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New Study Urges Urban Leaders to Focus on “Portal Neighborhoods” to Aid Integration, Opportunity

CHICAGO – With a projected population increase of 130 million over the next four decades, largely fueled by immigration, urban leaders had better pay attention to a newly classified neighborhood, “Portal Neighborhoods,” as an important tool for integration and economic opportunity, according to a newly released report.

“Strengthening Portal Neighborhoods,” released today by CEOs for Cities with support from Bank of America, identifies these neighborhoods as key to successfully integrating immigrants into the economic and social mainstream in America. It urges urban leaders to develop a new set of policies and strategies that take into account the purpose and functions of these neighborhoods, which continue to grow in importance as the immigrant population swells.

“These are the areas in cities and suburbs that consistently see an inflow of immigrants and are the places where they begin to learn the language, get their first jobs, go to school and open their first bank accounts,” said Paul C. Brophy, co-author of the study. “For most immigrants, they are temporary places that help them get on their feet. Because of their transient nature and their growing importance, community leaders need to view their portal neighborhoods as opportunity areas, focusing on the positive contribution these places make to their cities and suburbs, instead of the negatives.”

To ignore Portal Neighborhoods or their special circumstances can result in problems for the cities and suburbs where they are located.

“It can mean that immigrants get off to a poor start as they enter the United States, exacerbating the challenge to newcomers and their ability to integrate into American society,” Brophy said. “Second, the neighborhoods themselves can become places that breed persistent poverty rather than upward mobility for their populations. Helping Portal Neighborhoods be the best immigrant integrators possible helps both the immigrants and the places themselves become vital parts of a city.”

“No matter what side of the immigration debate you are on, the fact remains that immigration is fueling growth in our cities, and it can’t be ignored,” said Carol Coletta, president and CEO of CEOs for Cities. “Urban leaders have an opportunity to craft local government and civic policy that is more innovative and intentional, which can be tremendously beneficial to their communities.”

Examples of Portal Neighborhoods include West Lake in Los Angeles (Central Americans), Chinatown in New York City, Ironbound in Newark (Brazilians) and many other urban and inner-suburban neighborhoods that house a mix of immigrants. Once established, immigrants are likely to move to neighborhoods with more long-term residents, and new arrivals take their place.

Unlike traditional neighborhoods, Portal Neighborhoods serve a different function and should be measured for success in different ways.

For instance, neighborhood success is often measured by poverty rates. But in Portal Neighborhoods, poverty rates tend to stay at constant levels as they are temporary places for new immigrants. A better measure, Brophy says, is to track upward mobility – the number of people who leave the neighborhood, get jobs, buy homes and contribute to the economy.

Other recommendations of “Strengthening Portal Neighborhoods” include:

- Showcase the positive contributions these neighborhoods make to the communities where they are located. In addition to tremendous buying power, immigrant populations bring unique cultural experiences to cities that can be leveraged in this age of growing homogeneity and sameness. Distinctiveness is an asset that urban leaders should build upon.
- Collaborate for success. Cash-strapped governments cannot continue to do it all. Urban leaders from across sectors should work to find new ways for service providers to collaborate and develop new partnerships between private and public sectors. Some examples include the Chicago Community Trust and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation’s immigration initiatives and Bank of America’s financial literacy program.
- Adapt neighborhood development approaches so that they are more in line with the purpose of these neighborhoods – creating opportunities for upward mobility for newly arrived immigrants. Some detailed approaches include: changing housing policy to better reflect the culture of the immigrant population (more flexibility regarding overcrowding, long-term affordability, consumer protection for renters and home ownership counseling); strengthening police relations (assurances that immigrants

can report crimes and problems without fear of deportation); fostering economic development (leveraging immigrant entrepreneurship tendencies, using ethnic-centered marketing to drive visitors and their wallets to these areas).

Additionally, more research of best practices and better tools for networking among community development practitioners across the country is needed, said Brophy.

Background

“Strengthening Portal Neighborhoods” is the third part in a trilogy of papers from the CEOs for Cities project, *Developing Strategies for U.S. Portal Neighborhoods*. The first part is a briefing paper that acted as a springboard for discussions at the national convening of experts on neighborhood development and immigrant issues in Miami, September 26-27, 2006, co-sponsored by Bank of America. The briefing paper, which takes an in-depth look at immigration patterns and immigration integration programs, and the second paper, a summary of the national convening, can be found at www.ceosforcities.org/rethink/research.

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