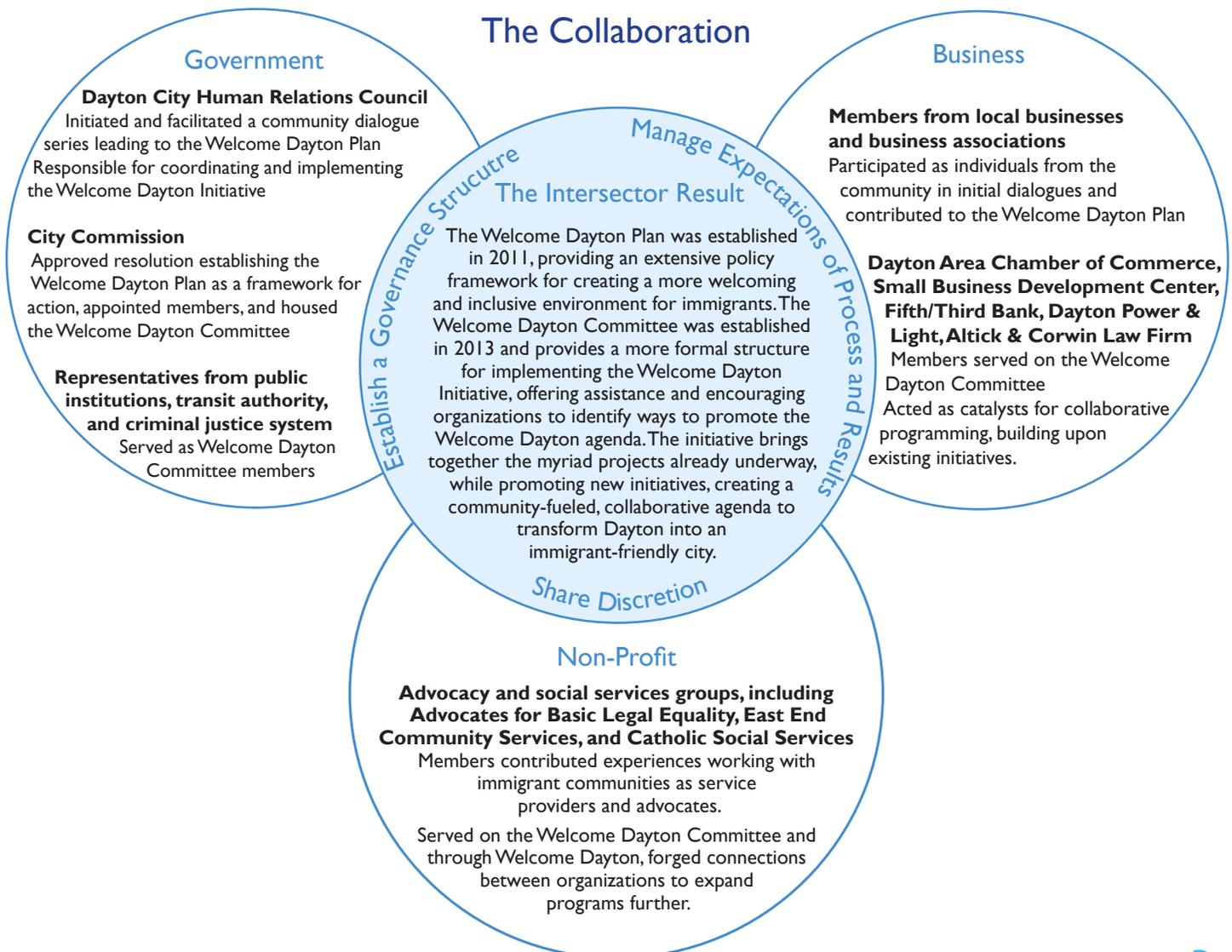


R6 Empowering the Immigrant Community in Dayton
Issue: Community Revitalization | Location: Ohio, United States

