

# New England Community Developments

Emerging Issues in Community Development and Consumer Affairs

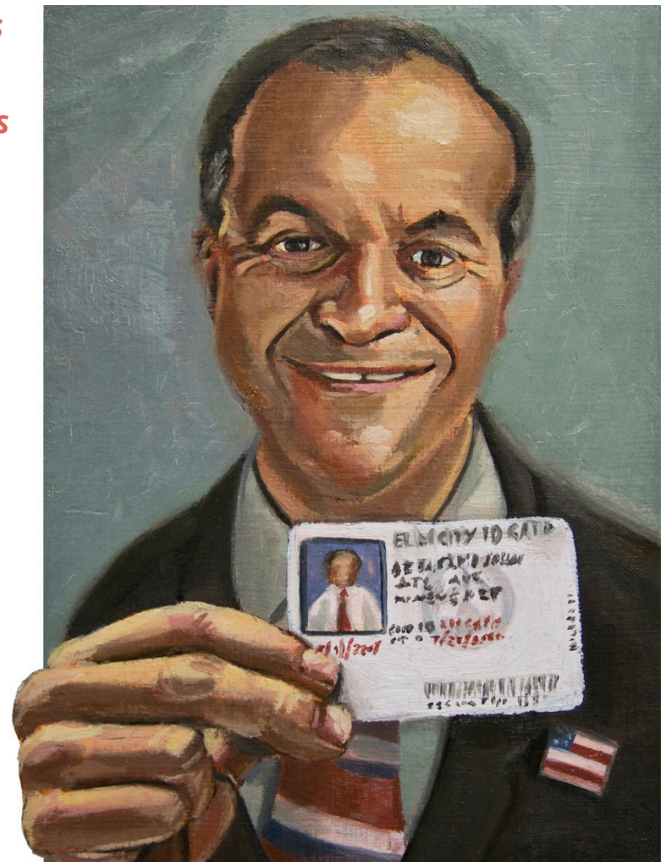
## The Elm City Resident Card: New Haven Reaches Out to Immigrants

By Kica Matos

*Cities are addressing the challenges posed by illegal immigration in different ways. This article describes some of the policy choices made by the City of New Haven.*

As the national debate over immigration reform continues, cities with sizable immigrant populations are responding to the issue of illegal immigration in a number of different and sometimes controversial ways. Some cities have responded by enacting ordinances to encourage the flight of illegal immigrants, while others have sought ways to engage and integrate this population. In 2004, the City of New Haven began to actively collaborate with its immigrant population for the purpose of finding ways to increase public safety and integrate immigrant residents into the civic life of the community.

Over the last few years the city has implemented a series of public policy initiatives. The program that has generated the most attention is the Elm City Resident Card, a multipurpose identification card that can be of use to any city resident, irrespective of status.<sup>1</sup> The card, launched in July 2007, was created to address several areas of concern in the immigrant community: public safety, access to financial services, access to government services, and knowl-



One of the many New Haven residents to obtain the new ID, Mayor John DeStefano, shows his card. *Illustration by Joe Guidry.*

edge about individual rights and civil liberties. This article outlines the genesis and implementation of the resident card program and provides an update on the status of the policy initiative.

### Inside

Data Corner 8

Community Affairs  
News 10

## Background

Over the last several decades, Connecticut has experienced a significant surge in the immigrant population. Currently, one in eight residents of the state is foreign born, reflecting a 61 percent increase in the size of the foreign-born population over a decade since 1990, and a 21 percent rise over the last six years. It is estimated that by the year 2025, the population will double, with the state gaining an additional 337,000 residents from outside of the country. Immigrants are the fastest growing segment of the population in Connecticut. In the city of New Haven, between 1990 and 2000 there was a 43 percent increase in the foreign-born population. Currently there are 127,288 city residents, an estimated 17 percent of whom are foreign born. As with the rest of the state, residents from Latin America constitute the biggest group (38 percent) of foreign-born residents in the city.

