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Creating an Immigrant-Friendly Community to Enhance Financial, Social, and Cultural Capital: Sioux County, Iowa

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Abstract

Communities where there are a substantial number of new immigrants face many contradictions among legalists, who insist that all residents have appropriate documentation pluralists who focus on the human aspects of family separation and cultural inclusion and pragmatists who insist that the local economy needs immigrants. Since there is no path to legal migration for such labor, the workers need to be there. Sioux County, Iowa, moved by a campaign of racial profiling and deportations by the county sheriff, organized to stop the loss of labor and the breakup of families by mobilizing the market, state, and civil society factors to study and develop local policies in the face of federal inaction. Lessons learned are presented.

Study groups formed around the role of immigrants in the local economy, the paths to legal status for workers and their families, including myths and truths about immigration and immigration law, the local resources already existing for new immigrants and the possibilities for social services to be even more effective. This politically conservative, religiously devoted and highly entrepreneurial country should come together and give hope for the possibility of comprehensive immigration reform, and the ability of local communities to integrate new immigrants as valued members.

Keywords: immigration law, immigrant communities, immigrant labor

Introduction

Located in Northwestern Iowa on the South Dakota border, Sioux County is very prosperous and conservative. Its median income is higher than that of the state of Iowa, while its cost of living is lower. It has a higher proportion of registered Republicans than any other county in the U.S. As of 2011, according to Wikipedia, 80% of Sioux County residents were descendants of Dutch immigrants, primarily from the Dutch Reform tradition, with many branches of that church and its colleges. Northwestern College affiliated with the Reformed Church in America, the North American branch of the Dutch Reformed Church. Dordt College affiliated with the Christian Reformed Church, an even more Calvinist offshoot of the Dutch Reformed Church. That ethnic solidarity is built upon its work ethic and communal cooperation to foster strong entrepreneurs, strong families, and educated youth. Faith is an important component of the county's cultural capital.

Sioux County's population increased 6.7% to 33,700 between 2000 and 2010, in part through the immigration of workers to staff the major livestock industries in the county, including hogs, dairy, laying hens, fed cattle, and sheep. A number of other manufacturers in the county had employment increases, although manufacturing employment fell in most of Iowa after the turn of the 21st century.

While families in Sioux County are larger than the Iowa average, a large number of the county's population of young people seek higher education after high school. The kind of manual labor involved with large-scale animal operations is not attractive to Sioux County natives. Those who do complete their college education tend not to return to the county. Unemployment in Sioux County was less than 3% in 2008 and only 3.9% in 2012, according to the economic data of the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. Persons below the poverty level made up 6.4% of the population, well below the 11.6% of the Iowa population so classified.

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, 8.9% of the population is Hispanic. The number and proportion of Hispanics increased between 2000 and 2010, as

both farm and non-farm employment increased with the expansion of dairies and hog-confined feeding operations. These jobs are overwhelming, require little skill, and are paid a low-wage.

For the new immigrants, Sioux County is not generally their first residence in the U.S. They learn of employment opportunities through networks from their hometowns in Mexico, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador, or from networks formed in California, Minnesota or Washington. The agricultural businesses and the local schools value the new immigrants as good, reliable workers and contributors to a thriving school system. However, not everyone in the community was as welcoming.

Employers in Sioux County, Iowa suddenly became aware that their Latino workers were not coming to work in the last months of 2007. For Sioux County meat processors, dairy producers, beef producers, and swine producers, poultry producers, no workers meant no production and no income.

The local sheriff's department had started to stop vehicles driven by immigrants on their way to work. Cell phones are a major form communication among immigrants, and once one immigrant worker was stopped, other workers were notified by phone calls from their colleagues and did not even attempt to go to work. Immigrant families permanently left the area out of fear.

Others in the community were concerned because of the broken families that resulted when a parent was deported. Many of the immigrant households had mixed immigration status. Some immigrant households had regularized immigration status, some were in the process of regularization, and some members were without a path to regularization. Thus, the business owners and school and medical community representatives got together, with the help of Cooperative Extension, and asked for a meeting with the Sioux County Board of Supervisor to combat what they perceived as racial harassment. They prepared carefully for the meeting to make the following points:

1. They are a group of concerned citizens who want what is best for the county.

2. Immigration is a problem that should be dealt with at the Federal level.
3. Immigrants work in many capacities in Sioux County, and thus we are all affected by the county-based immigration enforcement.
4. Immigrants play a large role in our county's economic prosperity
5. Immigrant families are being broken up.
6. There is a need to work together to deal with this issue locally.

