

>>> THE COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

for the National Capital Region

YOUTH LEADERSHIP

This issue brief is part of a series of publications examining major issues affecting immigrants and communities of color in the Washington, DC metropolitan region. It has been prepared for public officials, grant-makers, business leaders, community, neighborhood, and school activists, and individuals who are seeking ways to build community and improve the quality of life in the metropolitan Washington region.

Youth Leadership: Engaging Immigrant Youth for Social Change is sponsored by the Community Foundation for the National Capital Region through the work of the Washington Area Partnership for Immigrants. Through the Partnership, the Foundation invests in community efforts that address critical issues impacting immigrant families, including access to quality education for children, language acquisition and workforce development, and the protection of the rights of laborers. This brief focuses on immigrant youth and opportunities to support their ability to assume significant roles in our civic life.

The Community Foundation for the National Capital Region facilitates individual, family, and organizational giving at all levels to create a permanent source of philanthropic capital to improve the quality of life in the metropolitan Washington region. The Foundation connects its donors to organizations providing impactful programs; serves as a convener and catalyst on emerging issues; and provides sound financial management of assets. The Foundation plays a leadership role in helping to create change on critical issues pertaining to equity, access, and opportunity for our region's communities.

The Washington Area Partnership for Immigrants was established in 1998 to help immigrants obtain U.S. citizenship. This funding collaborative has developed into a strong leadership group of local philanthropic and government representatives that play an important role in the development of emerging immigrant leadership and in the protection of human rights.



ENGAGING IMMIGRANT YOUTH

>>> FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

>>> **Forward**

*by Terri Lee Freeman,
President of the Community
Foundation for the
National Capital Region*

We in the Washington metropolitan area are very fortunate to live in a region marked by prosperity and growth. All indicators predict continued growth, with economic and demographic changes fueled by a strong economy. This bright future presents both opportunities and challenges, inviting us to continue to build a community where all residents can contribute to, and benefit from, our collective prosperity. We believe that the region's best asset in its ability to respond to this invitation is the promise and leadership of our youth.

This report highlights opportunities to invest in our future by focusing on the youth of our immigrant community. The role immigrants play in supporting continued growth is formidable. Data show that one of every five children in our country is currently foreign born and more than 25 percent of legal immigrants who arrived in the Washington region in the 1990's were under 18.¹ In our region's most populated jurisdiction, Fairfax County, data indicate

that 34 percent of youth between the ages of 13–17 are the children of an immigrant parent. The potential contributions these children can make to our region is boundless.

The stunning diversity we see everyday in our region is reflected in these young people—"immigrant youth" encompasses vast differences in identities, affiliations, and interests. These differences can be seen between young people who have recently arrived in the U.S. and those who have years of experience here; between those with light skin and those with dark skin; or between Spanish-speakers from San Salvador and Korean-speakers from Seoul. Some young people come from immigrant families whose social and political experiences have left them fearful of engaging in the political process. Others come from immigrant families whose cultural history has left them with a deeply rooted sense of social responsibility and an appetite for activism.

Within this diversity, we find something loosely but meaningfully identifiable as a "1.5 Generation" of immigrant youth. These are both foreign-born youth and the children of recent immigrants, representing a growing seg-

ment of immigrants with significant life experience in our region. For these young people, bilingualism and biculturalism often impart unique and provocative political values, ones that present exciting possibilities for leadership in an increasingly complex global society. Supporting these youth through programs that bring their voices to the table is the critical role we must play to help youth from immigrant communities be leaders alongside other young people in building bridges to a new multicultural future.

Providing opportunities for these youth to thrive in our region is central to the mission of the Washington Area Partnership for Immigrants, a funding collaborative housed at the Community Foundation for the National Capital Region. Exploring these questions will provide invaluable insights and direction for funders and organizations in the metropolitan Washington region and across the nation. In answering these questions, the Community Foundation challenges philanthropic, nonprofit, and community leaders to make an enlightened choice to invest in, learn from, and follow the leadership of youth from immigrant communities.

“I see some of the strongest youth organizing going on where there is a strongly articulated focus on youth with an immigrant identity, understanding their role as culture and language brokers in the community.”