Undocumented immigrants are also a part of the immigration narrative in Connecticut. A 2005 U.S. Census report estimates that there are approximately 70,000 undocumented immigrants in the state, comprising 20 percent of the foreign-born population. In New Haven, there are an estimated 10,000 to 15,000 undocumented immigrants, which means that about 10 percent of the city's population is made up of residents without status.

The rapid increase in the immigrant population in recent years presents the city with a number of challenges and opportunities, particularly as it relates to the undocumented population. These undocumented residents face the traditional obstacles confronted by immigrants (language barriers, cultural differences, barriers to educational attainment, low-wage work), as well as additional problems uniquely tied to their lack of status, including difficulty accessing financial institutions, victimization, scams promising citizenship, and exploitation in housing, employment, and other areas affecting quality of life. To compound matters, undocumented immigrants are often afraid to report violators for fear of deportation.

For city governments across the country, these problems present themselves as issues of public safety and community integration. For cities with sizable immigrant populations, the need to respond is paramount, and municipalities have approached the challenges posed by illegal immigration in different ways. The City of New Haven decided to work in partnership with its immigrant population to address these problems.

## Engaging Immigrants

In 2004, the City of New Haven and the New Haven Police Department began to focus on ways to strengthen local government's ability to effectively manage the influx of new populations. The city engaged in a series of dialogues with members of the immigrant community and immigrant rights organizations about public safety and ways to strengthen the relationship between the city and the immigrant community. The New Haven Police Department, in partnership with community-based organizations and a local church, held separate dialogues with the community about policing issues. These interactions culminated in the submission of an October 2005 report written by Junta for Progressive Action, New Haven's oldest Latino community-based organization, and Unidad Latina en Acción, a New Haven grassroots immigrant rights organization. This report outlined six policy initiatives for the city to consider that would increase "public safety at the same time as improving the effectiveness of local government." Among the initiatives listed were the following:<sup>2</sup>

- 1) develop a New Haven Police Department policy of nonenforcement of federal civil immigration laws consistent with the city's policy of community policing;<sup>3</sup>
- 2) strengthen the relationship between the police and the immigrant community;
- 3) enforce state criminal wage laws through the New Haven Police Department;
- 4) create a municipal ID card for residents of the City of New Haven;
- 5) work with financial institutions to allow customers to open bank accounts without Social Security numbers;<sup>4</sup> and
- 6) create an Office of Immigrant Affairs.

After the city received the report it explored the proposals' feasibility and legality. Concomitantly, the Board of Aldermen's Human Services Committee held a series of public hearings to examine issues affecting the immigrant population and explore recommendations put forth by city residents. After doing its due diligence and at the urging of Mayor John DeStefano, the city set about implementing the initiatives. The New Haven Police Department began developing a nonenforcement policy, working with community groups to improve relations between the police and the community, and exploring models to facilitate their enforcement of criminal wage laws.



The city initiated discussions with banks about ways to facilitate access to bank accounts for the city’s unbanked populations, to protect their safety (see below) and promote their ability to build wealth. By the summer of 2006, the only two items that had not yet been tackled were the creation of a municipal ID card and the establishment of an Office of Immigrant Affairs. A tragic incident in the fall of 2006 would change this.

In October 2006, an undocumented immigrant by the name of Manuel Santiago was stabbed to death in Fair Haven, a neighborhood with a large Latino immigrant population. Santiago was the victim of a botched robbery. His story and the circumstances behind his killing touched a nerve with the immigrant community and created considerable community sentiment about the need for additional public safety measures to protect vulnerable immigrants.

Like many residents of Fair Haven, Santiago originally hailed from Mexico. He was 36 years old and worked at a local bakery. He had moved to New Haven in 2001 to join his brother and earn enough money to be able to send some home to support his mother. Because he was undocumented and did not have easy access to financial services, Santiago, like many others in the neighborhood, was a “walking ATM”—a term used for undocumented immigrants

who, because they carry cash on their person, make them an easy and likely target for robbers. While Santiago was cashing his paycheck, a robber lay in wait. When Santiago resisted the robbery, he was stabbed to death.