Approximately 100 people attended the meeting on February 26, 2008. To the group's surprise, the county sheriff and the county attorney were there. All agreed that something needed to be done at the local level. From that meeting, a planning committee was established with representatives from the Board of Supervisors, Iowa State University Extension, Social Services, and the president of CASA. The group met regularly from March through May and then launched a focus group discussion series on immigration issues in order to provide a venue for community and business leaders to learn, share information, and communicate candidly with each other in a safe environment. As a result of the discussion series, community and business leaders would come up with specific actions to take, regarding local citizens. However, the wariness of employers began to match those of their employees when Immigration and Customs Enforcement appeared in the workplace of one of the members on the panel, explaining the value of immigrants for his business.

The focus group's series of discussions were determined to look at immigration topics from multiple perspectives, looking at how Sioux County is affected by immigration. Based on this, they would make recommendations to the county supervisors for addressing immigration locally. Nineteen local leaders and two facilitators met from mid-June through mid-September to learn all they could about the issue. They dealt with the myths about immigrants and uncovered their truths. They learned about the huge complexities of immigration laws, as well as the limits of current immigration laws, to respond to the needs of Sioux County because of the unskilled

workers entrance limit. The group was dismayed to learn that there is no practical way for immigrants seeking unskilled labor positions in Sioux County to do so legally.

They found that fear kept parents from bringing their immigrant children for early and preventative treatment for illnesses. Disruptions caused by raids or the deportation of a parent made it difficult to have classroom continuity as well. Teachers and counselors were also concerned that students not born in the U.S. were not eligible for financial assistance to attend college, not able to legally work to pay for college, and cannot obtain a drivers license, which makes a job and college attendance nearly impossible.

The discussions with the focus group and county-level law enforcement were particularly illuminating. Lack of current documentation makes immigrants particularly eager to avoid law enforcement who had been taking lack of documentation as a reason for arrest and notification of Federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement, resulting in deportation.

The public forum discussing the economic impact of immigrants on Sioux County included an egg production manager, a dairy manager, the local economic development director, a construction company owner and a local retail business manager. Pointing to the positive economic position of Sioux County in terms of business and population growth and the low local unemployment rate, they explained why they needed immigrant labor to fill their less skilled positions. They found Hispanic workers dependable, hardworking, pleasant, and genuinely grateful for a chance to work. Rather than taking away jobs from the local labor force, they are filling the need for low-skilled labor.

While the group represented a wide diversity of opinions about immigration, they agreed on the lessons they had learned from the process.

- The immigration population in Northwest Iowa continues to grow
- The residents of Sioux County value all people
- Immigrants have solid rural family values, a

- strong work ethic and respect for authority
- Immigrants are addressing workforce needs of the county
- Immigrants have been good for our communities.

Based on this, they came up with three action steps:

1. Hold politicians accountable for practical solutions
2. Develop a media campaign that will provide the public with thoughtful consideration of issues regarding our immigrant population
3. Provide learning opportunities for the public regarding immigration and its impact on our communities

Local organizations are now engaged in providing learning opportunities for the community through church and civic organizations and channeling those findings into appropriate local media. While not all politicians in the area are willing to move from a radical to a practical approach to immigration, they are in contact with their Federal Congressional delegation.

While acknowledging the need for comprehensive immigration reform, instead of waiting passively for Federal action or moving to implement punitive programs towards undocumented immigrants and their employers, organizations within the community determined to do what they could locally. Anne Junod conducted research on two active organizations seeking to increase economic security and social inclusion for all in Sioux County.

CASA Sioux County

CASA Sioux County is an all-volunteer, nonprofit organization, working to meet the immediate needs of the county's immigrant residents and cultivate community support by sponsoring education and outreach initiatives and engaging community leadership. Founded in 1998, the mission of CASA Sioux County is "to justly assist, serve and advocate for people of all races, creeds, and cultures

by building bridges that strengthen the whole person, family, and community" (CASA Sioux County, 2012).

CASA organizes its work into the following program areas:

- English as a Second Language (ESL) Classes
- Resource referrals: Food Pantries, Community Meals, Housing
- Legal Clinic sponsorship
- Transportation
- Deportation Rapid Response
- Church/Faith Outreach
- Community Education

CASA provides extensive resources to Sioux County immigrants and area advocacy and faith groups working with area immigrant communities. Resources include listings of area food pantries (see Figure 1.3, CASA Sioux County Food Pantry Listing), free community meals, housing opportunities and referrals, and other ESL classes in addition to those provided by CASA members.

Further, CASA offers resources for immigrant residents to know their rights and advocate on behalf of themselves, including: 1) G28 Form instructions; 2) a listing of area immigration attorneys; 3) a printable "Know Your Rights" card in English and a 4) pamphlet to help residents avoid immigration scams. CASA partners with area and state groups, including Love, Inc., Mid-Sioux Opportunity, the Latina Health Coalition and Welcoming Iowa (part of the nationwide group "Welcoming America") to ensure seamless service provision and ample community education opportunities.

