

Magdaleno M. Rose-Avila Response to Council Questions
Public Safety, Civil Rights & Technology Committee
Appointment Director of the Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs (OIRA)

Questions

1. What is your vision for the Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs?

I want it to become a well established and effective office that will represent Seattle as the city with best policies and practices regarding immigrants and refugees.

2. What are your major goals for the Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs over the next four years? How would you define a successful term as Director?

It is an interesting challenge to come into a small two person office and to realize the multiple expectations that others will have for this work. These expectations come not only from within the City but also from the community at large. I believe strongly in the core goals we have established for the Office and from them we will begin a process that will expand and improve our relationship with the immigrant and refugee community.

Office of Immigrant & Refugee Affairs Goals

- a. Ensure that immigrant and refugee communities have a voice in City government and that government officials are kept abreast of key and critical issues affecting this community.
- b. Improve City services and better engage immigrant and refugee communities.
- c. Define and achieve desired outcomes for City investments for immigrant and refugees in conjunction with community partners and City Departments.
- d. Advance the mission of the office in a manner consistent with the City's Race and Social Justice Initiative.

Defining Success

We will define success by setting long and short term benchmarks and targets for the office. Our aim will be focused on working with existing City services, initiatives, and programs thus improving access for our immigrant and refugee communities. Success will be measured by the impact we have made in integrating new residents into the city through their utilization of City resources and participation in decisions that affect them. While not all success is quantitative, there will also be a qualitative shift in the way our community stakeholders view the City and its efforts to deliver productive policies and programs that impact the immigrant and refugee communities.

Finally, City Departments will see the Office of Immigrant & Refugee Affairs as a resource. We will be able to give them insights to these various communities. And we will also help to build bridges that will assist in the Departments meeting their goals.

3. What do you see as the primary challenges for the Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs?

There are a couple of key issues facing us. One is how to expand or include more opportunities for these communities given the current budget situation and the fact that this is a two person office. We will also be challenged to predict or forecast the next year's numbers and countries of origin for the next waves of refugees and what their special needs might be.

Already there is a lot of work being done by various departments and we must find out all that is underway and how best to ensure that the immigrant and refugee communities know of these efforts and how best to participate. Also, we must examine what we can do to enhance the current efforts where possible within existing resources.

4. What do you see as the most critical emerging needs in Seattle's refugee and immigrant communities?

Several issues come immediately to the surface and those include employment and education. Both employment and education are important to the success of our new residents. Also today it is harder to get free legal services and advice given that many programs that provide services have seen their budgets cut and staff levels diminished over the recent years. Over the years the condition of our economy adversely affects these most vulnerable communities and is a major factor. Compounding this is the diminishing funding borne by many of the service providers amidst a backdrop of endless threats to the safety net itself.

Housing while not emerging is one of the constant critical issues for these communities. In addition, concerns in public safety, criminal justice and civil rights remain constant issues facing these communities.

5. Tell us about your background and what past experiences you have had that you see as most relevant and useful to bring to this position?

I became involved in immigrant rights work in 1974 through an organization in California called Casa. Since then my work with United Farmworkers of America, Amnesty International, Homies Unidos, Peace Corps and the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project all helped to give me the background and understanding of this work and its challenges. Over the many years, I have continued to be engaged in this issue at many levels. Immigrant rights work has been a constant part of my life for almost four decades.

6. What would you say has been the biggest challenge you have faced in your career? What did you learn from that experience?

In 1974 when I became a convert to the immigrant rights movement, I soon discovered that most civil rights, human rights, non profits, foundations and labor organizations did not embrace this as a legitimate movement.

Most of us at that time made a concerted effort to educate ourselves better about the politics of immigration and refugees and with this knowledge began to change the minds and hearts of many. This was not an easy process and in the beginning we got more no's than yes's. Cesar Chavez, the historic farm worker leader, always reminded us that we might get 9 no's out of ten encounters and that we should concentrate on those who said yes and move forward with them and that eventually we would have enough support to return and change many of the no's into supporters. The work was done strategically and as part of a long term strategy to develop core groups of supporters beyond the natural allies. It was not easy but we knew we were on the right side of justice. We continued to tell the truth and to build a coalition of support in different parts of the community.

Now today you find many organizations that embrace this issue as part of their daily work and we are beginning to make serious progress. This history and experience will be of benefit to our work as we move to expand the work and efforts of this office on behalf of the city, consistent with the Race & Social Justice Initiative and in helping the broader community embrace the contributions of our City's immigrant and refugee communities.

7. How do you plan to ensure Councilmembers and their staff remain informed about the work of the Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs in order to make policy and budget decisions?

I plan to provide Councilmembers and their staff with information of key and critical issues as they arise. I will also provide regular updates on work plan progress. We also hope to develop social media sites where all can go and obtain an update of the most recent information and activities of this office.

We will conduct an analysis of existing programs and resources currently being provided by the City and will report back to you with our findings. This report will be the foundation for moving forward. We can find ways to expand and improve existing efforts.

8. How do you see the role of the Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs in the community? How do you envision the Office engaging the public?

The Commission will be one of the vehicles we engage to reach out to the communities. Also, we plan to be engaged with the key coalitions that work on these issues as well as the key organizations and leaders. In the process, we will have developed a master list of all the key organizations and individuals with whom we should be engaged.

We also hope to engage other communities that may not have been natural allies in this work and will build bridges of mutual concern with them. Our efforts should be to reach out to as many potential partners and allies as possible.

The natural outreach and communication that is used by various departments will also be used to disseminate our information as well as obtaining needed feedback. With limited resources, it will be critical to learn more about and leverage existing initiatives that have similar goals such as the Race & Social Justice Initiative, Inclusive Outreach & Public Engagement, Public Outreach & Engagement Liaisons, and other Mayoral priorities.

9. As a small office with the responsibility of facilitating and coordinating work across many City departments related to issues impacting refugees and immigrants, how do you envision being effective and what strategies would you use to be successful in achieving this objective?

First it will be important that both the City and immigrant and refugee communities have realistic expectations about what can be done by such a small office.

It will be important that we establish in the near future an Interdepartmental Team (IDT) for our work to further our work plan. Our participation in other such working groups i.e. the Inclusive Outreach and Public Engagement Initiative (IOPE) would also benefit our mandate. Through these coordinated efforts we hope to take advantage of programs and staff who are already operating in areas of interest to our office. We hope to leverage the good efforts and cooperation of others to help us to have broader reach.

We also hope to use the best ideas of key stake holders within all city government and the other stakeholders in the community to bring the best thinking into our discussions.

It is also important for this office to recruit volunteers and interns that would support our work.

10. In your opinion, how can the City be more effective at engaging and being more inclusive of immigrants and refugee communities in developing policies and decision-making?

I think the City needs to become more visible in these communities, to make them aware that they are there to serve and engage with them. Creating policies that secure the safety of immigrants and guarantee better public services will solidify a trust between these communities and the City.

It would be important that we fully develop the visibility and the work of the OIR Commission so that they can become much more visible and affective in their work.

We also will establish a web page for us as well as a Facebook page and the other ethnic media that we can employ

In the future we envision developing special working groups on key issues with other departments to get their input on programs and policies.

This unique office will have to invest, on an ongoing basis, in public outreach and education with the many immigrant and refugee organizations and their supporters. Communication will be a major effort that will need to be made to be more inclusive with all the stakeholders.