Santiago’s death galvanized the Fair Haven community; advocates, immigrants, and supporters alike called for the city to increase its efforts to protect immigrants. Unidad Latina en Acción organized a press conference at City Hall and renewed its call for the city to implement the resident card program, which would help immigrant access to banks and obviate the need to carry large sums of cash. The group met with Mayor DeStefano, who subsequently directed the city’s Community Services Administration to work on the creation of a municipal ID card program.

## Overview of the Elm City Resident Card

As originally conceived, the Elm City Resident Card was to address three primary issues of concern to the immigrant community:

- **Public Safety.** A lack of access to official U.S. government-issued identification made it



difficult for immigrants to open bank accounts and access financial services; and because they work primarily in a cash economy, immigrants were frequent targets of robberies and burglaries. A lack of identification and their undocumented status also made them reluctant to report crimes and/or serve as witnesses. To further complicate matters, immigrants expressed a general reluctance about contacting the police in any situation in which they were either a victim or witness for fear of deportation.

- **Lack of Access to Services.** Immigrants and service providers working with them articulated the general absence or lack of understanding by new immigrants of ways to access government services and information about government. Providers stressed the inability of community-based organizations to handle the increasing needs of the immigrant community and called for greater communication between the city and immigrant residents.
- **Marginalization.** Immigrants and providers identified a sense of marginalization and disorientation among some immigrants resulting from language and cultural barriers, immigration status, lack of familiarity with the city and its neighborhoods, and a lack of knowledge about individual rights and civil liberties. Some immigrants confirmed that they and their peers rarely ventured beyond the Fair Haven neighborhood and most did not know whether or not laws protecting city residents applied to them.

After determining that the City of New Haven had the legal authority to issue municipal IDs, the Community Services Administration proceeded

to design a card that would address immigrant concerns regarding safety and access to institutions, be appealing to the city population at large, and be able to meet security standards that would give the card legitimacy with city and banking institutions. New Haven tackled these concerns in the following ways:

- 1) **Safety and Access.** The city sought to create a card that would facilitate access to city services and financial institutions. It engaged local banks, in partnership with the Connecticut Bankers Association, in dialogue to address concerns about the security of the proposed ID card and authentication of documents. The Bankers Association hosted a forum where the city presented its ID card program and took questions from banks.
- 2) **Broad-Based Appeal.** Immigrant advocates stressed the need for the card to have appeal beyond the immigrant population; otherwise, undocumented immigrants could be easily identified by virtue of their cardholder status. Exploratory efforts were made to determine whether an ID card/debit card could be created in partnership with MasterCard, Visa, or another similar financial institution. This was not possible, however, because of the limits that would be placed on the amount of text that could go on the card and because card ownership would not remain with the city. The city decided to go with a debit card supplied by Parcxmart, a smart card and patent-pending payment system.
- 3) **Security Standards.** The city worked to create a card with security features that would make it difficult to forge; it created a training program for staff around authentication of documents; and it patterned the requirements for obtaining an ID card on those used by the U.S. Department of Treasury to obtain an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN) account.

The result was the creation of the Elm City Resident Card, a secure, multipurpose resident card available to all city residents, irrespective of their immigration status. The card's multiple features include the following:

- 1) **ID Card.** The card includes a resident's photo, name, address, date of birth, date of issue and expiration, and the cardholder's signature. Each card has an identifying nine-digit number.
- 2) **Library Card.** The card can be used to access any of the city's six public libraries.
- 3) **Debit Card.** The adult card has a debit chip in the reverse side that allows holders to load up to \$150 that can be used to pay for city parking meters and garages, and to purchase goods at about 50 participating stores.
- 4) **Access to City Services.** The card provides access to the Recycling Center and gives holders residential rates for the public beach and golf course. More recently, it has been used to determine resident eligibility for a public works program to discard large electronic products and for flu shots being dispensed at City Hall.
- 5) **Kid Card.** A separate children's card gives parents or guardians the option of listing both emergency contact and allergy information.