CASA takes action, working with groups on legal housing, communication, websites, community education, Church Outreach and the recently formed Deportation Rapid Response.

CASA Sioux County members recognize that without regional government and law enforcement support, documented and undocumented immigrants, as well as native-born residents in Sioux County, will continue to face significant challenges in their mutual integration.

CASA Sioux County is a relatively diverse organization, with retirees and college students, Whites, American Indians and Hispanics/Latinos, priests, nurses and stay-at-home parents, all working together for shared goals. It is clear for most CASA members that their actions and attitudes towards their immigrant neighbors are informed primarily by their respective faith traditions. Diverse in their political views, all people that were interviewed agreed that “welcoming the stranger” is a Biblical mandate. Their approaches to the greater Sioux County community are reflective of this ethos when applicable, but they also leverage practical, economic and social defenses for the need to welcome, foster relationships with, and to support immigrants, in Sioux County.

The Sioux County 100

The Sioux County 100 is a new organization formed in the spring of 2012 following an 8-week community educational workshop at the American Reformed Church, in Orange City, Iowa. The Christian perspectives on immigration in Northwest Iowa drew over 300 Sioux County and area residents who engaged in discussion, heard stories from Sioux County immigrants, panelists from various area industries, clergy, communities and government agencies about immigration challenges, best practices, opportunities, and theological considerations.

Following the culmination of the series, a small body of Sioux County residents expressed their desire to do more. A group of 10 residents formed The Sioux County 100 by carefully crafting a petition for area dissemination that calls for immigration reform at the federal level as well as humane and welcoming policy and social changes at the local and regional levels (Our Iowa Neighbors, 2012). The petition, titled “Fixing Our Broken Immigration System: A Proposal from the Sioux County 100,” has three primary goals, both pragmatic and pluralistic in their approaches:

4. *To Protect Families and Children:* Reform immigration law to be more “family friendly,” enabling immigrant families to stay together or reunite,

and enabling immigrant families to flourish.

5. *To Grow Small Town Economies:* Expand legal avenues for workers to enter our country and work in a safe and legal manner with their rights and due process fully protected, and for workers who are already contributing to our economy through employment to continue to work while applying for legal status that reflects their contribution to our communities.
6. *To Practice Smart Law Enforcement:* Implement smart immigration law enforcement initiatives consistent with maintaining human dignity and respect that includes fostering positive relationships with all local residents while deterring and punishing criminal activity” (2012).

It is clear that Sioux County is not “finished” with its efforts to create an immigrant-welcoming community. He estimates that approximately one-third of residents would fall in the “pluralist” category, which is most individuals with attitudes of welcoming immigrants coming from the county’s vast faith communities (Flora, et al 2000). Another third of Sioux County residents are “pragmatists,” who recognize the importance of immigrants in supporting the county’s rich agricultural and manufacturing industries and support common-sense reforms. “Legalists,” Heie suggests, “include those who think “we should send them back” (Heie, 2012), comprised primarily of community members with the deepest roots in Dutch American culture, with the majority coming from elderly populations who are fearful of change and difference, more than hateful, and are motivated primarily by these fears. By engaging “all three categories” through community-wide discussions of this petition, in particular and the work of organizations like The Sioux County 100 and CASA Sioux County in general, the different groups “can talk to one another.” Personal relationships and respectful conversations, to Heie, play the primary role in affecting social change.

Long-term residents partner with their immigrant neighbors in county and region-wide advocacy and direct service efforts, focusing on commonalities in ideology rather than differences, and working

directly with elected officials and county law enforcement, cross-institutional and organizational networks are growing. As Heie notes, positive changes in Sioux County have come from individuals working together in community-based, collaborative efforts. “It’s not emerging top down – it’s not because the city council does anything to make it happen, or even church bodies as institutions, or the mayor – it’s bubbling up from below,” (Heie, 2012).

Conclusion

Sioux County is not “finished”. Immigration is an ongoing process and these two select organizations cannot shoulder the burden of creating a welcoming Sioux County alone. The breaking up of families, restrictions on working visas, and limited pathways for legal migration are issues that must be addressed at the federal, and where appropriate, state levels.

However, CASA Sioux County and The Sioux County 100 are not resting idly, waiting for such reforms. While different in their missions and scope of work, the groups’ members are partners in addressing advocacy and policy-level issues as well as immediate, tangible needs, all while fostering broader community education and inclusivity. CASA Sioux County and The Sioux County 100 are reframing the narrative of immigration away from partisan politics towards faith, family and community prosperity, both economically and socially. In this way, the organizations cultivate relationships with members across the legalist/pluralist spectrum, focusing on values that the majority of Sioux County residents share. Given the outpouring of public support for The Sioux County 100 petition, and CASA Sioux County initiatives, this relational focus appears to be working.

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