The Story

The percentage of foreign-born United States residents has quadrupled since the 1970s, reaching over 40 million – nearly 14 percent of the population – in 2012. Tom Wahlrab, Executive Director of Dayton Ohio’s Human Relations Council (HRC), was aware of the challenges immigrants faced building a life in a new country and noticed that many of Dayton’s immigrants, when faced with housing discrimination, did not submit civil rights claims. Recognizing that a number of immigrant groups felt marginalized within the city, HRC initiated a series of conversations with community members including city leaders, police, social service providers, business leaders, immigrant community leaders, and immigrants. The resulting Welcome Dayton Initiative is a collaborative effort aiming to “promote immigrant integration into the greater Dayton region.” It supports economic development; improved access to education, government, health and social services; greater equity in the justice system; and promotes arts and culture. Welcome Dayton has publicized the needs of various immigrant communities, helped leverage the assets of existing groups working on immigrant issues, and promoted a cultural shift towards immigrant inclusion.

The Collaboration



The Leadership

Tom spent his career building consensus in the fields of transformative mediation and organizational development. He participated in civic engagement initiatives as a mediator, in both a professional and a personal capacity, before being appointed by the City Commissioner to the Human Relations Council, the civil rights agency of the city administration. Drawing on his background in bringing people together, Tom designed and facilitated the community meetings that resulted in Welcome Dayton.



Contextual Intelligence

During his professional career, Tom advocated for marginalized groups, working with businesses and governmental organizations as a mediator within the field of organizational development and workplace team development. He has worked with communities and the government as a civic engagement professional, a mediator in professional and volunteer roles, and as the Executive Director of the city's Human Relations Council, responsible for protecting and promoting civil rights in the city. He has also worked on issues including affirmative action and contract compliance, which straddle the sectors of business, government and the community. Now retired, he continues to support conflict resolution in the immigrant community through the Dayton Community Business Conversation, where members of the community can present issues in a private and confidential setting. His efforts to build consensus among conflicting factions has taught him the different interests within various sectors, while creating personal connections in the Dayton metro area.



Transferable Skills

Tom's work as both a mediator and a government appointee allowed him to design the initial phase of the Welcome Dayton Initiative as a community conversation led by a government organization, rather than as a top-down government initiative. Prior to Welcome Dayton, Tom trained in mediation with Baruch Bush and Joe Folger, the founders of the Transformative mediation model, and organizational development and civic engagement from Peter Block, an expert in community building and organizational management. Tom strengthened his communication skills to prioritize collaboration, patience, receptiveness, and the human need for autonomy and community. His style promotes self-organizing, connectivity, and ownership of issues by the community. Tom made it a point to invite friends and colleagues from various social groups to the trainings to strengthen the mediation and civic engagement principles among members of different community groups.



Integrated Networks

Through his role as the Director of the Dayton Mediation Center and the Human Relations Council and his civic engagement work, Tom established himself as a problem solver within government agencies, the business community, and among community leaders, and social service providers. He developed connections with a range of parties involved in immigrant issues, from the police force to representatives of the various immigrant communities. Tom sent an organizing statement to his network of contacts, asking them to invite anyone they thought would be interested, which attracted about 150 people to the conversations that resulted in the Welcome Dayton plan.



Intellectual Thread

Tom has practiced transformative mediation for over 20 years, working on issues ranging from affirmative action and civil rights to contract compliance. This skill set helped him unite many individuals from various social strata and sectors to discuss immigrant contributions and issues in the community.

