



SEPTEMBER 2024

NATURALIZE NOW!

How to Increase Naturalization in Your Community

Strategies, lessons, and guidance from a
groundbreaking and replicable citizenship
initiative in Houston, Texas

Introduction

Citizenship opens the door to opportunities for career advancement, education, economic development, voting rights, social services, legal protections, stability, and a greater sense of belonging. We know that naturalization and civic engagement are key to building a democracy that works for, protects, and promotes opportunity for all.

As of January 2023, there were an estimated nine million lawful permanent residents across the U.S. who are eligible to naturalize. Yet financial, legal and language barriers, as well as confusion about eligibility requirements, prevent many qualified

residents from applying. Texas is one of four states (along with California, Florida, and New York) that were collectively home to half of new U.S. citizens in fiscal year 2023.¹

The **National Partnership for New Americans (NPNA)** – a multicultural, multi-ethnic, multiracial coalition of 75 of the nation’s largest immigrant and refugee organizations across 40 states – is working with a range of public and private stakeholders on a landmark initiative, **Naturalize Now, Houston!** to help make Greater Houston the “citizenship capital” of the U.S. and a continued vibrant, inclusive, and prosperous region.



“The *Naturalize Now, Houston!* effort proves that when local governments, non-profit partners, and powerful networks of organizations collaborate, we can meet the communities needs for information and services to scale our reach effectively. I am encouraged to see in real-time how effective collaborations can help thousands of eligible residents be able to access the process of naturalization supported fully by their communities.”

– **NICOLE MELAKU**, Executive Director, National Partnership for New Americans

“The City of Chicago is a proud founding and Executive Committee member of Cities & Counties for Citizenship (CC4C) since its inception in 2014. As we kick off the 10th year, we are excited to see this partnership grow and expand citizenship for our residents. We are appreciative of the work of localities and organizations across the country who support immigrants and their path to citizenship.”

– Mayor **BRANDON JOHNSON**, City of Chicago, CC4C Executive Committee Member

To that end, *Naturalize Now, Houston!* launched in September 2023 with catalytic funding from Houston Endowment as a three-year and first-of-its-kind public-private partnership to reach more than 300,000 immigrants in the region who are eligible for U.S. citizenship. *Naturalize Now!* will scale naturalization in Greater Houston by:

- › **Strengthening the ecosystem** to increase access, pool expertise, expand resources, and ultimately improve the provision of naturalization services;²
- › **Investing in local government** infrastructure to expand and amplify naturalization initiatives through NPNA’s Cities & Counties for Citizenship (CC4C) network;
- › **Building the capacity** of local nonprofits to reach eligible individuals through our signature Citizenship Community Navigator model that leans on the expertise and leadership of trusted community members;
- › **Fostering collaboration** and partnership between local government entities (specifically the City of Houston and Harris County) and with community-based organizations; and

› **Advancing immigrant equity and inclusion** by eliminating barriers to naturalization and leaving a lasting legacy of new citizens who are civically engaged to participate in our democracy.

With the *Naturalize Now, Houston!* initiative about to enter its second year, and with the upcoming ten-year anniversary of the CC4C network in December 2024, this case study elevates the key strategies and tactics that make the initiative both successful and replicable.

We actively encourage local governments, community-based nonprofits, and funders to launch naturalization initiatives in their communities, and offer you tangible guidance for how to get started.

¹ More information on the naturalization process and trends is available at <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/naturalization-trends-united-states#socioeconomic-characteristics>
² NPNA acknowledges the tremendous efforts by New American Campaign and Houston Immigration Legal Services Collaborative, who have been championing naturalization efforts in Houston to date. *Naturalize Now, Houston!* builds upon their work.

Scaling Naturalization in Houston

Opportunity Meets Infrastructure

The landscape of Greater Houston is particularly conducive for an initiative of this scope and scale, with its combination of a large eligible-to-naturalize population, and a robust and forward thinking ecosystem willing to support naturalization.