—Vera Miao, Funders Collaborative for Youth Organizing

>>> **Background and Research Methodology**

The study, *From Identity to Action*, builds and expands upon the findings of previous research, including a recent report by LISTEN, Inc. that examined youth engagement work taking place in the District of Columbia. This report seeks to complement the LISTEN research by providing insights into the particular dimensions of civic engagement among immigrant youth and by offering a regional perspective on this work. Within this context, we focus on two specific strategies that support the engagement of immigrant youth. The first, civic engagement, provides youth with the skills and strategies for identifying civic issues and engaging in advocacy and negotiation. The second, youth organizing, takes civic

engagement a step further by mobilizing youth to challenge social and political power structures through direct action and by working in alliances and coalitions.

This exploration of opportunities for civic engagement of youth in immigrant communities includes:

- Interviews with seven metropolitan Washington organizations working with youth from immigrant communities. The pool of groups interviewed reflects a sample of groups across geography, ethnicity, and program type.
- A focus group with staff from 15 metropolitan Washington youth organizations.
- A focus group with young people from across the metropolitan Washington region.

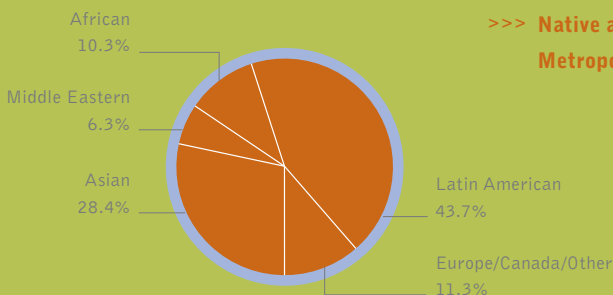
- Interviews with six youth organizing groups serving immigrant youth outside the metropolitan Washington area. This sample of groups was selected primarily based on regional and ethnic representation. Youth organizing groups were selected to provide insights into the work of groups with the most fully developed programs for youth-led social change.



The following seven findings represent common themes that emerged from the interviews and focus groups we conducted during our research. These themes reflect the opportunities and challenges facing groups inside metropolitan Washington, yet each theme was also echoed by the immigrant youth-serving organizations we interviewed from cities across the country.