The Toolkit



Share discretion

The Welcome Dayton Plan was written through a series of conversations held in 2011 that eschewed hierarchical structures and speeches in favor of conversations where people felt recognized and on equal footing, regardless of their position in society. Tom imagined the Welcome Dayton conversations would be an environment where people could have a discussion rather than hear a speech. The discussions generated greater buy-in from the business and non-profit sectors, as well as community members; these initial conversations allowed participants to share their expertise from personal experiences in their communities, neighborhoods, or organizations. Participants self-selected into four sub-committees, applying their sector-specific expertise to draft each of the four sections of the Welcome Dayton Plan: business and economic development; local government and the justice system; social and health services; and community, culture, arts and education. Once the Committee was established in 2013, members contributed knowledge based on what their communities, organizations, and institutions were already doing to aid immigrant inclusion. The Committee created a 19-point “visioning process” which focused the Welcome Dayton Committee’s goals; these points isolate specific ways that Welcome Dayton could be resourceful within the four priority areas of the Welcome Dayton Initiative. In the business realm, they are working to provide mentoring and start-up advising to entrepreneurs, while ensuring members supported an Immigrant Investor Regional Center. In government, the Committee focused on ensuring interpretation service availability for governmental and judicial issues, making legal services available to immigrants, and promoting immigrants as civic leaders. The Committee sought to create a more inclusive education system for immigrants and refugees, from providing better ESL training to retaining foreign students in the city’s universities. In health and social services, the Committee led an initiative to create a welcome center, oversee that refugee resettlement was a comprehensive process, and increase accessibility.



Build a common fact base

Composed of groups from more than 100 different countries, 77 percent came to the US after 2000 and nearly 30 percent were children. Tom and others wanted to shift away from the national discussion about immigration, which was dominated by negative perspectives, focusing on illegality and economic threats. Participants in the early community conversations joined voluntarily, and all had some stake in the integration and empowerment of Dayton’s various immigrant communities. The conversations helped narrow down participant’s ideas into an actionable Welcome Dayton Initiative to promote immigrant inclusion.



Manage expectations of process and results

The Dayton Plan was adopted in 2011, yet it was not until 2013 that the Welcome Dayton Committee was formed. Before the Committee was formed, a core group from different city departments met to carry the initiative forward. Existing organizations facilitated small-scale collaborations; several community groups met to address several issues related to English as a Second Language (ESL) classes; the Latino Connection, an existing association, continued to meet monthly to share resources, network, and discuss issues. These ad hoc and existing associations and their collaborations developed new partnerships and generated new ideas, becoming the building blocks for Welcome Dayton. The City of Dayton’s Public Affairs Department established a website connecting immigrants and those interested to service providers and information regarding issues such as visa applications, health services, translation service providers, and immigrant associations, improving access to information.



Establish a governance structure

The Welcome Dayton Committee, established in 2013, formed the central body of the Welcome Dayton Initiative, comprising members of organizations with a stake in immigrant inclusion. Members must show a strong interest in immigrant issues and work in one of the following fields: education; banking; health care; social services; local, state, and federal law; city and county government; and private businesses. Committee members serve three-year terms and meet regularly to make decisions and discuss opportunities for projects. A Chairperson and Vice Chairperson are elected by the City Commission to oversee committee meetings and call special meetings. The Committee allows members to offer their professional expertise in discussions about designing an overall agenda for immigrant inclusion.

The Intersector Result

Welcome Dayton is a community-led government initiative with a standing committee within the Human Relations Council and a full-time employee dedicated to coordinating the initiative. It exists as a platform to encourage and support immigrant inclusion in Dayton's society, emphasizing a cultural shift towards awareness and integration. The city government, business, and non-profits have individual responsibilities to immigrant groups that coalesce through Welcome Dayton to create a more structured and comprehensive approach to immigrant issues. In 2013, the US Chamber of Commerce recognized Dayton as one of seven enterprising cities, citing Welcome Dayton's role in the city's success. A series of projects under the Welcome Dayton umbrella are underway:

- > Recreation and Youth Department hosted the 2nd annual Dayton World Soccer Games in 2013 with over 20 teams competing representing 16 different countries.
- > Wright State University hosted the workshop "Immigrant, Inc." to develop ideas on how to create an ecosystem to support immigrant entrepreneurs.
- > Dayton Public Schools have opened Welcome Centers for immigrant and refugee students where they receive individualized tutoring and high school refugees are paired with a mentor from the community.
- > Dayton Police Department and the Human Relations Council have provided funding for legal services to victims who may be eligible for a U-visa.
- > Tom continues to mediate within the immigrant community through the Dayton Community Business Conversation.

"My trajectory is to bring people together, support their decision-making, support their agency, and realize possibilities that no one could imagine if they would go out there and just problem solve it."

—Tom Wahlrab, former director of Dayton Human Relations Council