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# Opinion: Let Immigrants Serve On City Boards

by **CHRIS GEORGE** | Jun 28, 2023 6:31 pm

As director of a local refugee and immigrant service agency, [IRIS](#), I have been following the [New Haven alders' discussions about revising the New Haven city charter to remove the requirement that one must be a U.S. citizen in order to serve on a city commission or board.](#)

Over the past 41 years, IRIS has welcomed thousands of immigrants — mostly refugees and asylum seekers — from all over the world. Although most of these new Americans are too busy meeting their basic needs to find time to serve on city commissions and boards, I believe they should be allowed to serve and they would do a great job.

Immigrants come from a variety of countries and all walks of life. Some are engineers, students, teachers, cooks, drivers, physics professors, doctors, seamstresses, and social workers. Some speak fluent English. Most are on track to become citizens. Some are interested in participating in city government. They have a lot to contribute.

No doubt New Haven's alders want [all 45 of the boards and commissions](#) to be strong.

So what makes someone a valuable contributing member of a commission or board?

If the role of a commissioner or board member is to provide advice on public policies, and if the [online application](#) asks for “interest and experience” then — if I were an alder — I would want to want to open up these positions to people with a broad range of interests, ideas and experience, and also have an eye on representation and diversity.

I would want commissions and boards filled with highly motivated dedicated residents who can provide excellent advice, based on a wide range of experience and perspectives that are relevant to the role of the commission or board.

For example, the Commission on Equal Opportunities, with a broad scope of work including achieving harmonious relations between religious groups as well as dealing with prejudice and discrimination, can clearly benefit from having immigrant participation. And given that immigrants use city parks more than the general population, it makes sense for immigrants to serve on the Parks Commission.

The Commission on Equal Opportunities, meanwhile, currently has four vacant seats. The Fair Rent Commission, a commission of the utmost importance to our poorer residents, including newly arrived refugees, has one vacant seat.

If I were an alder, I would want these commissioners and board members to represent the vibrant diversity that makes New Haven a great city. It wouldn't matter to me if they were able to vote. What matters is their ability to fulfill their role — to share their perspective and give good advice.

As the director of an immigrant service organization, I have learned that New Haven's immigrant community is incredibly diverse, with people from the Middle East, Africa, and throughout Latin America. Recently many have come from Afghanistan and Ukraine. But even for those who are on track to become U.S. citizens, the process can take decades.

In my world of refugee resettlement, we are facing an issue that is in some ways similar to the New Haven city charter question. Should we open up refugee resettlement work to the general public, allowing volunteers to participate; or should we restrict resettlement to the refugee resettlement professionals?

Here at IRIS we believe in the value of allowing ordinary Americans to participate in refugee resettlement. It's controversial. There has been some pushback. But in the end, the open participation model has been a great success.

If I were an alder, I would vote for opening up commissions and boards to all residents — realizing that the essential relevant criteria should be what people can contribute to the city where they live, work, pay taxes, and raise their families, not whether they can vote.

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