

# BUILDING INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

## An Action Guide for City Leaders

League of Minnesota Cities' Cultural Diversity Task Force

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Minnesota has for centuries been home to people of widely varied cultural heritages. While today the differences between people of Norwegian and Irish and Czech descent may not seem so stark, each group of new arrivals to Minnesota has been seen as different and many have felt unwelcome. Today's new Minnesotans often have a similar experience.

The cultural composition of Minnesota's 853 cities has changed significantly over the past decade. According to the 2000 Census data, the percentage of Minnesotans of African, Asian-Pacific, and Latino descent—as well as new immigrants from the former Soviet Union and other regions—increased 119 percent between 1990 and 2000. More than 100 cities experienced more than 100 percent growth in these “ethnic populations.” Projections from the U.S. Census Bureau and the Minnesota State Demographer's office are for Minnesota cities to continue to become more multicultural in the future.

In response to the release of the 2000 Census data, as well as his own community's decade of demographic change, Willmar Mayor Les Heitke, the 2001-02 president of the League of Minnesota Cities, initiated the Building Inclusive Communities effort. Mayor Heitke's goal was to provide all Minnesota cities with the information they need to begin building communities that are welcoming and inclusive of all people—no matter how long they have been Minnesotans, no matter the color of their skin, no matter if they have yet become fluent in English.

The *Building Inclusive Communities Action Guide* is the result of Mayor Heitke's inspiration and leadership, and the hard work and dedication of the League's Cultural Diversity Task Force made up of city officials, academics, and leaders of organizations that represent and serve Minnesota's ethnic populations. The League Board of Directors also unanimously endorsed this action guide and directed League staff to seek funding for continuation of the Building Inclusive Communities effort.

A companion document being researched and developed by the Center for Rural Policy and Development for release in Spring 2003 will also focus on building inclusive communities. The document will highlight programs and approaches being implemented by cities throughout Minnesota and the nation that seem to be effective and that can be modeled.

### CULTURAL DIVERSITY TASK FORCE

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## REASONS TO READ. REASONS TO ACT.

No matter what your city's current situation, there are good reasons to read this action guide and to build an inclusive community.

- **Civic responsibility.** City officials are elected and appointed to ensure residents receive quality city services, to engage them in the city governance process, and to lead the community in setting and achieving a shared vision of the future.
- **Economic development.** Ethnic populations contribute significantly to the economic base of Minnesota communities through an estimated \$6 billion in buying power and by providing a stable workforce, as well as entrepreneurship and job creation.
- **Loss control.** While there are many positive factors that motivate city officials to build inclusive communities, it is also a reality that serious liability issues can arise if cities do not comply with civil rights laws. From public safety to employment practices, city officials need to be cognizant of the liability risks they face and work to reduce those risks.
- **Community harmony.** Your community's residents likely have various expectations about the assimilation of newcomers, both in the level and speed of adopting community norms and English as their primary language. The Task Force suggests that "bilateral assimilation"—where both long-term residents and newcomers modify behaviors and expectations to accommodate each other—may be the approach that best prevents conflict and results in community harmony. This approach is unlikely to develop without leadership from city hall.

## RECOMMENDED ACTION STEPS

The action guide addresses seven key issue areas: *cultural competence, language, racism and prejudice, public safety, housing, economic development, and leadership*. Each topic is framed in a city government context, and recommended goals and action steps are provided. While there are many action steps recommended in the action guide that are specific to each issue of focus, the following are overarching themes and are relevant to all issue areas.

# 1

### CONNECT

Connect with the populations that live and work in your city, as well as with the leaders of not-for-profits, businesses, and other community institutions, around the goal of making your city welcoming and inclusive. Connect with other city officials who are working toward the same goal.

# 2

### EXAMINE

Examine proposed and existing city policies and procedures to determine if they have a potentially discriminatory impact. If so, work to modify or eliminate those policies and procedures. Examine your city's housing and economic development efforts to ensure they reflect changing demographics.

# 3

## EDUCATE

Educate new residents, especially ethnic populations, about city government in general, laws and regulations and the rationale behind them, and residents' rights and responsibilities. Educate yourself and your city colleagues on cultural similarities and differences related to your community's populations, as well as key phrases in the most common languages spoken. Educate your residents about the city's settlement history.

# 4

## INITIATE

Initiate a community-wide or region-wide effort to develop translation and interpretation services that the city, health care providers, businesses, and social service organizations can jointly fund and jointly utilize. Initiate the development of a multi-cultural, multi-lingual city staff, rewarding and recognizing staff for cultural competency and multilingual skills. Initiate efforts to engage ethnic populations in your city's governance processes.

# 5

## COMMIT

Commit individually and as a city to ensuring that racism and prejudice are not tolerated in your community. Commit to leading by example as a community employer, ensuring that cultural differences are respected and valued, and that both the letter and spirit of civil rights laws are upheld. Commit to a long-term effort to build an inclusive community by developing a community-wide, multi-year plan, working in partnership with ethnic populations and integrating such a plan into the community's long-range strategic vision.

## TAKING THE FIRST STEPS

The changing demographics of Minnesota pose many challenges and opportunities for city leaders. We hope this action guide prompts you to explore how you personally and how your city government as a whole can embrace this change and actively work to become an inclusive community.

As Mayor Heitke states, *“By leading your community to be responsive, inclusive, and welcoming, your city can find great reward—economically and socially, and to the benefit of the next generation of Minnesotans.”*

**The complete *Building Inclusive Communities: An Action Guide for City Leaders* is available on the League's web site: [www.lmnc.org](http://www.lmnc.org).**

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