In addition to demographics, Houston also benefits from:

EXISTING INFRASTRUCTURE

Houston has a robust network of nonprofits (including existing members of NPNA) and legal service providers, community leadership, and support from local government.

POLITICAL WILL

Houston has been a committed partner of the CC4C network to advance naturalization with local governments since 2017. Former two-term Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner and Harris County officials have demonstrated strong leadership on naturalization. The City of Houston has both an Office and Mayor's Advisory Council for New Americans and Immigrant Communities. *Naturalize Now, Houston!* has been working with Mayor John Whitmire since his inauguration in January 2024 to continue the momentum. In addition to the City of Houston, Harris County introduced a Citizenship Day resolution in 2023 and recently made its first allocation to naturalization with an over \$5 million investment (see below). Efforts are also underway to involve multiple departments within the county to support naturalization.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Naturalize Now, Houston! is supported in collaboration with Houston Endowment to turbocharge naturalization efforts in the region as well as NPNA general operating support. The project builds off of the success of the New American Campaign, Houston Legal Service Collaborative, NALEO Educational Fund, and the many non-profit organizations working to promote naturalization in the Greater Houston area. Civic engagement and immigrant civic integration are strategic priorities for Houston Endowment, and the foundation is particularly interested in ensuring that lawful permanent residents have the resources they need to naturalize. As noted, Harris County also made its first budget allocation to naturalization in early 2024.

Greater Houston by the numbers³

- › One of the fastest-growing metropolitan areas in the U.S.
- › An international city that ranks third nationally with over 90 nations represented in consular offices
- › One of the most ethnically diverse regions in the U.S.
- › Nearly one in four residents were born in another country (exceeding rates for Texas and nationally)
- › Nearly half of children live in a household with at least one immigrant parent
- › Immigrants in the region paid over \$16 billion in taxes and exceeded \$50 billion in spending power in 2021
- › Has an immigrant community that is becoming increasingly diverse; the top 10 countries of origin include Mexico, northern Central American countries, Vietnam, India, Nigeria, Venezuela, China, and Colombia
- › Already a national leader in naturalization and home to nearly 4% of all new citizens in fiscal year 2023
- › An estimated 300,000 lawful permanent residents remain eligible to naturalize

³ More information on immigration, integration, and diversity in Houston is available at <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/immigration-integration-houston-area>

INVESTING IN AND STRENGTHENING THE ECOSYSTEM

***Naturalize Now, Houston!* is strengthening the local ecosystem to reach more than 300,000 lawful permanent residents who are eligible to naturalize and help them navigate the process. This is accomplished through several key tactics.**

Leverage the experience and expertise of NPNA, the CC4C network, and their membership

Naturalization is one of NPNA's core areas of expertise; we build capacity and provide technical assistance to enhance service provision, while also advocating and working with local, state, and federal leaders to reduce barriers. NPNA has expanded the network of legal service providers, secured fee waivers for naturalization, and trained immigrant leaders as community navigators to promote citizenship. NPNA has established and is growing the CC4C network of cities and counties that are committed to expanding citizenship initiatives. In Houston, NPNA has existing members, strong relationships, and the collective expertise to scale the work. NPNA is a national organization with local know-how and the flexibility to adapt their approach as needed.

Use existing data and evidence for both project design and implementation

Houston Endowment took a data-driven approach to its investment in this initiative, using information from the [Greater Houston Citizenship Dashboard](#) and other research. It has a firm understanding of the eligible-to-naturalize population, existing barriers, and the potential economic impact on individuals as well as the community. Some of the *Naturalize Now, Houston!* nonprofit partners have also conducted surveys around barriers to naturalization that have been valuable for implementation.



