



One City, Many Voices: A Harrisonburg / Rockingham Listening Project



Dedication

This report is dedicated to communities and individuals fighting against injustice everywhere and to all the participants, voices, and stories involved in this project. Thank you for opening your doors and sharing your struggle and resiliency.

What Is A Listening Project?

A listening project (LP) is a three to nine month long neighborhood/community organizing process developed forty years ago by a North Carolina-based nonprofit group, Rural Southern Voices for Peace. The intended outcome of this process is increased community input, involvement, and leadership in addressing community issues and cultivating community-based efforts.

Using this process, residents who are concerned about pressing issues in their community (often working in partnership with community supporters) go through a goal-setting process that leads to the development of a questionnaire. Residents and community supporters attend a Listening Project training and go into the community to conduct both door-to-door and solicited interviews.

The information is then gathered to develop and implement resident-led organizing and community development activities based on direct input aimed at increasing involvement from people in the community. Central to the LP process is the follow-up action and organizing done long after interviews are completed.

The rich qualitative and quantitative information collected can be used to inform local policy choices that may affect the community. The listening process also informs community organizing so that efforts serve the needs of those affected directly by local policy and law.

Introduction: Why a Listening Project in Harrisonburg?

Latino and immigrant-residents of Harrisonburg have in the last five years felt the effect of toughening immigration policies and programs enforced at local levels. Increased coordination between local authorities and federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) produced mixed results. Locally we saw the introduction of the 287(g) program that helped enforce federal immigration law in Harrisonburg and Rockingham County. The program that had existed in Harrisonburg/Rockingham County for five years as a “Jail Force Agreement” had received very little public attention; most local residents were unaware of its existence. Not knowing the community impact of this agreement local residents and other community organizations and their members desired to listen to Latino immigrants around the subject of local police and immigration. Many community members expressed a sentiment of fear of police and of families being deported after being arrested for minor infractions by local police. With this in mind the listening project set out to listen extensively to these stories in a systematic way with the following questions in mind:

What does it mean for the Rockingham County Sheriffs Office to play a role in what is traditionally under federal authority? How has this program affected our community’s sense of safety? Has the law affected our immigrant community’s trust in local police? Does the community know about the 287(g) agreement?

Virginia Organizing's Campaign Against the 287 (g) program

In late September 2011 the Harrisonburg Virginia Organizing Chapter decided to take on, or at least begin to investigate the possibility of running a campaign to end the 287(g) program. Members of the local chapter felt the program was cause for concern however outside of a few local stories that would support that the program lent itself to racial profiling of immigrants, there was no larger effort to truly understand its impact. The group decided a listening project would benefit community-organizing efforts and could aid in better understanding the impact of the 287(g) program. It was felt the dialogue created by a listening project might also garner support around any efforts to end the program.

Who We Are

The organizations at the front of the listening project are Virginia Organizing, The Wayside Center for Popular Education, Dream Activist Virginia and COSPU (Comité Salvadoreño Paisanos Unidos). Members of these organizations and other active community residents greatly contributed to One City, Many Voices.

Virginia Organizing is a statewide non-profit community organizing organization.

The Wayside Center is a retreat and education center helping community groups develop plans and solutions to pressing social problems in Virginia and the South.

Dream Activist Virginia is an undocumented student-led immigrant rights organization supporting the passage of the Dream Act.

COSPU is comprised of members of the Harrisonburg/Rockingham Salvadorian community and organizes Harrisonburg's Salvadorian Festival each year.

One City, Many Voices Steering Committee Members

Fernando Perez (chapter leader, Virginia Organizing)

Wilfredo Flores (COSPU)

Isabel Castillo (founder, Dream Activist Virginia)

Emily Riehl (organizer, Virginia Organizing)

Palamo Saucedo (community resident)

Florenica Paz (community resident)

Joshua Diamond (programming coordinator, Wayside Center)

Nelly Moreno-Shenk (COSPU)

Our Process

Guided by Rural Southern Voices for Peace, organizers with the Wayside Center and Virginia Organizing gathered a group of interested community members to set goals for the project, create questions for the interview, and establish a method for recoding and documenting interviews. These dedicated individuals constituted what would be the primary Steering Committee of the project. The Steering Committee worked closely with US-born individuals of Latin American decent, recently arrived immigrants and US-born bi-lingual community members. Beginning in October of 2011, the group began working with graduate students of Eastern Mennonite University's Center for Justice and Peace Building to establish goals for the project and create the survey.

After this half-day facilitated meeting, the Steering Committee designed a training for Spanish-speaking and bi-lingual community members interested in participating in the project as interviewers.

