



IDEAS THAT INNOVATE

State & Local Policies

State-Funded Opportunity Centers





State-Funded Opportunity Centers

Policy

Utilizing State resources to support local nonprofit integration efforts across the state.

Where it's working

- State of New York
- 27 Opportunity Centers across the state

Players

- New York Governor Andrew Cuomo
- New York State Office for New Americans
- Local Community Based Organizations

What does it mean?

On January 2012, New York Governor Andrew M. Cuomo called for the creation the New York State Office for New Americans (ONA), the first statewide office in New York with a sole focus on assisting the State's immigrants in their efforts to integrate, contribute to the economy, and become a part of the communities across New York. Last year, Governor Cuomo and the State legislature codified the Office for New Americans as a statutory office of State government, making it the first state-level immigrant office created by statute in the country. In one of its first programmatic endeavors, ONA was able to allocate \$6 million in State resources to support 27 Opportunity Centers across the state.

What is a State-Funded Opportunity Center?

In the example of New York, **Opportunity Centers** are State-funded resource centers that serve a range of immigrant communities. They are positioned throughout the state within existing culturally competent, language accessible community-based organizations. Opportunity Centers help New Americans learn English, prepare them for the U.S. citizenship exam, help them start and grow businesses, and help eligible young people apply for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA).

To develop the application process, ONA staff conducted significant field research to better understand the integration needs among New York's immigrant communities. ONA met in different parts of the State with more than 130 individuals representing 95 immigrant and refugee service organizations, including visiting multiple English language education and naturalization programs to see how services are delivered, while researching and analyzing the skills and vulnerabilities of immigrants in the state's rural, suburban and urban communities. ONA spoke directly with immigrants, immigrant service providers, and governmental agencies in other states and abroad to identify

service delivery approaches that could be tailored to New York State's needs.

Awarded through a competitive process, ONA Opportunity Centers are located throughout the state within existing culturally competent, language-accessible community-based organizations. Opportunity Centers are asked to help New Americans learn English, prepare them for the U.S. citizenship exam, help them start and grow businesses, and help eligible young people apply for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). Each ONA Opportunity Center is asked to blend the work and efforts of trained professional staff with that of community volunteers and technology to help newcomers. Neighbors volunteer their time to help their new neighbors become part of the community. In its two years of operation over 88,600 immigrants have been assisted.

ONA is also supported by a toll-free, multi-lingual hotline to respond to general questions about immigration and naturalization and provides referrals to other immigrant-related public and private programs. This New York State Office for New Americans Hotline already receives more than 24,000 calls and makes over 32,000 referrals annually.

Each ONA Opportunity Center is required to provide at least 200 hours of ESOL instruction to more than 200 Limited English Proficiency clients per year in an effort to expand access to English language instruction in New York.

ONA has set a goal to increase New York's naturalizations. To that end, each Opportunity Center has been asked to utilize CitizenshipWorks, a new software program that simplifies the naturalization process, very much like TurboTax streamlines the tax process. Moreover, each ONA Opportunity Center is asked to assist at least 100 immigrants annually through the naturalization application process and provides direct access to exam preparation training. In the first two years of ONA's inception over 6,000 naturalization applications were completed and reviewed by legal counsel.

Additionally, to better harness the unique entrepreneurial spirit immigrants bring and to help them start new businesses, each ONA Opportunity Center is required to host at least four “starting your own business seminars” per year. After the seminar, immigrant clients sit with a business coach to assess the level of business development assistance needed. Those with a business background from their home countries meet between five and nine times with a business coach. New budding entrepreneurs are tracked separately into a multi-week intense business class to develop a business plan. At the end of either track, both sets of entrepreneurs are provided access to capital through a variety of State and private sources.

Why does it matter?

While the laws governing immigration are set forth by the federal government, immigrant integration is experienced on the state and local level. Compared to many developed countries, the U.S. federal government provides very few resources to facilitate immigrant integration. The impacts of immigration and integration, however, are felt across local communities and states across the nation.

Increasingly, state and local governments are responding. Several states (Illinois, Michigan, Massachusetts, New York) have established State Offices for New Americans.

Providing state and local resources to support the nonprofit community-based efforts to integrate immigrants and refugees is important to speeding the integration process. Immigrant communities that are more efficiently and effectively integrated within their new communities foster even greater positive economic and social benefits to those communities.

The Opportunity Centers program of the New York Office for New Americans represents a creative and important vision of utilizing state and local resources to support the best practices in the field.

While the outputs and impacts of New York’s 27 Opportunity Centers can vary, the vision and concept of the program deserves highlighting. Future efforts may focus more on the entrepreneurship, workforce development, as well

as economic development aspects of integration, but New York's effort is exemplary in its vision and scale, as well as its use of local partners.

Resources for Action

New York Office of New Americans Opportunity Centers Website

<http://www.newamericans.ny.gov/opportunity/opportunity.html> ↗

The website for the New York Office of New Americans Opportunity Centers includes information to assist New York residents in finding one of the twenty-seven Opportunity Centers, as well as accessing their English language classes, citizenship services, entrepreneurship and business support services, job training, information on Deferred Action, and other resources.

Illinois Office of New Americans Website

<http://www2.illinois.gov/gov/newamericans/Pages/default.aspx> ↗

Massachusetts Office for Refugees and Immigrants

<http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/gov/departments/ori/> ↗

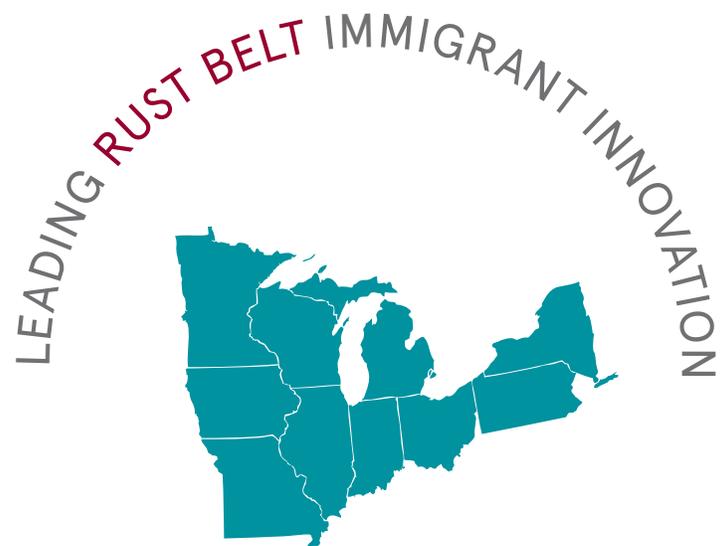
Michigan Office for New Americans Website

<http://www.michigan.gov/ona> ↗

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