Foster local government investments and strengthen public-private partnerships to advance citizenship

The City of Houston and Harris County have already demonstrated their interest in and commitment to naturalization. By design, *Naturalize Now, Houston!* leverages and catalyzes their interest and expands their role in advancing citizenship, in line with CC4C network goals. The City of Houston, for example, recognized the high need, unmet demand, and positive impact of naturalization to the city and the region, and they see *Naturalize Now, Houston!* as a way to build upon what works. Harris County is committed to supporting its diverse population and ensuring that all residents have an opportunity to fully participate in the community.

Naturalize Now, Houston! funds two full-time Naturalization Program Managers – one each in the City of Houston and Harris County – to foster relationships with and referrals to partner organizations. Both new hires have lived experience as naturalized citizens working in the community, multilingual skills to help with outreach and translation, and a clear understanding of the needs and services required.

Activate teams of citizenship community navigators hosted by local nonprofits

Naturalize Now, Houston! invests in local community-based partners and builds their capacity to create, train, and activate teams of community navigators.⁴ These individuals are housed within the nonprofits and drive engagement, conduct education sessions and workshops, and support their peers in navigating the citizenship process. The navigator model removes barriers to naturalization by improving access to services and allowing flexibility for how partners are doing the work. Some partners employ navigators, for instance, while others train volunteers. The model elevates the voices of eligible and/or recently naturalized community members. Ultimately, the navigators are the *most qualified people* to guide their peers through the naturalization process.

⁴ Year one grantees include [Mi Familia en Accion](#), Woori Juntos, [OCA-Greater Houston](#) and [South Asian American Voter Empowerment Texas \(SAAVETZ\)](#) Education Fund.

Eliminate barriers to naturalization

Naturalize Now, Houston! convenes free and low cost clinics, walk-in hours, and related outreach events across the Greater Houston region. Events are promoted using strategic communications channels (see below) and by community navigators and other partners. To improve language access, translation is often provided on-site. Materials and advertisements are being produced in multiple languages (see below). Attendees can speak in detail with a lawyer prior to submitting their application, and stakeholders have noted that this is particularly important for more complex cases. Navigators can also address financial barriers by connecting eligible individuals to an organization that can potentially provide financial support to cover the application fee, which [increased](#) in April 2024.

Convene the ecosystem of stakeholders

Quarterly stakeholder meetings are being held throughout the duration of *Naturalize Now, Houston!*. These convenings bring together citizenship partners and key stakeholders across Greater Houston to review progress towards shared goals, strengthen relationships, exchange best practices, and plan for the future. Collectively, the group can assess what is working and make real-time adjustments as needed.

Leverage strategic communications channels

Significant efforts are being made to conduct multilingual outreach across print, social media, radio, television, and other media. *Naturalize Now, Houston!* launch-related activities included Citizenship Day proclamations; press releases; and related media coverage that built momentum for the initiative. Special attention has been paid to promoting *Naturalize Now, Houston!* in the ethnic media in English, Chinese, Spanish, Korean, Swahili, Kinyarwanda, Arabic, Hindi, French, and Vietnamese to date. Impact stories will be gathered, leveraged, and shared at airports, on billboards, and through a series of public service announcements (PSAs) throughout the rest of the grant period.



1 YEAR IN

Assessing *Naturalize Now, Houston!* Impact and Lessons Learned

We are entering the second year of the *Naturalize Now, Houston!* campaign and are pleased to share noteworthy accomplishments, challenges, and recommendations as we also encourage other localities to replicate the effort.

“The American dream is deeply tied to the story of immigrants, and I commend the determination and grit of anyone going through the naturalization process. I am proud of Harris County’s collaboration with the National Partnership for New Americans to bring robust naturalization services to our area. The strength of our region and the health of our democracy depend on our ability to deliver on the great promise of this nation.”

