**The “Tapestry Project”**

**Building a strong community one thread at a time**

**Mankato, Minn.**

**Mankato’s diverse population growth**

Mankato, Minnesota is a growing regional center in southern Minnesota. A city on the Minnesota River with a council-manager form of government, it has a population of 39,624 and a trade population of more than 300,000 people. Mankato is ranked by Forbes as 11th in the nation as one of the best small places for business and 15th as one of the best small cities to raise a family. Mankato has also been recognized multiple times as one of the nation’s top 100 best places for youth.

As Mankato continues to grow, so does its diverse population. During the late 1990s, the city experienced an influx of refugees. By the early 2000s, there was a notable increase in city service needs for the community, specifically within the diverse population. An informal gap analysis was done and new areas of diverse community needs were identified:

* communication;
* outreach;
* responsiveness;
* and inclusion of diverse groups within the existing community.

As part of the analysis, it was learned that many of these city service calls resulted from cultural differences. Tasks most citizens find to be basic, such as how to use a front load washer and stove, how to put out a grease fire, where to shop for food and clothing, proper house cleaning techniques, how to manage a school system, when to call 911 and even learning how to say “hello” to neighbors presented unique challenges for the immigrant and refugee population.

To better meet needs of the diverse population, the city of Mankato engaged in a multiple jurisdiction collaborative partnership. Included in this partnership are private, medical, non-profit, local government, faith-based organizations and Mankato resident volunteers, also known as “community connectors,” working together with the goal of simple acts of kindness across all cultures. Through these collaborative efforts, the “Tapestry Project” was created.

**The “Tapestry Project”**

The “Tapestry Project” launched as a pilot program, a six-week mentorship course focused on topics and development areas that would benefit diverse community members. A program goal is to get to know 35 new neighbors/residents (from three different refugee countries) per class and help them acclimate into their new homeland. First areas of focus included:

* tenant/landlord relations;
* basic public safety needs (such as when to call 911);
* and simplistic neighborhood relations.

After the first class graduated, the program was reviewed. The program was expanded to a seven-week course and additional development areas were added:

* integration into housing;
* political and social context of the whole community;
* city service highlights (featuring services aimed at improving quality of life—mass transit, park and recreation and city volunteer opportunities).

Project partners expected to see a reduction in police and fire calls, reduced damage to apartments and better relationships between neighbors, and they did. This resulted in fewer community resources needed to respond to service calls, such as kitchen fires or damaged apartments. Public safety staff who responded to service calls gained a better understanding of cultural issues, which helped them work with the diverse community. Neighbors also got to know and understand each other. What’s more, when the seven-week course ended, learning and relationship building continued, showing a powerful ripple effect the “Tapestry Project” had for both participants and partners.

**Ripple effect**

Participants gained educational tools to be active in sustainability and self-sufficiency. They share information with their communities over coffee, on the playground and at gatherings. In addition, participants have taken lessons learned to their households. Parents have learned how to establish healthy boundaries with their teenage children and how to work on discipline challenges with their children. Now, parents want their children to be a part of the program. Relationships continue to grow through neighborhood gatherings, such as the “Women’s Craft Collective,” which meets once a week to help build community and reduce isolation and depression in women.

Not only have the participants experienced positive impacts from the “Tapestry Project,” so have others. For example, public safety staff have acknowledged the program has helped them enhance work and engage the diverse community. Staff’s volunteer participation in “Tapestry Project” grew. Mankato resident volunteers, also known as “community connectors,” have made friends with new neighbors and learned they can make positive contributions and share with their faith-based and civic communities.

The “Tapestry Project’s” success has been seen by other communities and shared on an international level. Minnesota cities Eden Prairie and Faribault are interested in developing a similar program. Brazilian delegates traveled to Mankato to learn more about community governance and relationship building with schools, neighborhoods and immigrant programs, such as the “Tapestry Project.”

**Building a program**

Throughout the process of building, developing and growing the “Tapestry Project,” partners have discovered what works, what didn’t and ways to improve.

**Lessons learned**

* ***Identify community needs***—since each community, no matter its dynamics, has its own issues and needs, this type of program cannot be replicated with the exact same curriculum. While some opportunities and challenges may be similar, it’s key for a community to identify its own needs and issues. In addition, it’s important to connect with those who have a passion and interest in building this type of program.
* ***Gain full support***—for a successful program like the “Tapestry Project” to succeed, it must be fully supported by the entire government organization it serves. People involved must be empowered to make decisions to help strengthen involvement and commitment.
* ***Realize obstacles***—as with any program or opportunity, there are some obstacles that need to be overcome. The city of Mankatoand its partners learned that not enough interpreters were available, which impacts what participants are able to get out of each course session. Knowing the community’s diverse population and how to connect interpreters to the program can help ensure participants are able to get the needed information.

Another challenging area can be work schedules. For participants to be successful, it’s important they attend each session. By engaging with employers, employee schedules were adjusted so participants could attend.

**Program recommendations**

How to develop a successful “Tapestry Project:”

* Build strong partnerships with all community entities.
* Identify lease infractions if working with a property management company and then categorize topics based on infractions.
* Create a training curriculum and gather training materials to best fit community needs.
* Determine training date and location for the program (try to select a location within walking distance for participants).
* Personally invite residents by knocking on their doors with an interpreter or liaison to assist with communication.
* Invite volunteers, “community connectors,” from faith-based or civic organizations to participate.
* Hire or find interpreters because training is not helpful unless people can understand content.
* Due to liability, if people are in a private setting conduct background checks.
* Use release forms for photos (due to liability). Some cultures may not want photos taken.
* Create consistent ‘community tables,’ which provides an opportunity for participants to share and talk about their week with neighbors. Each meeting builds relationship and trust.
* Stay on time to help keep each meeting moving along. Offer prizes for those there before class starts.
* Include group exercises at each meeting to encourage more conversation among participants at tables rather than just listening to the guest speaker.
* Celebrate with a graduation potluck and have everyone bring their family and favorite dish. Food connects people positively.

There are many similarities among cultures even though there are some differences. People have the same dreams—jobs to support families, a place to call home, the chance to send children to college so they can succeed. By welcoming members of diverse populations and providing opportunities to learn and understand how to live in their new communities, city staff and other community members can help build a solid foundation for immigrants and refugees to navigate and experience quality of life their new home. The end result is a strong community…built one thread at a time.

For more information about the “Tapestry Project” and how to build a similar program, contact city of Mankato Assistant City Manager Tanya Ange at 507-387-8609 or tange@city.mankato.mn.us; or Commander Amy Vokal at 507-387-8780 or avokal@city.mankato.mn.us.