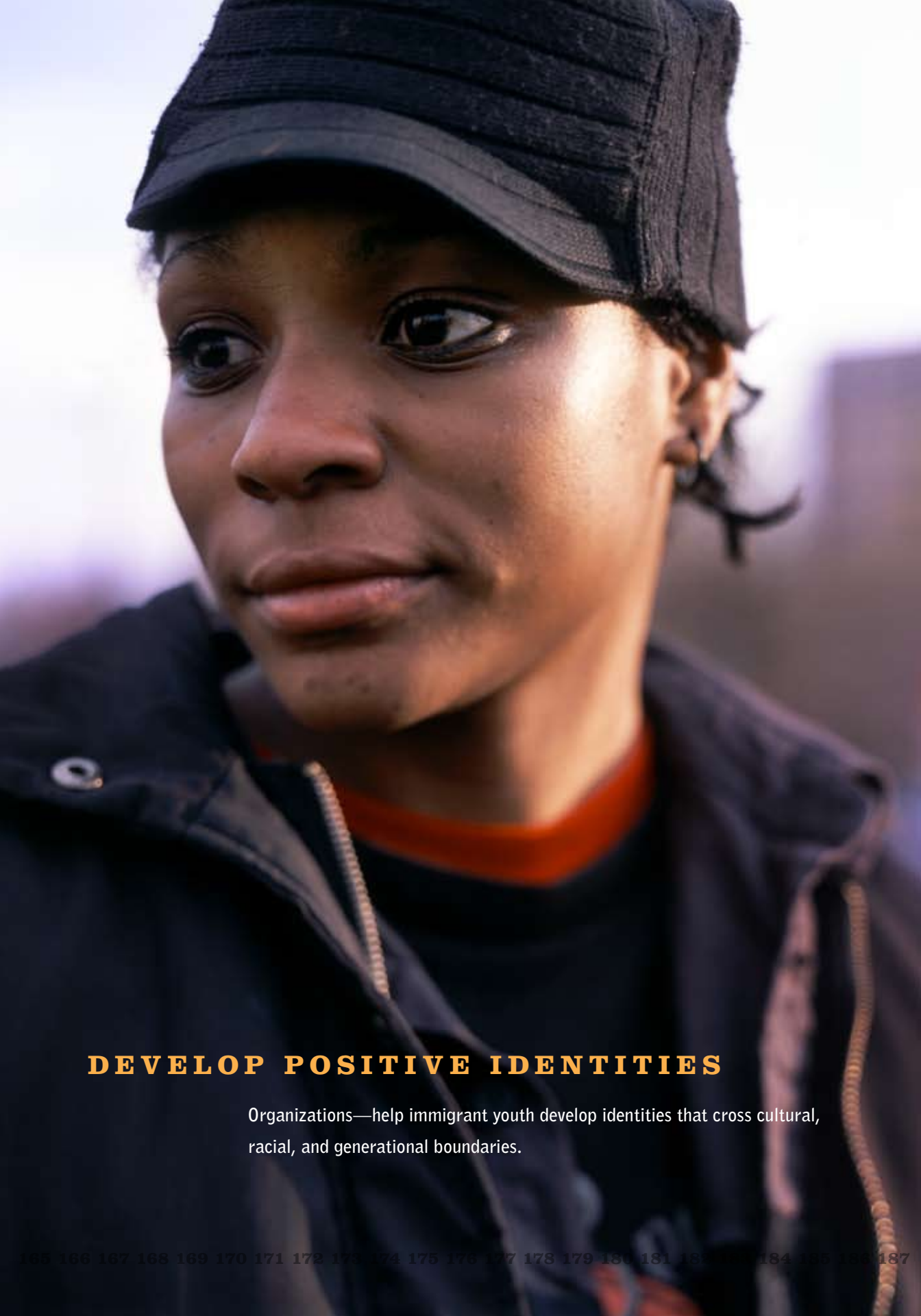
According to a study published by The Brookings Institution in 2004, roughly one in five metropolitan Washington residents are immigrants—half of whom have arrived since 1990. This stunning recent increase has prompted experts to describe Washington as an “emerging” immigrant gateway city—a designation that sets our region apart from cities such as Philadelphia, Chicago, New York, and Baltimore.

In addition to its emergent status, metropolitan Washington’s immigrant community is characterized by diversity. No one country of origin dominates among our region’s newcomers. Overall, 39 percent of metropolitan Washington’s immigrant community are from Latin America and the Caribbean, 36 percent are from Asia and the Middle East, 12 percent from Europe, and 11 percent from Africa.²



>>> **Native and Foreign-Born Immigrant Children
Metropolitan Washington—2000 Census**





DEVELOP POSITIVE IDENTITIES

Organizations—help immigrant youth develop identities that cross cultural, racial, and generational boundaries.

“We need to start with acculturation, not assimilation. We need to help young people see themselves as part of a community and a race in America. They need to be able to talk about being Korean-American, about that hyphenated identity. Young people are really confused. They’ll say, ‘I think I’m Korean’ or even ‘I think I’m English’, since that’s the language they’re speaking. They can’t put into words what they would call themselves. We try to get them to a point where they see themselves as ‘Korean-American’ and ‘Asian-American.’ We may not get as far as a connection to an Asian American movement, but at least they have some identity.”

—Michelle Pang, Washington Youth Foundation, Annandale, VA

FINDING 1

To work successfully with immigrant youth, organizations must first help youth develop identities that cross cultural, racial, and generational boundaries. To help build the necessary consciousness that provides a foundation for civic engagement, organizations must enable immigrant youth to develop positive identities connected to both their ethnic and cultural communities as well as to the mainstream population. Like adults, youth must feel as if they belong to a community before they become motivated to act on its behalf. As members of immigrant communities, many young people are regularly confronted with negative stereotypes based on ethnicity and immigrant status, as well as overt discrimination and exploitation. Yet, as young people, many are unwilling to accept the dominant ideas and expectations set forth by the immigrant communities to which they belong.

