

CITY OF TACOMA

COMMISSION ON IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE AFFAIRS

Report Period: April 2018 - February 2020

Presented to the City Council's Committee on Community Vitality and Safety

February 27, 2020

REPORT SUMMARY AND KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Commission on Immigrant and Refugee Affairs (CIRA) was seated in 2018 to help make Tacoma a city that is welcoming and inclusive of immigrants and refugees. After two years, this Commission has established the basic structures of an advisory body with subcommittees focusing on *Community Engagement*, *Community Safety*, *Governance*, *Language Access*, and *the NW Detention Center*.

CIRA has laid the foundations for increased civic engagement from the immigrant and refugee community, established rules for CIRA's membership and participation, and highlighted the values and positions that could be beneficial to Tacoma's immigrant and refugee communities. The lessons we have learned from these two years are our most valuable contribution at this time. Our experiences and challenges working on behalf of Tacoma's immigrants and refugees, in partnership with the City of Tacoma, lead us to present the following Summary Recommendations:

1. The City of Tacoma should hire a full-time employee focused only on promoting immigrant and refugee affairs, in line with the pillars of the City's Equity and Empowerment Framework. Immigrant and refugee affairs should not be solely the responsibility of community members acting in a volunteer, advisory role.
2. Recognizing the City of Tacoma's numerous immigrant communities, the City of Tacoma should expand CIRA's membership to 12 commissioners and one alternate to create a body that is more reflective of the communities we serve.
3. The City of Tacoma can honor the cultural vibrancy of our immigrant communities. CIRA recommends implementing the Free Block Party program brought forth by the Community Safety subcommittee that will provide spaces for communities to freely express their cultural heritage for themselves and enhance community safety.
4. The City of Tacoma should commit to an expansion of the City's Immigrant Defense Fund to fulfill its commitment to the rights and well-being of all Tacoma residents.
5. The City of Tacoma should begin the process to establish a joint commission with Pierce County that includes direct participation by elected officials from each jurisdiction to ensure immigrant and refugee communities are involved in equitable decision-making and government is responsive to their input.

COMMISSION ACHIEVEMENTS

1. City Council passed the zero tolerance policy on separating families at the border with input and participation from CIRA.
2. CIRA members toured the Northwest Detention Center in 2018.
3. CIRA created a task force to respond to proposed changes to the “Public Charge” rule, receiving Council support to oppose the change.
4. CIRA continues to support the Pierce County Auditor’s efforts to increase civic engagement by reducing barriers to participate in the Census and in elections.
5. CIRA has guided public entities to ensure more equitable service delivery. For example, CIRA pushed Tacoma Public Utilities to recognize individual tax ID numbers as eligible for benefits.
6. Along with King County and Seattle Immigrant and Refugee Affairs Commissions, CIRA co-organized a day-long session on May 4, 2019, to discuss opportunities for regional collaboration.
7. CIRA held annual day-long retreats in 2018 and 2019. In 2019, the retreat was facilitated by CIRA members to define the Commission’s strategic direction.
8. Reached quorum at every monthly Commission meeting.

CHALLENGES

- CIRA members were appointed based on their connection to community and less on policy-making experience. However, CIRA members did not gain a solid understanding of City decision-making processes because of a superficial onboarding process. As a result, CIRA members often felt ill-equipped or not invited to provide substantive feedback on legislative topics. From the start, CIRA members feared being tokenized and treated in a ceremonial fashion rather than as work partners. That concern persists.
- CIRA’s ongoing challenges with receiving culturally appropriate and responsive support from City staff coincides with the lack of staff with backgrounds related to immigrant and refugee communities. That deficit directly contradicts the first aspiration of the City of Tacoma’s Equity and Empowerment Framework:

The City of Tacoma Workforce Reflects the Community it Serves

- The multilingual support for CIRA itself has been inconsistent and often inadequate. This challenge shows the City needs to consider more carefully input from the Commission on language access to design and ensure ***Equitable Service Delivery to Residents and Visitors***. CIRA’s input on language access is based on its members’ firsthand experiences.
- CIRA continues to encounter numerous barriers to obtaining information regarding the NWDC and processes that affect detainee health, including City actions at the legislative level. This barrier extends to other topics and disempowers CIRA members and the communities we represent from two pillars of the Equity and Empowerment Framework.

CIRA is unable to **Support Human Rights and Opportunities for Everyone to Achieve their Full Potential** and shows the City's **Commitment to Equity in Policy Decision Making** remains unfulfilled for immigrant and refugee community members.

CIRA has five subcommittees focusing on: *Community Engagement, Community Safety, Governance, Language Access, and NW Detention Center*. Subcommittee-led achievements include:

Community Engagement Subcommittee Highlights

1. Took on an increasingly active role in planning Welcoming Week activities for 2018 and 2019 with City staff and community organizations.
2. Met with Tacoma City Mayor to discuss issues affecting the commission's work and opportunities for community engagement (Coffee with the Mayor event.)

Community Safety Subcommittee Highlights

1. Created a Free Block Parties proposal, developed over several months with input from the broader community.
2. Communicated via letter with and received partial information from Tacoma Police Department regarding immigration-related practices. While we are encouraged by the start of this process, our learnings indicate that TPD falls short of upholding a Welcoming City's values.

Governance Subcommittee Highlights

1. Established structures, including By-Laws, needed to insure CIRA is accountable to the values we seek to promote, in line with the City's Equity and Empowerment Framework.
2. Developed subcommittees to focus on key themes with specific workplans.
3. Identified processes and opportunities to advise City of Tacoma and City Council on more effective strategies to welcome immigrants and refugee communities.

Language Access Subcommittee Highlights

1. Participated in the 2019 WA State Coalition for Language Access (WASCLA) Summit to engage in conversations about language access efforts at the state level.
2. Met with City Public Affairs staff to work on a CIRA communication plan and to evaluate available resources to serve Tacoma communities in their languages of preference.
3. Engaged in ongoing work on a Language Access Policy document to advise City practices on the procurement of equitable language access services.

NW Detention Center (NWDC) Subcommittee Highlights

1. Supported community fundraising events and messaging campaigns aimed at improving conditions for immigrant detainees and ending detention practices in Tacoma.
 2. Established a position to shut down the facility, while improving the condition of detainees. CIRA feels a movement is building and it appears the City, CIRA, and immigrant rights advocates, are heading in the same direction.
 3. Engaged with stakeholders such as the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department, federal government officials, rights advocates, and legislators to improve the food and health conditions for detainees at the NWDC.
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Current Commissioners

- Jason Gamboa
- Perla Gamboa (Vice Chair)
- Jefferson Mok (Chair)
- Hieu Nguyen
- Diana Parra (former Vice Chair)
- Saiyare Refaei
- Alma Vargas
- Clara Zamalloa
- (vacant)
- (vacant)
- Alternate (vacant)

Previous Commissioners

- Vaelupemaua Anitema – Removed from Commission due to repeated absences
- Silong Chuun - Resigned
- George Conzuelo – Completed term
- Eunice Kalembo – Asked to resign
- Maria Ramos – Moved away from Tacoma