

U.S. cities look at NYC immigration model

- No specifics come out of Queens tour but 'diversity is refreshing'



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by Josey Bartlett, Editor

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Representatives from 23 cities visited Jackson Heights to check out the business improvement district and a busy immigrant community.

Mayor Bloomberg thinks other United States cities should work with immigrant communities like New York does.

Last week the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs released Blueprints for Immigrant Integration that included policies on language access, police and community engagement, economic development and entrepreneurship, civic engagement, and citizenship —and “served as detailed guides to support the replication of New York City models.”

Last Thursday, as part of the launch, representatives of 23 different cities were shown the Borough of Queens. The group started in Long Island City at Newcomers High School, a school for recent immigrants; then went to 82nd Street and Roosevelt Avenue, where a business improvement district is being expanded; then Elmhurst Hospital Center, and ended in Flushing.

Some of those on the tour through the city's most diverse borough, including neighborhoods where English is not the first spoken language, said they won't be going home with any specific plan for their immigrant populations, but seeing New York City firsthand has them thinking more about the issues than before.

“I was very impressed by the high school,” said Bob Lind, business finance director for the City of Minneapolis Community Planning and Economic Development Department. Minneapolis, which has the nation's biggest Somali population, enlists charter schools to teach new immigrants and focus on English as a Second Language programs.

Lind says that model works for them, but could be supplemented.

“I'm taking home the flavor and the attitude,” said Napoleon Bell, spokesman for the Columbus, Ohio mayor's office. “The diversity is really refreshing.”

Columbus has the United States' second largest Somali populations and in some neighborhoods about 100 different languages, Bell said. The city is working on educating residents about the ways the new immigrants help the city.

“Immigrant communities are one of the reasons we are making it through the recession,” Bell said. “It's a new tax base and more small businesses.”

The blueprints come on the heels of increased national talks about immigration and the approval of deferred deportation for young illegal immigrant students last year.

New York has also taken some stances recently on immigration issues. Two bills signed on March 18 continue to deny the fingerprints of those who have committed small crimes including most misdemeanors to Immigration and Customs Enforcement, which goes against the federal Secure Communities program. The new laws differ from the original by not allowing ICE to detain residents with pending charges for a minor crime. The bills also protect illegal immigrants who are charged with prostitution, patronizing a prostitute or those who were convicted of a felony as a minor.

“As we continue to make the case for federal immigration reform, cities can’t wait for Washington to take action,” Bloomberg said in a release. “That’s why it’s crucial that cities come together to share ideas and help each other assess needs, find ways to address them and provide concrete examples of policies that have been successful.”