FINDING 2

Civic and analytic skill development is crucial for effective civic engagement; training should be tailored to issues specific to immigrant youth. Like all young people, immigrant youth must acquire some basic skills—including issue analysis, campaign development, advocacy, and organizing—to engage community decision-makers effectively. The life experiences of immigrant youth, however, often frame how they define and view issues, as well as how they perceive the organizations that seek to work with them. As a result, many programs design skill-based trainings with immigrant youth around issues that are pertinent to their identities as youth and immigrants, such as gang involvement or access to higher education.

“Young people raised in the U.S. who speak English have a lot of questions about their identity on things like gender and sexuality, so there is a lot of opportunity to bring those issues into the program. Recent immigrant young people have different kinds of identity issues, more around being immigrants. The second generation feels like they know civil rights issues so are more interested in issues in Korea. It’s the opposite with the new immigrant youth, who are more interested in understanding the U.S.”

—*Eun Sook Lee, National Korean American Resource & Cultural Center, Chicago, IL*

FINDING 3

Organizations working with immigrant youth often maintain an intentional focus on parent involvement. Because of the unique generation gaps present within many new immigrant communities, organizations working with immigrant youth often strengthen their work with youth by employing specific strategies to engage parents. Many immigrant parents remain rooted in the customs of their native culture and do not understand the power structures that govern decision-making processes in the United States. Even basic interactions, such as parent-teacher meetings, are often unfamiliar. As the family members most adapted to an English-speaking, U.S. context, youth in the 1.5 Generation often take on the role of translator or advocate for their parents—placing unique pressures on them as cultural brokers.

