



# OMAHA TOGETHER ONE COMMUNITY

**November 2011**

**Year-End Newsletter**

## About Omaha Together One Community:

*OTOC is a broad-based, multiethnic, interfaith organization. Members are institutions, primarily congregations, although like-minded organizations, such as neighborhood groups, community organizations and parents groups are welcome to become members.*



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## OTOC 15TH ANNIVERSARY CONVENTION CELEBRATES PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

On October 31, 2010, over 550 members of OTOC congregations and guests gathered for OTOC's 15th Anniversary Convention at Benson High School. Mayor Jim Suttle, Archbishop George Lucas, OPS Superintendent John Mackiel, Police Chief Alex Hayes and State Senator Brenda Council came to listen and respond as OTOC leaders celebrated 15 years of successful organizing that has made Omaha a better place in which to live, work and worship.

After listening to stories which emerged from over 120 house meetings during September and October of 2010, our leaders challenged delegates to sign up for action teams. Over 125 people responded and 75 came to a follow up training where they formed our 5 current action teams: Housing & Community Revitalization, Immigration, Refugee Support, Education & Youth Enrichment and

Workforce Development. Each action team has developed an agenda of concrete ways to improve our community. Go to [www.otoc.org](http://www.otoc.org) to learn more about OTOC's agenda and the current work of our Action Teams.



*Over 550 attendees filled Benson High School at OTOC's 15th Anniversary Celebration*

## 450 PRESS FOR REFORM AT OTOC IMMIGRATION FORUM

One news story began: "It was standing room only at Our Lady of Guadalupe's Social Hall last Monday night. The overflow crowd spilled out into the



circular driveway." The World Herald opened their article correctly observing that OTOC "wants to keep opposition to an Arizona-like immigration law at the forefront of state legislators' minds." Over 450 leaders from all over Omaha and four state Senators attended OTOC's Sept.

26 Immigration Forum featuring gripping testimony from immigrant leaders, business owners, academics, Methodist Bishop Anne Sherer-Simpson, Catholic Conference Director Jim Cunningham, and OPD Dep. Chief Schmaderer as OTOC pushed for comprehensive reform.



Over 450 leaders from across Omaha met at the OTOC Immigration Forum to push for comprehensive reform.



Parents at Gomez Heritage at their "Pathways to College" leadership sessions learn how to help their children succeed in school.



One example of the poor living conditions and code violations discovered by Housing & Refugee Action Teams at a home occupied by immigrants.

## IMMIGRATION ACTION TEAM TEACHES REASONS FOR REFORM

OTOC's Immigration Action Team got to work early in 2011 by meeting with 10 Omaha area Senators to express our opposition to "Arizona style" immigration legislation introduced in the Unicameral. OTOC Leaders met repeatedly with Omaha Senators Brenda Council, Burke Harr and Brad Ashford, all members of the key Judiciary Committee.

OTOC leaders testified against anti-immigrant bills at the March 2 Judiciary Committee public hearing where Senators Harr and Council led the opposition resulting in all immigration bills being held in committee for the upcoming 2012 session. The Action Team has held training sessions in 15 different institutions involving over 800 people who

came to learn more about this issue. They are now organizing house meetings in immigrant communities to hear more about their experiences with area law enforcement and immigration agents. OTOC will then organize a community meeting with OPD Dep. Chief Schmaderer and immigrant leaders to discuss how immigrants can better interact with OPD.

## HOUSING & REFUGEE GROUPS TEAM UP TO CLEAN UP APARTMENTS

When our Refugee Action team heard stories about cockroaches, mice and stench in common areas at an apartment complex occupied almost entirely by African refugees, they asked our Housing Action team for help. Together these teams taught refugee tenants that they can ask the city to inspect to determine if the apartments meet city housing codes.

After several months of training

sessions and meetings to assure the refugees they have the right to this help, Omaha code enforcement did an inspection blitz at the complex accompanied by OTOC leaders and 6 translators from the refugee communities.

The inspectors found numerous code violations and the landlord has had to make a number of repairs including replacing hall carpets, painting hallways and common areas and replacing kitchens in a

number of units. In August, the landlord issued eviction notices to several of the families who helped organize the inspection sweep. OTOC enlisted the support of Family Housing and Creighton Legal Clinic and the evictions were stopped.

As a result of the settlement of these wrongful evictions, the landlord has agreed to provide translation when tenants come to request repairs and to meeting monthly with a group of tenants.