The card's numerous security features include UV text script, a faded city seal, a halftone photo, text script on the applicant's photo, and a custom-made Parcxmart debit-chip card. The cost is \$10 for adults and \$5 for children. The First City Fund Corporation made a grant available to the city to support the program for a one-year period.

## The Politics of the ID card

In order for the program to launch, legislative approval was required, including a favorable vote from the Finance Committee and a majority vote from the full Board of Aldermen. In preparation for this, the Community Services Administration engaged in community outreach and education efforts, while simultaneously seeking input and feedback from members of the Board of Aldermen. To that end, meetings were first held with the leadership of the Board, followed by an informational session of the full board, and individual conversations with Aldermen needing additional information. In preparation for the public hearing before the Finance Committee, JUNTA, Unidad Latina en Acción, and

the St. Rose de Lima Church engaged community members, encouraging broad-based participation in support of this initiative by way of testifying at the public hearing or attending the proceedings.

While there was some opposition to this initiative, it came largely from Southern Connecticut for Immigration Reform (SCTIR), an anti-illegal immigrant group with a small membership based in North Branford. The group held a number of sparsely attended rallies outside of City Hall, and created a series of flyers that were widely distributed throughout the city. On the Sunday before the final vote of the Board of Aldermen, SCTIR produced a flyer that was distributed outside of African American churches and left under windshield wipers of cars parked close to these churches.

As the city worked to obtain final approval for the card, the program began to generate an increasing amount of media attention, first local, then statewide and national. Stories about the initiative even prior to its launching appeared in the *New Haven Register*, *New Haven Independent*, *Hartford Courant*, *New York Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *The Washington Post*, ABC, CNN, NBC, Telemundo, and Univision as well as international media outlets from Europe and Central and South America. By the time the proposal was ready for a legislative vote, it seemed as though the eyes of the nation were on New Haven.

The public hearing before the Finance Committee was held on May 17. Before a packed room in the Aldermen's chambers, approximately 40 city residents testified, the overwhelming majority in favor of the initiative. For the fourth time in his 14-year tenure, Mayor DeStefano testified, stating:

*It is only through the recognition of the value and worth of each one among us, that we are able to employ the skills, the strengths, and vision of an entire community to the benefit of an individual . . . Living among us today—silently, almost invisibly, are some 12 million men, women, and children . . . they would not be here but for the complicit permission of the national government. Like the rest of us—they are not here by accident.*

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*So tonight we have a chance to end the silent complicity in our nation—by taking action together, here in New Haven . . . We can do that by way of a fundamental acknowledgment of an individual's worth and dignity—by giving a name to those among us. Not to name them by a stereotype. Or by an ignorance. Or a prejudice. Rather—to call our neighbor by their own name.*

After attaching several stipulations to the proposal—including that the initiative is funded from outside sources and there be periodic reports of the initiative—the Finance Committee unanimously voted the proposal out of committee. On June 4, the proposal came before the full Board of Aldermen. After testimony from numerous Aldermen, the board approved the initiative by a vote of 25 to 1.

### **New Haven understands that citizens themselves benefit when all residents feel they have a stake and are not pariahs.**

Two days later, in the early hours of the morning, Immigration and Customs Enforcement conducted a series of raids in the Fair Haven neighborhood. By day's end, they had arrested and detained 32 individuals. The timing of the raids, the way in which they were conducted, and the individuals targeted suggest that they were carried out in retaliation for the city's resident card program. Notwithstanding, the city resolved to continue with its effort to implement the program, despite reservations about its success following the raids.