Commissioner **LESLEY BRIONES**, Precinct 4, Harris County, Texas

Successes

Overall, we are seeing a much-strengthened ecosystem for naturalization in Greater Houston with several key accomplishments to date:

- › **Advancing equity and inclusion** by eliminating legal, language, financial, and other barriers. Implementation is happening in culturally competent ways; new staff and volunteers often have multilingual skills, existing community connections, and lived experience as naturalized citizens.
- › **Increasing naturalization applications and approvals.** As one community partner stated about *Naturalize Now, Houston!*, “It’s working.” The Houston field office of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) received the highest number of naturalization applications in the state in the first quarter of 2024, and recently extended its hours to accommodate the volume of cases. Recent events are also telling: in July 2024, Harris County convened its largest naturalization oath ceremony to date since the COVID pandemic in which over 2,200 Texans became new citizens. Attendance was high despite active power outages following Hurricane Beryl. In another example, the City of Houston mentioned that a citizenship workshop was filled within a couple hours after registration opened. As another interviewee remarked, “Everyone has ways to be part [of this initiative].”

“**Harris County is stronger and better** today because of the contributions of immigrants. Naturalization only serves to empower our diverse community and allows individuals a way to begin their journey as an American and to strengthen their American roots. By helping eligible residents become U.S. citizens, we allow them to further solidify and strengthen the social fabric of our county, and it fosters economic growth and enhances civic participation. Naturalization is an investment in the future of Harris County, ensuring that all our residents have the opportunity to contribute fully to our community.”

Commissioner **ADRIAN GARCIA**, Precinct 2, Harris County, Texas

NATURALIZE NOW, HOUSTON!

Impact Metrics
(September 2023 – August 2024)

79,550

Individuals reached with citizenship information

9,499

Visitors reached through the *Naturalize Now, Houston!* website

115,221

Accounts reached via social media and over 53,664 accounts engaged

218

Workshops, clinics, and/or one-on-one assistance provided by nonprofit partners

58

Media placements have been procured across a range of radio, print, and television outlets

10

New citizenship library corners created to date in Harris County, in conjunction with USCIS and local libraries

“It’s been great to see this project flourish over the past year. *Naturalize Now, Houston!* supercharges the efforts of the county and city; they have become so active in promoting citizenship, forming new partnerships, and becoming more visible in the community. The community navigator model has also been very successful. We know how difficult the naturalization process can be to navigate; having someone to guide individuals through the whole journey is so important.”

GISLAINE WILLIAMS, Program Officer – Civic Engagement, Houston Endowment

“*Naturalize Now, Houston!* has fostered stronger ties with community organizations, leading to a notable increase in the number of citizenship applications. As a result, more eligible immigrants are being encouraged and supported to apply for naturalization.”

AUSTRA ZAPATA, Naturalization Program Manager, Harris County, Texas

“I pursued the role of Community Navigator out of a deep passion for helping others. The Community Navigator role is crucial because it connects individuals with resources and services that can significantly improve their quality of life. By bridging these gaps, we build a more inclusive and supportive community for everyone.”

MONICA CAMACHO, Community Navigator, Mi Familia en Accion

› **Enhancing public-private sector collaboration.** Interviewees for this case study unanimously cited improvements in collaboration, and many noted that the extent of local government involvement with community-based organizations is particularly unique. Several interviewees said they now view local government as more of a partner with a stronger understanding of the community’s needs and a more visible presence. One nonprofit noted that this is the first time they are collaborating to such an extent outside of their immediate community. Stakeholder convenings have also become important for strengthening relationships across sectors and expanding networks. To date, *Naturalize Now, Houston!* has held three forums (in September 2023, February 2024, and June 2024) with over 200 participants, and has a fourth scheduled for September 2024 to celebrate the one-year anniversary of the project. Adjustments to implementation can be made in real time and best practices can be shared and elevated.

› **Expanding local government capacity.** Two full-time Naturalization Program Managers are on board and bring their experience as naturalized citizens with deep roots at the community level. One lead was featured in a [recent PSA](#) about expanded eligibility for reduced naturalization application fees and the other leader has supported translation into Amharic. Both Managers report an increased volume of inquiries from individuals, nonprofits, and other institutions. Libraries are holding more classes and workshops, and local government has provided facilities for events and meetings. *Naturalize Now, Houston!* has also catalyzed city and county collaboration around naturalization in new ways. Quite notably, Harris County [announced](#) its first allocation to naturalization earlier this year, with a more than \$5 million investment.