## OTOC'S PUSH TO INCREASE INSPECTION FEES WINS 7-0 APPROVAL

OTOC's Housing Action Team worked for the last year to encourage the City of Omaha to raise the re-inspection fee when homes are found to be in violation of city housing codes. OTOC leaders learned that there are over 4,000 open cases where property owners have failed to make repairs once a housing code violation was found. Nearly 70% of these violations are in rental properties and many are longstanding violations.

Irresponsible landlords have had little incentive to make repairs since housing code enforcement lacked real teeth. Landlords could ignore the order to repair the home and the \$41 re-inspection fee was too low to appear on the property owner's credit report or be subject to collection efforts by the city.

OTOC met with council members over the last 6 months to explain why the \$41 fee needed to increase as a way to

turn up the heat on negligent landlords. Two council members had attempted this on their own in 2009 but met with strong opposition from the landlord association and the measure was defeated. Responding to OTOC leaders and allies who testified, all seven Council members voted at their October 25th meeting to increase the re-inspection fee from \$41 to \$125 over the next 3 years. OTOC leaders continue to seek ways to improve housing.

## WORKFORCE ACTION TEAM WANTS MORE SUPPORT FOR JOB SEEKERS

OTOC's Workforce Team is pushing to improve customer service and job training at the federally funded workforce center located at 24th and Lake Street. Participants in OTOC house meetings reported that center staff had been unresponsive and unhelpful in recent years. OTOC joined with the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance (IMA) to put pressure for improvement on the

agencies responsible for managing the center.

Mayor Suttle appointed Heartland Workforce Solutions (HWS) to assume management of the center and OTOC and IMA have met with the new management on a regular basis and attended board meetings to express our concerns. OTOC leaders continue to visit the site with job seekers to

monitor their progress in improving customer service and job training.



Rev. Michael Williams questions HWS Director Jan Kauk the OTOC June 12th Delegates Assembly.

## ALLIANCE SCHOOLS INCREASE PARENT ENGAGEMENT IN EDUCATION

OTOC's Institute of Public Life (IPL) has partnered with several OPS schools to help parents learn how to participate more actively in the education of their children.



Kellom parents share at Heritage Night

Parents at Gomez Heritage, Spring Lake Magnet, Yates Community Center, Fontenelle and Kellom Elementary have worked with OTOC's IPL on a variety of strategies to engage parents in working to improve the climate for education in their schools, communities and homes. Each group of parents determines their own priorities and parents have organized events such as a Family

Heritage night for the diverse families at Kellom and immigration workshops at Spring Lake with lawyers and the Mexican Consul. Parents at Gomez have worked with the IPL trainer, Elyse Johnson, to develop a Pathways to College Leadership Academy to better understand how to help their children succeed in school from kindergarten through college.

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### What is OTOC and OTOC's IPL?

**OTOC** is a coalition of over 25 congregations and community organizations which work together across the lines of race, religion, economic class, language and national origin to improve the quality of life for ordinary families in Omaha and Nebraska. OTOC is rigorously non-partisan, never endorsing candidates or parties. We do, however, work in the public arena to support policies, initiatives and practical strategies to help working families succeed. Go to <http://www.otoc.org> for much more information about OTOC and our work together. Donations to OTOC are not tax deductible.

**OTOC's Institute of Public Life (IPL)** is a separate 501(c)3 non-profit organization that provides leadership development and training in the skills of public life to leaders of OTOC member congregations; to "Alliance Schools" which join with IPL and OTOC to promote the active involvement of parents in the education of their children; and to refugee organizations and other community groups. Donations to OTOC's IPL are tax deductible.

## REFUGEE LEADERSHIP ACADEMY TEACHES NEW SKILLS, CONFIDENCE

After holding house meetings with 150 of the 20,000 African and Asian refugees living in Omaha, OTOC's Refugee Support Action Team recognized that many refugees face daunting challenges as they attempt to settle their families here. Imagine finding a job, a home, transportation and schools for your children in a new country where you don't speak the language or know the culture, all within three months of your arrival.

OTOC's IPL and the Action Team have organized a Refugee Leadership Academy which meets every other week for 3 months to help refugee leaders understand how to help their communities address fundamental issues. Each

session involves a workshop on organizing and leadership development and a workshop by local experts on topics such as housing rights, job search and employment rights, accessing healthcare, public transportation, the role of police departments and helping children succeed in school.

So far, over 40 refugee leaders from 7 different communities have participated in 2 rounds of training sessions. Refugee leaders will share their new skills to help their communities address real problems that are affecting families in their community.

Refugee leaders are currently working with OTOC

leaders on improving housing code enforcement at apartments with high concentrations of refugee families and adding bus route signs and route maps at OMetro bus shelters.



Refugee leaders learn how to do individual meetings at Refugee Leadership Academy