### **Program Launching**

During the month of June and the first few weeks of July, the city worked on the final stages of the program. A new office was created to house the initiative, the Office of New Haven Residents. Its mandate from the very beginning was to administer the municipal ID card program as well as create additional programs and initiatives to assist new residents arriving in the city.

On Tuesday, July 24, before a national audience, the Elm City Resident Card program was officially launched with a ribbon-cutting ceremony attended by local elected officials, community leaders, and city

residents. Several hundred applicants turned out on the first day of the program. The following day, a line of applicants for the resident card program formed before city hall opened its doors, and residents were turned away because of capacity issues. By Friday morning, the line stretched an entire city block, with the first applicant standing in line at 4 a.m. City Hall was forced to triple the number of available staff and extend the office hours of operation.

Last October, the city launched a mobile unit, which travels to different neighborhoods in order to process card applications in community-based settings. The mobile unit has visited faith-based organizations, senior centers, and community-based organizations. Plans are underway to visit schools and homeless shelters.

Since the launching of the initiative, other cities interested in replicating the program have reached out to New Haven for information, guidance, and support. Currently, legislation has been introduced in San Francisco and New York City. Similar efforts are taking place in Madison, Wisconsin, and Lexington, Kentucky.

Opposition to the program has continued, with the efforts of SCTIR and a local anti-illegal immigrant newspaper focusing on trying to obtain applicant records under the Freedom of Information Act. They have so far been unsuccessful.

Efforts to encourage banks to accept the card as a primary form of identification in order to allow immigrant access to financial services continue. To date, the following banks accept the card as a secondary form of identification: Bank of America, Chase, Citibank, and Sovereign Bank. Other secondary forms of identification can include a utility bill or major credit card. Applicants for a bank account must first provide a primary state or federal identification, which for undocumented immigrants includes a valid passport or a consular ID card. The Community Services Administration has been working with the business clinic at Yale Law School and the Connecticut Bankers Association to think about ways to encourage all banks with branches in New Haven to accept the card, and to transition acceptance of the card as a primary form rather than secondary. The Community Services Administration is also planning to do additional research on how to strengthen the financial services available to local immigrant residents.

## Conclusion

Currently, there are an estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States. In the absence of comprehensive federal immigration reform, cities, towns, and states have enacted measures to address the challenges posed by individuals without status. Beginning in 2004, the City of New Haven has adopted policies that focus on integrating immigrants into the larger community and ensuring the public safety of all of its residents, irrespective of their status. In an op-ed piece for the *New York Times* (April 15, 2007) entitled, “A Safe Haven in New Haven,” Michelle Wucker wrote:

*New Haven understands that citizens themselves benefit when all residents feel they have a stake and are not pariahs. A place is far better off when people want to come to it than if they are fleeing in fear, and when practical solutions take precedence over mean-spirited solutions.*

While it is too early to measure the impact of the Elm City Resident Card program, anecdotal evidence suggests that it has resulted in improved relations between law enforcement and the community, led to the increased use of libraries and other city services by immigrants, and helped immigrants open bank accounts. The program has been very popular with residents. The city had established a goal of issuing 5,000 cards over a one-year period. This target was reached within the first five months of the program and, as of mid-January 2008, 5,101 cards have been issued.

**Kica Matos** is the administrator of the Community Services Administration at the City of New Haven.

**Joseph Guidry** created the illustrations for this article.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> New Haven was nicknamed “The Elm City” after instituting the first public tree-planting program in America. The program eventually produced a canopy of mature trees, including some large elms (Wikipedia).

<sup>2</sup> A seventh initiative—the translation into Spanish of the most frequently used city documents—was requested at a meeting with the Mayor. This was the first initiative to be launched.

<sup>3</sup> The federal government has authority over the creation and enforcement of immigration laws.

<sup>4</sup> This recommendation was aimed at helping banks understand that federal and state laws do not require individuals to have Social Security numbers to open a bank account, although laws requiring acceptable alternative forms of identification do exist and should be enforced.