

## Strong Cities Network – Member Case Study

### Title

Natural Helpers Program

### Location

City: Aurora

State: Colorado

Country: United States

### Duration and background

Navigating a new system can be a challenging task for new local residents. Community members seek many different types of help needed to adapt to life in Aurora, ranging from finding a medical doctor and child care resources to job opportunities and enrolling children into school.

This initiative is borne of a recognition that the local community – including newer residents and recent immigrant groups – is well served by a number of citizens who are instinctively leaders in their community, and are a natural port of call to whom people turn for help, advice and resources. On a voluntary basis, members of the local community offer their time, knowledge and support to help fellow citizens, immigrants and refugees in the process of integration into receiving communities.

Launched in December 2015, the *Aurora Natural Helpers Program* is an innovative project that trains these natural helpers and local volunteers to enable them to better help newcomers and link them to programmes, resources and services in the community.

### Goals and objectives

The overall goal of the programme is to develop a network of individual, person-to-person, peer support services that will help immigrant newcomers to more effectively access existing community resources and work with community social service organizations.

It aims at providing help to newcomers in navigating day-to-day life in their new home, and also aims at establishing a network and contact between newcomers and the city's services. This not only integrates newcomers into existing municipal structures, but also increases knowledge on existing issues and potential areas of concern.

### Target Groups

People who take part in the Natural Helpers Program are individuals who have a history of being a person to whom community members turn to for help, serving members of an immigrant or refugee community in Aurora that struggles to meet basic needs. They are knowledgeable about their community's activities and ideally know many of its members. This often includes frontline workers in informal positions. Large importance is further placed on bi-lingual skills and the ability to function well in two languages.

## Overall strategy and activities

The programme builds on strong levels of trust which already exist between ‘natural helpers’ and their communities. It is not a programme aimed at professionals, but on enabling volunteers to fulfil their informal roles more effectively.

Phase 1: People selected for the Natural Helpers Program (around 20 per term) commit to an 18-hour training programme, which provides them with the information on resources and tools necessary to be able to help the immigrant and refugee community more effectively. The programme concludes with an inauguration with buy-in and attendance from local leaders.

Phase 2: After completing the training programme, individuals continue working with the Welcome Center. Natural Helpers have to report back to a Programme Manager at the Welcome Center on whom they are engaging with, keeping track of issues and individuals, and ensuring concerns can be raised if something is not right. This includes monthly meetings with different communities and, where necessary, involves cooperation with the local police (Aurora Police Department has assigned an Officer to liaise with the Programme Manager on police related issues and potential issues of concern).

Phase 3: Based on last year’s programme cycle, there are currently plans for a new “train the trainers” phase, where people who already underwent the programme will be equipped to train the next round of Natural Helpers.

## Partners

The Natural Helpers Program is a collaboration between the Office of International and Immigrant Affairs, local law enforcement and the local non-profit [Aurora Welcome Center](#), which offers services for different members of the local immigrant community. Although funded and overseen by the City of Aurora, city officials are not part of the delivery of the program.

## Outcomes and evaluation

The programme has so far trained 60 volunteers from across 39 different countries.

Natural helpers have not only assisted new local residents with access to information and resources, but have also improved the municipality’s awareness of underlying vulnerabilities and areas of concern. High level police buy-in has further ensured swift action where it was necessary, which amongst other things has led to the break-up of a drug and trafficking ring.

The training programme undergoes consistent review and expansion to be able to address emerging challenges and concerns in a timely fashion. The next round of training will incorporate an additional focus on refugee children and the specific vulnerabilities which they may have.

## Lessons learned

The main lesson from the first round of the Natural Helpers Program was the realisation that the City administration does not have to be the main face of a programme of this kind, and that in fact too much official involvement might be hindering its success. To address this, the city’s Welcome Center was tasked with taking charge of the overall running of the programme, which greatly improved buy-in from the local immigrant and refugee communities.

## **Further information**

For further information on Aurora's Natural Helpers Program visit

[www.aurorawelcome.org/natural-helpers](http://www.aurorawelcome.org/natural-helpers)

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