In January of 2012 the Steering Committee brought together 30 listeners for an in-depth all day training. Much of the training was devoted to teaching participants how to listen objectively without putting one's own projections and bias on the individual. Participants were given packets with helpful information on interviewing techniques and sent into the community to conduct their own interviews in pairs to reinforce skills learned in the training. After the training, listeners gathered monthly to discuss what they have been hearing from the community. Interviewers were not allowed to reveal the identity of any of those interviewed during this discussion unless stated explicitly from the interviewee.

It was established that the project work towards a goal of interviewing 200 individuals of the immigrant Latino Community.

Goals of the Listening Project

Goal 1: Listen deeply and increase dialogue around the immigrant and non-immigrant Latino community's perceptions and feelings of local policing and the 287(g) program.

Goal 2: Through the listening processes inform and educate community members on what and how the 287(g) program works.

Goal 3: Use listening information to inform and guide any efforts geared towards addressing perceived impact and effect the program has on the community.

The 287 (g) Program: What is it?

The Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) Section 287(g), codified at 8 U.S.C. § 1357(g), was added to the INA by section 133 of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (enacted September 30, 1996).

Section 287(g) authorizes the Federal Government to enter into agreements with state and local law enforcement agencies, permitting designated local officers to perform immigration law enforcement

functions, pursuant to a memorandum of agreement, provided that the local law enforcement officers receive appropriate training and function under the supervision of sworn U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers. Under 287(g), with federal approval and training, ICE provides state and local law enforcement officers with the training and authorization to identify, process, and--when appropriate--detain immigration offenders they encounter during their regular, daily law-enforcement activity.

In the case of the Rockingham County Sheriff's Office, the 287(g) program that was in effect for most of the five year period that the MOA was active was an in-jail agreement, meaning only those individuals brought to jail by local arresting agencies are scrutinized under 287(g) authority. In other words, when an individual was brought into the Rockingham County jail, whether through the Sheriff's office or Harrisonburg City police, a trained officer in the jail has access to ICE databases to determine the immigration status of a given arrestee and detain the individual who is then handed over to ICE if they are determined to be in the country without documentation.

Out of 3,077 counties in the United States, there are 57 active 287(g) Memorandums of Agreement between local and federal authorities.

The Questions

Introduction

- How long have you lived in Harrisonburg?
- What brought you to Harrisonburg?
- What do you like most about your neighborhood? Least?
- How well do you know your neighbors?
- Do you feel part of your neighborhood, and why?

Safety/Acknowledgement

- What was your perception about your safety when you came to Harrisonburg?
- Has your feeling of security increased, decreased or stayed the same in the past three years?
- What do you think the police know about the Harrisonburg Latino community? What would you like them to know?
- What would you like the rest of the Harrisonburg community to know about the Latino immigrant community?

Police Interactions

- How do you feel when you see police in Harrisonburg?
- Have you ever called on the police to help in an emergency?
- What changes could be made so that you feel safe with the police?
- Have you noticed a change in police presence in your neighborhood in the past three years?

Deportation

- Do you know someone who has been deported after being arrested by local police?
- How did this affect you?
- What impact has deportation had in your community?

287g

- Do you know about the 287g program?
- Why do you think the Sheriff's office decided to implement 287g?

Follow-up

- What do you think we should do with this information?
- What are some things that you can do to make change to the situation? What can the community do?

Results at a Glance and A Note on Listening

After eight months of interviewing in Harrisonburg City and Rockingham County the steering committee decided to finish out the project with 122 recorded interviews. While this did not amount to the original goal of 200, the committee felt this number was adequate in understanding the impact of the 287(g) program and the perceptions of community or police safety felt by the Latino immigrant community. Below you will find quantitative results as well as common responses heard from individuals interviewed.

The majority of those interviewed knew of someone deported locally through the 287(g) program however knew nothing of the actual agreement. Most reported a general fear of police with many citing fear or hesitation in calling the police in an emergency. Most community members expressed respect for the police with many participants stating that they do not blame police for issues of deportation. Most participants reported enjoying Harrisonburg, stating they feel Harrisonburg is a calm place, suitable for raising their children. Many feel safe in their neighborhoods from crime and violence, however they feel unsafe when they see police or when driving. Many participants felt a connection to their community while others reported feeling isolated and not being in good connection with their neighbors.

It is important to note here that while we did glean some basic information from the listening project; our goal in listening was not only for results, but to increase dialogue about issues affecting the community. In other words, the process of listening was a goal in itself. Through the act of deeply listening individuals feel heard, which lends itself to empowerment.

What We Learned From the Questionnaire

- 122 respondents,
- 67 females/33 males, 22 N/A

Some Statistics

- 77% did not know about the 287g program, 41 N/A
- 66% knew someone who was deported, 24 N/A
- 70% expressed fear of police, 37 N/A
- 44% came here for work, 15% for a better life, 12% for education, 24% for family, and 3% for safety, 81 N/A

What impact has deportation had on your community?