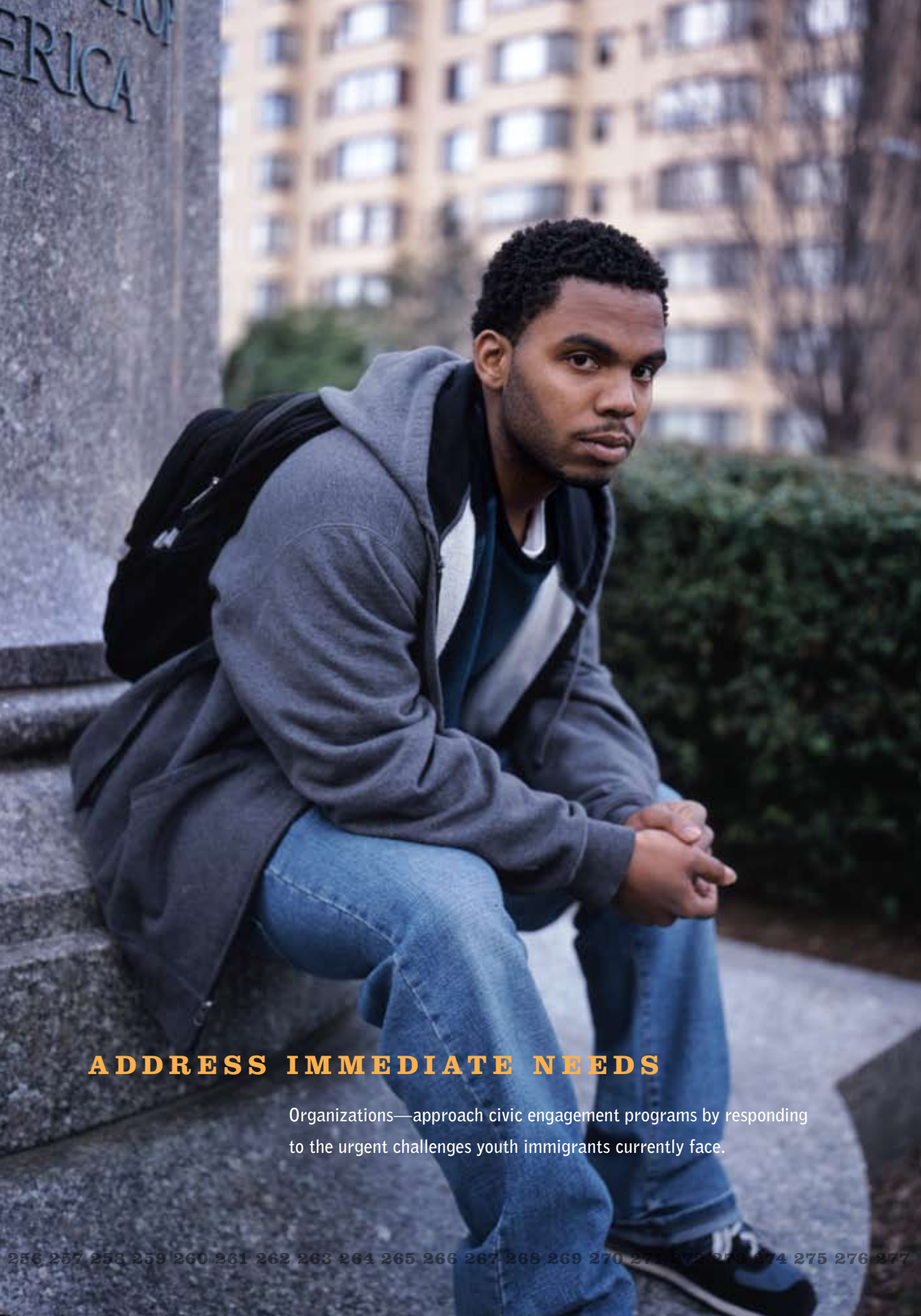
FINDING 4

Programs involving both native- and foreign-born immigrant youth need to address the diversity presented by differing experiences and cultural or racial backgrounds. For years, youth-serving organizations have struggled to address racial and cultural differences among their members. Many immigrant-serving organizations, however, also encounter divisions that spring from within a single cultural community. Across the country, groups working with immigrant youth suggest that important differences exist between new immigrant youth, who identify most strongly with their country of origin, and 1.5 Generation youth, who feel both connection and alienation within the United States.



SUPPORT COLLABORATION

Funders—provide resources for partnerships among organizations committed to strengthening youth leadership within immigrant communities.



ERICA

ADDRESS IMMEDIATE NEEDS

Organizations—approach civic engagement programs by responding to the urgent challenges youth immigrants currently face.

“With high-risk youth, you need to do civic engagement in the context of other types of programs. If a young person is in a gang or is a young mother, you need to start with the immediate issues they are facing. Then you can move into activities, like discussions of broader issues, and from there into organizing campaigns.”

—Molly Baldwin, ROCA, Chelsea, MA

FINDING 5 **Young people in immigrant communities have a range of immediate needs that civic engagement programs should respond to.** Many immigrant youth face immediate challenges related to health and safety, so organizations must remain flexible enough to address urgent needs before beginning to engage youth around civic issues. Organizations must take different approaches in engaging more vulnerable youth, recognizing that addressing immediate needs is a key component of a larger strategy of social change.

FINDING 6 **Important new youth collaborations and networks are emerging to support and strengthen civic engagement among immigrant youth.** In metropolitan Washington, the opportunity to strengthen immigrant youth civic engagement appears to be growing as more organizations engage in collaborations and networks focused on youth and social change. Opportunities for collaboration range from formal networks of youth-serving organizations to simple, informal gatherings of staff and youth discussing common challenges and opportunities. By collaborating, youth-serving organizations can share resources and leverage their collective power.

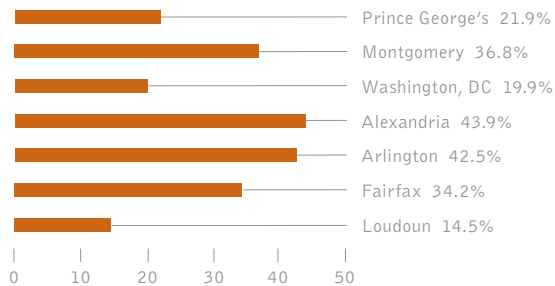
“Three years ago the LAYC board voted for a ‘green light’ to do advocacy. This was controversial because 70 percent of our funding comes from government sources. So, it can be a challenge to take on advocacy that is ‘biting the hand that feeds you.’ Sometimes we have to shy away from issues that are hot topics.”

