



**REACHING, SUPPORTING, & EMPOWERING  
IMMIGRANT FAMILIES**  
Experiences of the  
Statewide Parent Advocacy Network (SPAN)



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## REACHING, SUPPORTING, & EMPOWERING IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

Immigrant children in the US are more likely to be poor, to have health and development challenges, to live in environments that exacerbate existing disabilities and special healthcare needs, and thus to need services and supports even beyond those services needed by families from the "majority" culture. Yet immigrant families, whether documented or undocumented, are frequently less likely to be aware of resources to assist their child and family or to reach out to access those resources. Based on our work with many diverse immigrant communities, the Statewide Parent Advocacy Network (SPAN)<sup>i</sup> has identified effective strategies for service providers to work with family organizations to help identify, reach out to, connect with, and serve immigrant families.

The old adage, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," perpetuates an approach that ignores the cultural differences that impact how families from various cultures experience authority, relationships, and services. Our efforts must be focused on "doing unto" immigrant families *as they would have us do unto - and with - them*. Service providers must understand families' beliefs, strengths and needs, and how they want to participate in decision-making about their children and access services. Service providers must listen - with the heart, for the heart of what is important to families.

Family organizations, particularly those with staff that reflect the larger community, can play a critical role in reaching out to and supporting immigrant families and thus helping to identify possible needs at earlier stages and encouraging and supporting immigrant families to access services and supports for their children. Family organizations can serve as "cultural brokers" with immigrant communities.<sup>ii</sup>

The first step is identifying partner family organizations that have legitimacy in the community targeted for outreach and support. Possible family organization partners include the state's Parent Training and Information Center (PTI) or Community Parent Resource Center (CPRC), Family Voices chapter, Family to Family Health Information Resource Center, Parent to Parent, and Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health organization. Bringing parent organizations that work specifically with families and community-based organizations that serve the diverse families you are targeting together and requiring their collaboration as part of the outreach and support effort will ensure both family competence and cultural competence. Work with the parent organization(s) to identify and partner with "cultural brokers," respected members of the targeted community.

It is critical that parents from the targeted cultural/racial group are key staff on the project. In our focus groups with Spanish-speaking immigrant parents, it

was clear that being matched with a parent from their language and culture is the most effective strategy to engage and empower them. Many of the barriers faced by the targeted families arise from significant cultural and linguistic unmet needs.

Family organizations that are representative of the community you are trying to serve can act as cultural liaisons. They are knowledgeable both about their own culture's values, beliefs, and practices, and about the service delivery systems that they have learned to navigate. They can more effectively help immigrant families understand these systems because of their own experience. Because they reflect the immigrant families they are helping, they are more trusted by the families themselves. And they can help the systems understand how to understand and be more effective in working with immigrant families.

Family organizations can help you gather community knowledge that will be critical to you in designing approaches and programs that will meet immigrant family needs. Family organizations can help you to encourage and support community members to find their voice. Partnering with family organizations can also help you to be more responsive to what you hear from immigrant community members, which may be critical things that are hard for you to hear. They can also help you to respect the passion of the community for change. You will "turn off"

immigrant families if you are defensive when you hear from families about what you need to change and being unwilling to make those changes.

Family organizations can also help to ease the distrust that many racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse communities have toward organizations that serve children and families. Two elements are essential to the delivery of effective services: (1) the ability to establish and maintain trust and (2) the capacity to devote sufficient time to build a meaningful relationship between the provider and the family. Working with family organizations that are representative of the immigrant families you want to reach promote increased use of screening and services within their respective communities by helping you establish and maintain trust and build meaningful relationships with immigrant families.

Keep in mind that trust is not automatic: it must be earned and it can easily be lost. One critical component of building trust is to be honest about the problems, the barriers, the potential negative consequences - as well as the potential benefits - of screening, evaluation, and accessing - or refusing to consent to - services. For example, immigrant families may fear that engagement with a government agency will expose them to possible referral to immigration authorities or the child welfare system if their cultural norms differ from those of the majority culture. Immigrant and LEP families do not always feel safe in complaining

or raising concerns with government agencies, professionals, or those perceived to be "in authority." It is critical that there be cultural brokers and other trusted people in whom they can confide their complaints or concerns and that you and your partners are prepared to advocate on their behalf.

Other critical considerations for building trust with immigrant families include a commitment to "being in it" for the long haul, and not abandoning your outreach and support efforts after the first disappointment or failure. Admitting mistakes and asking for help is also critical.

Family organizations working with immigrant families can help screening and service delivery systems better understand the barriers to participation by immigrant families, both real and perceived. They can work with these systems to engage immigrant families in the identification of barriers as well as in the development of action plans to build systems that are more effective in identifying, reaching out to, and engaging immigrant families. What needs to change in your outreach and education materials? Where do you need to make your services available? What community organizations should you engage in your outreach process to be sure that immigrant-serving organizations are your partners in outreach? Family organizations can also help you develop ongoing tools to learn from immigrant families whether your changes are being effective.

Partnering for cultural competence requires committed leadership from all partners as well as establishing and maintaining good communication, clear decision-making, and specific responsibilities. From the beginning of your collaboration with family organizations, it's critical that everyone is clear on each partner's role, how you will communicate with each other, including how you will get parents to consent to the sharing of information with each other, where there may be conflicts and how you will resolve any conflicts, and that each partner has additional roles beyond the collaboration role. For example, the family organization has an ethical responsibility (and if they are the PTI, CPRC, or F2F HIC, the grant obligation) to help families understand their rights in the process and what to do if they disagree with the service provider or agency and service providers must be cognizant of this obligation and not act as if this is a betrayal of their partnership.

A starting point for your plan is ensuring that you have the quality information you need to develop an accurate "map" of strengths and needs of families from diverse communities -who's important, what's important, formal and informal relationships - as well as how others have addressed these issues successfully.

Specific steps for the plan include:

- Identify partners with legitimacy with families and targeted communities and ensure representative staff are involved in outreach and support efforts

- Reach out beyond existing databases to identify potentially eligible families
- Ask families what they need and what works for them
- Be flexible and determined in your outreach
- Revisit your written materials to meet diverse and targeted family needs
- Be flexible in your activities and prepared to change many times along the way
- Provide the support that immigrant families need
- Build a cadre of parent leaders to continue the provision of support
- Conduct ongoing evaluation of your impact and learn from mistakes.

Partnering with family organizations that serve immigrant communities is not the only step service delivery systems must do to identify, reach, and engage immigrant families. But it is an essential building block, a pebble cast into the pond, causing ripples that spread in all directions and a critical first step in the work that our service delivery systems need to do to reach and serve underserved children and families.

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<sup>i</sup> SPAN is NJ's Parent Training and Information Center, Family to Family Health Information Resource Center, Family Voices chapter, Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health chapter, and Statewide Parent to Parent.

<sup>ii</sup> Bridging the Cultural Divide: The Essential Role of Cultural Broker Programs, National Center for Cultural Competence at Georgetown University. Available in English and Spanish at <http://www11.georgetown.edu/research/gucchd/nccc/resources/brokering.html>.