- Separation of families
- Fear
- Lack of income for families
- People have moved
- Feels the community is unsafe
- Feels that it's racially motivated
- Fractures relations with the local police
- Mental health issues
- School graduation rates go down

What would you like the Harrisonburg community to know about the Latinos here?

- We're here to work and for a better life
- We have rights/ we're not all undocumented
- We pay taxes

Do you feel a part of your neighborhood?

- Yes: 59%
- No: 40.8%
- 73 N/A

What would you like for the police to know about the Latino community here?

- We feel that they don't know much about us
- There's racism here
- We feel profiled
- We're not all stereotypes
- We are fearful
- We're not all bad
- We're just here to work
- We're not all "illegal"
- It's bad they enforce immigration law
- We drive without license for necessity
- We contribute

What changes could be made to improve policing?

- Inform and build relationships with Latinos
- No racial profiling
- Spanish speaking police officers/diverse police force
- No more 287g
- Only detain high level criminals
- Provide ways to obtain licenses
- Better interpretation options
- Not asking for papers
- No more checkpoints

Listener Experiences

I was astounded by the reaction I saw from one family. I was interviewing the wife on the front porch of their trailer. She was very reticent to answer my questions-- giving one word answers or not answering at all. After the interview ended, I was surprised when the husband (who'd been sitting and grilling on the porch during the interview) piped up and said "I've been deported." He was stopped for running a yellow light and later deported-- only traffic violations on his record. He returned because he had a wife and 2 daughters (one of whom had a sickness).

- Listener Emily Riehl

I remember a particularly powerful interview with a mother of three living in National Coach trailer park. She was not aware of the 287(g) program but knew three close friends who were eventually deported through the program. She relayed to me, timidly and with hurt in her voice, that three friends went to a river in the county for a swim, and encountered a checkpoint after leaving. She did not know what happened exactly, but knew that they were arrested at the checkpoint and eventually deported. Since this incident, she has not felt safe bringing her children to a body of water for recreational purposes for fear she could be stopped at a checkpoint and deported. Her children were born in this country and are citizens so she lives in fear that she will be taken from her family.

- Listener Josh Diamond

I was contacted by a friend who asked me if I could help a family whose son was at the local jail. I went to interview the mother and her daughter. The daughter told me her brother was taken to jail for picking up a piece of log by the side of the road. He did not know this was against the law. He paid the \$50 fine but because of 287g he was picked up by ICE and was about to get deported. I was shocked to hear this because clearly he was a low priority case. After a public campaign he was released but he was very close to being deported despite having no criminal record and his mother being a Legal Permanent resident and sister a U.S. Citizen.

-Listener Isabel Castillo

There was one younger guy that I interviewed that really spoke to the flaws with our current immigration system. He told me about his travels as a migrant worker. He'd been around the United States and eventually ended up working in Washington state. He settled for a while and got a driver's license because it's not as hard to get there. Upon his return to Virginia to help his father while he was dealing with health issues, he was pulled over by an officer and asked for ID. He provided it and was immediately interrogated because the officer said that there was no way his driver's license was real. He went to court to fight the charges of falsification of documen-

tation and driving without a license. The ID was eventually authenticated. The judge made comments that the interviewee thought were unwelcoming that suggested he may be happier in Washington. He remained determined to help his father but said he would leave Virginia when he was able to do so.

-Listener Fernando Perez

Recommendations

Discontinue 287g MOA by not renewing in October 2012

- Without the agreement, the county (as well as most of the country) will still have Secure Communities and can check status
- 287(g) involves paid and trained personnel, Secure Communities functions via a database with fingerprints that are taken at booking facilities- automatically shared and compared against a national criminal and immigration database.

Contact ICE only with high level criminals (Levels 1&2)

More community outreach

- Prioritize hiring Spanish speaking police officers
- Bi-lingual know your rights trainings
- Create a bi-lingual community liaison and recruiter position who responsibility it is to do outreach in the Latino community to develop positive relationships with the community as well as increasing diversity of police force.
- Create Hispanic citizens Academy

Data Collection

- Davidson County, TN Sheriff Hall kept track of the numbers of foreign-born individuals entering the jail to discount racial profiling accusations
- Would allow us to verify racial profiling accusations that are heard in the community.

Create Advisory Council

- Other counties have implemented an advisory council to oversee human rights issues
- An impartial board that could field complaints about officers of concerns over police/community interactions
- Davidson County, TN created the DCSO's Immigration Council

Contact Information

If you would like to more information or would like to discuss the work documented here for any reason, feel free to contact us and share your thoughts.

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