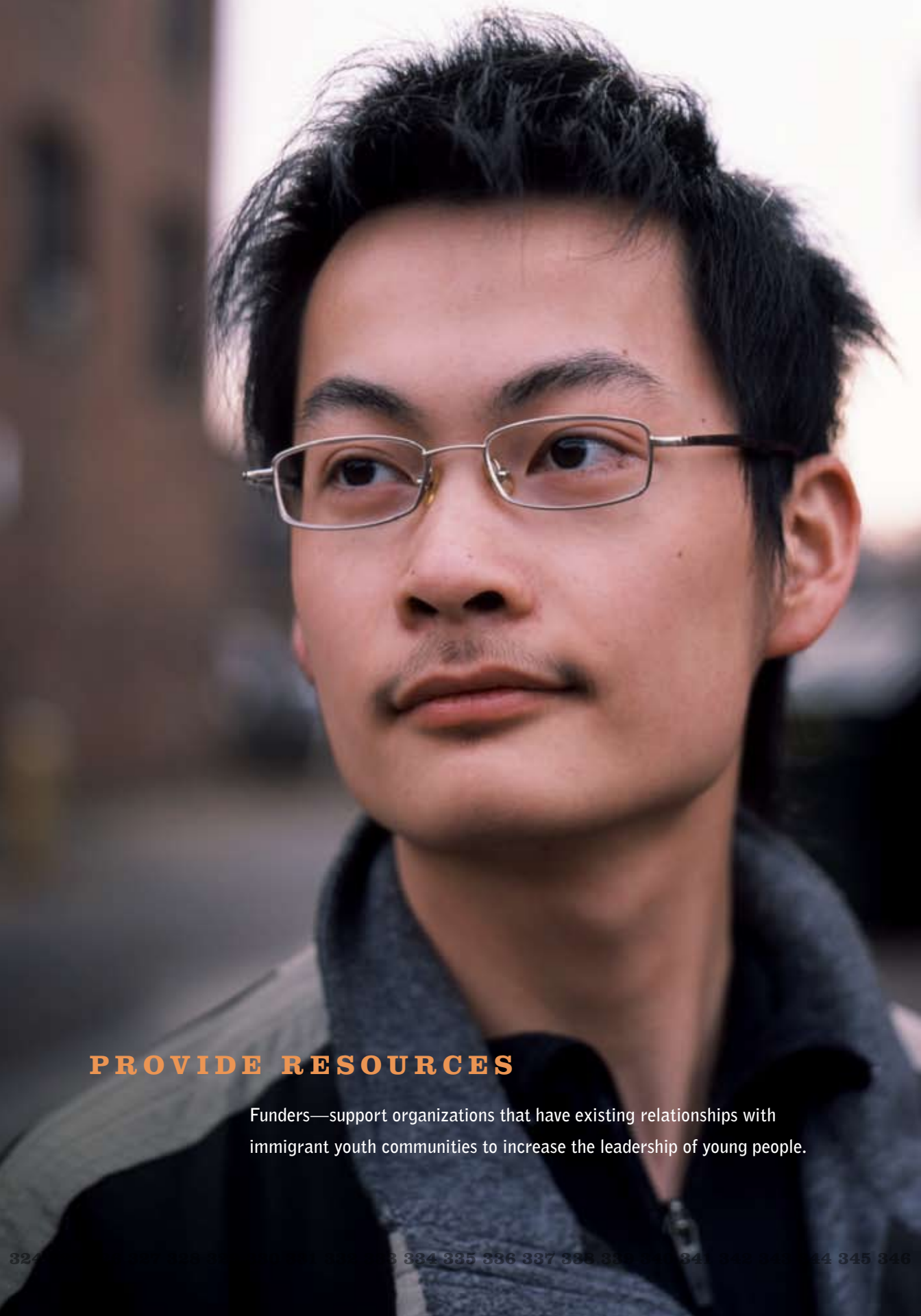
—Gabriel Albornoz, Latin American Youth Center, Washington, DC

FINDING 7

Immigrant youth civic engagement efforts are often limited by funding constraints. Funding for most youth programming is limited to program-specific, single-year grants. As a result, many organizations are challenged to find support that allows them to remain flexible in responding to the changing needs presented by immigrant youth and their families. Moreover, many youth organizations receive large portions of their funding from local government agencies. Such organizations are sometimes confronted with conflicts of interest when youth members organize to oppose actions being taken by local municipalities.