“This is a great initiative for the city to be involved. It has opened the door for communities to feel a sense of belonging and how they can mobilize others to become citizens. The community is well aware of our work, and we are looking forward to a brighter future for the region.”

AZEB YUSUF, Naturalization Program Manager, City of Houston

› **Improving the capacity of community-based organizations.** Nonprofit partners are up and running with the citizenship community navigator model and adapting it to meet the needs of their communities. There are currently 10 community navigators on board and plans to expand. *Naturalize Now, Houston!* grantee and NPNA member Woori Juntos, the first and only nonprofit in Houston providing social services to the Korean American population, cites the community navigator model and technical assistance from NPNA as critical to eliminating barriers to naturalization. Their citizenship community navigators provide language assistance and educate and guide their peers through the naturalization process. Woori Juntos notes they are becoming better equipped to handle the exponential growth they are seeing, and they have expanded and reorganized their program department accordingly.

› **Effectively using multilingual and multiethnic outreach.** Nearly five dozen placements have been secured across a range of racially and ethnically diverse outlets. To date, PSAs have been published and disseminated in English, Spanish, Korean, Vietnamese, French, and Tagalog; more are being produced in Hindi, Swahili, Kinyarwanda, and Amharic. Harris County will also be recording PSAs from two of its elected commissioners. In addition, *Naturalize Now, Houston!* has a centralized website to share consistent and up to date information, with nearly 9,500 visitors to date; over 500 lawful permanent residents have completed an intake form on the site requesting information about naturalization.

› **Creating economies of scale.** In addition to advancing naturalization, the ecosystem can be leveraged to improve civic education and engagement. Participants can register to vote, sign up for English courses, use the libraries and library system, and take advantage of other public resources.

Applying and Sharing Our Learning

As with many initiatives of this scale and space, there is a ramp-up period needed to identify existing capacity and gaps in the ecosystem, to build the infrastructure, to recruit and train staff, and to cultivate trust within the community. With the groundwork in place, *Naturalize Now, Houston!* can scale quickly.

- › **In Houston, the city and county are working together** for the first time on naturalization. We are mindful of internal approval processes between entities, and aware that localities across the country will have different mechanisms for collaborating. It is important to flesh these processes out in advance if possible.
- › **Anticipating turnout and meeting demand** has been difficult due to limitations on capacity and bandwidth of legal service providers. In many cases, demand has been high enough that individuals have had to be turned away (though given information about additional resources and where to go for support). The ecosystem, on the whole, is learning what makes an effective event. Relying on volunteers can also be challenging. Some community partners are waiting for accreditation from the Department of Justice, which impacts their ability to provide legal services and reliance on partner organizations. Local government contacts also cited their reliance on partners and are advocating for an in-house legal team.
- › **Events must be held in multiple languages** and materials must be translated accordingly. *Naturalize Now, Houston!* has planned for this, has recruited multilingual staff, and is producing additional materials.
- › **There is a need to increase awareness and communication** of *Naturalize Now, Houston!* impact and successes throughout the ecosystem, and particularly with policymakers. We hope that this case study will be a valuable tool. Continuing education and training opportunities for local government employees can also be helpful to keeping individuals up-to-date around naturalization requirements and processes.
- › **There remain significant needs for education and awareness-building** about who is eligible for naturalization and what the process entails. There may be ways to streamline this a bit to manage such a large volume of inquiries.

“The community navigator program really makes our organization a trusted one. It’s the kind of work that only a community organization can do. What is a better way to help immigrants become U.S. citizens so they can achieve the American Dream, [receive] security from deportation, and [obtain] economic opportunity? What is a better way to invest in community?”