>>> Percent of Children with a Foreign-Born Parent Metropolitan Washington—2000 Census





PROVIDE RESOURCES

Funders—support organizations that have existing relationships with immigrant youth communities to increase the leadership of young people.

“For our organization, the best way to develop civic engagement is through on-going collaboration among youth organizations. Through programs like BLOC and Columbia Heights Cool Down we have a chance to look at cross-cutting issues and think about how to collaborate. We can look at our own expertise and focus and figure out how to help each other.”

—Tania Alfaro, *Sister to Sister*, Washington, DC

>>> **The Civic Engagement Opportunity Among Youth in Metropolitan Washington’s Immigrant Communities**

Civic engagement strategies have a potential enormous impact on our region’s immigrant youth and the multiracial communities to which they belong. Across the region, young people from immigrant communities will play a major role in shaping civic life. Preparing them to take on this role with skills,

ideas, and confidence may present one of the region’s most strategic opportunities for investment.

Fortunately, this investment can be built on the substantial expertise that exists among groups currently working with immigrant youth in metropolitan Washington. This expertise includes “building blocks”—such as identity development, skills development, multigenerational strategies, attention to diversity, and

emerging collaboration—that provide organizations with a framework for bringing youth into higher levels of leadership. While transitions toward greater youth leadership cannot happen without honest reflection, deep commitment, and dedicated resources, these building blocks create a foundation for organizational changes that can collectively and profoundly shape civic engagement opportunities for youth in the region’s immigrant communities.

>>> **Building Blocks for Immigrant Youth Leadership in Metropolitan Washington**

As this report demonstrates, organizations within metropolitan Washington can build on their expertise in:

- Identity development, which instills youth with a basic level of cultural knowledge and esteem and encourages them to address the larger questions of civic engagement. Identity development must also recognize the overlapping nature of young immigrants' identities and connect them to opportunities for collective action. For example, groups such as Washington Youth Foundation, Identity, Inc., and Sister to Sister have experience that can be drawn upon when developing and expanding immigrant youth civic engagement in the region.
- Skills and analysis development, which employs widely recognized approaches such as active listening, facilitation, and cultural work grounded in knowledge and sensitivity of the particular issues and perspectives of immigrant youth. Organizations such as Latin American Youth Center, Youth Action Research Group, Ethiopian Community Development Center, and Young Women's

Project all have program experience and ideas to offer.

- Multigenerational strategies. These may be distinct aspects of work with immigrant youth that can also resonate within other communities. The evolution of youth-focused work in organizations such as Tenants and Workers Support Committee, Central American Resource and Education Center, and Asian American LEAD may offer examples for other organizations both within and outside immigrant communities.
- Experience working with both African-American youth and youth from immigrant communities. Groups such as Multicultural Services, Inc., Sister to Sister, and Tenant and Workers Support Committee are struggling with issues and approaches that merit continued focus and support.
- Collaboration and networking that create synergy and strategic alignment building youth leadership in community and social change. For example, the collaboration occurring through BLOC and Columbia Heights Cool Down paves the way for greater coordination and cross-fertilization in building the leadership of young people to respond to issues affecting them.

There is also an opportunity for immigrant youth-focused groups in metropolitan Washington to learn from work taking place among other youth organizations in the region, as well as youth organizations around the country. As this report suggests, much can be learned from youth organizing—a process that takes youth civic engagement a step further by engaging youth in challenging existing power dynamics, actively nurturing alliances and coalitions, and involving youth in making core organizational decisions.



>>> **Recommendations**

Based on the findings from this report, we have identified the following recommendations for funders.