– **HYUNJA NORMAN**, Executive Director, Woori Juntos (member of National Partnership for New Americans)

THE WAY FORWARD

With systems, staff, volunteers, and other infrastructure largely in place, stakeholders can now shift to proactive outreach to reach the remaining target audience.

- › *Naturalize Now, Houston!* will continue to invest in local partners – and training and activating community navigator teams – to **reach new communities**. As we deepen the program, we will include outreach to the diverse communities in Houston including, for instance, a local nonprofit that works primarily with the Afghan community.
- › Plans are underway to **collect and leverage impact stories** using airports, billboards, and other outlets. PSAs will continue to be produced in more languages.
- › Based on the impact of this project, we are **laying the groundwork** for greater government investment in naturalization.



ADVANCING NATURALIZATION AS A GOVERNMENT STAKEHOLDER

We at NPNA believe that many local governments have a ripe landscape for naturalization initiatives and that now is an ideal time to move forward. Resources and support are available throughout the process. We are here to support your naturalization efforts.



Photo courtesy:
Chelsie Kramer

Technical assistance, expertise, and know-how are available from both NPNA and CC4C to leverage funding for maximum impact. The CC4C network has previously published resources to help cities and counties get started in promoting naturalization among eligible populations, such as a [toolkit](#), [list of tangible steps](#) to get started, and a range of [additional resources](#). As one community partner stated, “Don’t be afraid! We are not alone in figuring out how to build this. There is support available.”

To make the case for naturalization in your locality, we recommend that you:

- › Find data points for your region using USCIS dashboards on [naturalization applications and approvals](#) and how [many people are eligible](#) to naturalize; the University of Southern California Equity Research Institute’s [interactive map](#) also has data on the propensity to naturalize
- › Map community-based organizations in your area to potentially partner with, and note this may include [existing NPNA members](#)

- › Contact the Office of New Americans in your [state](#) or [city](#), if applicable, for recommendations
- › Share this case study with policy- and other decision-makers

Funding may be available to launch a naturalization program in your community. If you have already explored this and have identified philanthropic funding, that is terrific! If not, there may be options through public funding. NPNA can work with you and provide expertise on how to both advocate for budget and make efficient use of limited city and county dollars.

For more information and technical support for *Naturalize Now!* and/or Cities and Counties for Citizenship (CC4C), please contact [Magaly Arteaga](#), Program and Training Manager of NPNA.

Remember that naturalization opens the door to full participation in the community and promotes civic engagement, education, language access, volunteering, and inclusion. The benefits for individuals, communities, and public-private collaboration are tremendous!

“At CHIRLA, we know that when local governments invest in citizenship, our immigrant communities feel supported and empowered to take the important step in applying for U.S. Citizenship. Initiatives like *Naturalize Now, Houston!*, and the Cities and Counties for Citizenship (CC4C) network, provide a blueprint for localities on how to effectively reach and assist eligible-to-naturalize populations. We are excited to work with our cities and counties in California to advance citizenship and encourage them to replicate *Naturalize Now!* across the state of California.”

Angelica Salas, Executive Director, Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights (CHIRLA), member of National Partnership for New Americans



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About National Partnership for New Americans

The National Partnership for New Americans (NPNA) is a multiethnic, multiracial coalition of 75 of the nation's largest immigrant and refugee organizations across 40 states. Together with its members, NPNA advances immigrant equity and inclusion policies, builds and expands capacities around immigration legal services and integration programming, and drives campaigns that strengthen democracy through increased civic participation. One of NPNA's key campaigns is Naturalize Now!, which builds on the momentum of record-breaking naturalizations in fiscal year 2022 and serves as a central driver of information about citizenship for immigrant and refugee communities.

Cities & Counties for Citizenship

Cities & Counties for Citizenship (CC4C), convened by the National Partnership for New Americans (NPNA), is a growing national network of nearly 120 cities and counties aimed at increasing citizenship among eligible U.S. permanent residents and encouraging localities across the country to promote and expand citizenship programs. It is chaired by the Mayors of New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Seattle, with support from NPNA.