1 Recognize that civic engagement and the funding for it must build on the expertise of immigrant community organizations and youth organizations. Civic engagement among young people requires a “paradigm shift” toward genuine youth leadership in the issues affecting them and their communities. In order to bring about this paradigm shift for youth from immigrant communities, organizations must balance two distinct areas of expertise. First, there are “universal” questions about youth leadership—including how youth engage in identifying issues or making organizational decisions—that play out in many sectors and can be applied to work with immigrant youth. Second, these young people face distinct issues—such as biculturalism, bilingualism, and immigration experience—that must be addressed by organizations seeking to help them develop the identities and skills they need to organize effectively. The successful blending of these areas will

provide immigrant youth with wider and deeper opportunities to make positive changes in their communities.

2 Explore and address the issues of race and racism that shape the context of civic engagement in metropolitan Washington. The findings of this report underscore the need to understand the racial context in which immigrant-focused work is taking place. As a study on inter-group relations in metropolitan Washington concluded in 2001:

“Racism among immigrants and long-term residents runs very deep and is very complicated ... [A retreat with organizations] revealed widespread bigotry and tensions among different racial and ethnic groups, but generally directed towards African Americans ... Because of the delicate nature of relations between certain immigrant groups and African American communities, [this funding initiative] may want to provide extensive assistance in brokering such relations and in developing appropriate strategies.”³

As this study found, issues of race and racism require intentional and sustained



focus as part of any approach to civic engagement in a multiracial region like metropolitan Washington.

3 Support organizations working with immigrant youth that are seeking to transition to greater youth civic engagement and leadership. Funders within metropolitan Washington can play a critical role in supporting organizations working with youth from immigrant communities to increase the leadership of young people. Funders should look for organizations that have existing relationships with youth from immigrant communities and a commitment to an organizational development process that intentionally reflects on youth leadership questions. Funders also need to provide multi-year general support grants combined with “transition-specific” capacity building funding to support groups in a long-term growth process beginning with an intensive self-assessment. In addition to grant support, many groups can benefit from training on key issues and peer learning from groups—inside and outside metropolitan Washington—that have successfully incorporated youth as leaders.

4 Recognize that the transition to greater youth leadership may have many different origins and paths. Different organizations have different starting points and different areas of expertise. Some organizations approach youth leadership from their history of adult organizing in immigrant communities. Others may be youth development organizations working with young people from immigrant communities that seek to expand into youth organizing.

5 Support emerging collaboration to increase youth leadership opportunities across the region. In addition to direct support for organizations, metropolitan Washington funders can provide resources for partnerships and collaborations among organizations committed to strengthening youth leadership within immigrant communities. Such collaborations could strengthen and formalize emerging relationships between youth leadership development groups, youth organizing groups, and immigrant-serving organizations. While funders must be cautious not to create “forced” collaboration, they can help organic

relationships blossom into powerful partnerships by providing resources for greater coordination and participation in convenings, technical assistance, and training opportunities.

For more information, or to obtain a copy of the full report from which this issue brief was created, please contact the Washington Area Partnership for Immigrants a funding collaborative of the Community Foundation for the National Capital Region.

¹ Singer, Audrey. *At Home in the Nation's Capital: Immigrant Trends in Metropolitan Washington*. The Brookings Institution Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy, Greater Washington Research Program. Washington, DC. June 2003.

² Singer, Audrey. *The Rise of New Immigrant Gateways*. The Brookings Institution Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy. Washington, DC. February 2004.

³ *Initiative To Strengthen Neighborhood Intergroup Assets: Summary Of Accomplishments And Lessons Learned 1998–2000*. Prepared by the Association for the Study and Development of Community. Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation. Washington, DC. February 2001.



1201 15th Street, NW
Suite 420
Washington, DC 20005

T. 202.955.5890
F. 202.955.8084

www.cfncr.org

There are nearly 450,000 native and foreign-born children of immigrant parents in our region, as of the 2000 Census. Organizations and funders must work together to engage youth for social change. Without encouragement and the proper resources, immigrant youth will be left behind.