



# Abdullah Kiatamba of African Immigrant Services (AIS)

Transforming immigrants into change-makers requires developing leadership, confidence

A Civic Caucus Review of Minnesota's Public Policy Process Interview

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## Present

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## Summary

Those feeling the impact of an issue should be part of the solution, according to African Immigrant Services (AIS) executive director Abdullah Kiatamba. Currently, the main work of AIS revolves around its From Observers to Leaders (FOTL) Project, funded by the Bush Foundation. Kiatamba says many immigrants say they didn't come to the U.S. to change the system and feel they have nothing to offer at the table where decisions are being made.

Through its FOTL Project, AIS attempts to change that outlook. The organization works to develop leadership in the immigrant community and to give people the confidence to participate in creating solutions to community problems. Kiatamba describes the work of AIS in organizing parents in the Osseo School District to set the agenda for the first time by making a list of issues they wanted the district to address.


Major issues put forward by the parents included making sure the community is involved in designing the solution to problems, getting cultural responsiveness in the schools through staff training in race and culture, and the importance of hearing all the voices in creating a solution. The parents have also pushed the district to hire more faculty of color.

Kiatamba talks of the importance of creating economic stability in the immigrant community. Without that, he asserts, it's hard to transform community members into change-makers.

## Biography

Abdullah Kiatamba is executive director of African Immigrant Services (AIS), a community-based, nonprofit organization based in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota, that works to empower African immigrants and refugees to integrate into mainstream communities and to increase their participation in civic life. A native of Liberia, Kiatamba is former chairman of the Minnesota African Task Force Against Ebola and former publisher/editor of the Minnesota-based publication *The Liberian Journal*.

## Background

Since September 2015, the Civic Caucus has been undertaking a review of the quality of Minnesota's past, present and future public-policy process for anticipating, defining and resolving major community problems. On Nov. 27, 2016, the Caucus issued its report based on that review,  *Looking Back, Thinking Ahead: Strengthening Minnesota's Public-Policy Process*. The Civic Caucus interviewed Abdullah Kiatamba of African Immigrant Services (AIS) to learn about its work to increase civic engagement and leadership in immigrant communities and to foster broader participation of those communities in developing solutions to public-policy problems.

**About African Immigrant Services (AIS).** Established in 2005 by African immigrants to build social capital and community power, AIS promotes cross-cultural understanding and engagement. It seeks to influence a more informed public perception and narrative about the assets and contributions of African immigrants and refugees.

AIS works to inspire civic engagement, to build community assets, and to overcome systemic and cultural barriers. The organization believes that when we expand the space for engagement and increase opportunities for leadership, those most affected by a wide range of problems will discover their own solutions and make change.

The organization has a five-person staff, 100 volunteers and a 25-member advisory board.

## Discussion

**Those affected by policy need to be part of the solution.** Abdullah Kiatamba, executive director of African Immigrant Services (AIS), said making that happen is a goal of his organization. AIS is focused on community engagement, systems change, grassroots organizing and shifting policy. "Those feeling the impact of an issue should be part of the solution," he said. He believes that makes for a more sustainable solution.

**Currently, the main work of AIS is its From Observers to Leaders (FOTL) Project.** Funded by a 2013 Bush Foundation Community Innovation grant, the FOTL Project facilitates and transforms community learning and reflection into action and change. Kiatamba explained that a lot of immigrants say they didn't come to the U.S. to change the system. They think they should stay in their little community and not try to sit at the table with "the sophisticated folks," he said.

"Our goal is to say you can be part of the solution to things like racial disparities, racism and anti-immigrant policies," Kiatamba said. "Those affected must be involved and be part of the solution. Immigrants are complaining, but they aren't at the table."

**No problem ever solved itself.** "A problem has to be solved by somebody," Kiatamba said. "How collectively can we come up with solutions? If solutions get bigger, the problems get smaller. If the solutions get smaller, the problems get bigger. Otherwise we have to wait for the next generation. But that's not how things change or lives get improved."

"America works better, and you only succeed there, if the system works for you," Kiatamba said. "The system has to be shaped. We have to tell the system it's not working for me and it has to work for me."

**We need to make the schools a better place for everybody.** Kiatamba said AIS sponsored a meeting that drew 350 people to discuss issues they are passionate about. One major one was that the school systems should be more welcoming of new people and new cultures. He said people at the meeting felt their relationship with the Osseo School District "is not going anywhere. You're not told what their agenda is. People said the district should ask what parents need and what their kids need. We need to make the schools a better place for everybody."

AIS help organize 200 parents in the Osseo School District. Kiatamba said the parents made a list of the issues they wanted the district to respond to. "It was the first time the parents set the agenda," he said. Organizing in that way gives people the confidence that we can get long-term solutions from the immigrant communities, he stated.

Kiatamba said the parents worked at creating consciousness so the school system would recognize that race impacts student outcomes. "How can we disrupt the prediction that because I'm black, I won't do well in school?" he asked. "The school system and the community must work together."

The parent group pushed the Osseo district to come up with a race policy. And the group and AIS worked to increase participation in the 2016 election, resulting in a huge turnout in Brooklyn Park and Brooklyn Center, both part of the Osseo district and home to many African immigrants.

**AIS does community organizing around system change and policy change.** "We must find the solution together," Kiatamba emphasized, "*with* me, rather than *for* me. He chaired the Minnesota African Task Force Against Ebola and said the task force led to the best community response to the Ebola crisis in the entire country. The response received national news coverage.

Kiatamba said the goal of AIS's work is to show people that "there is wisdom in *our* community and that we are not *their* problem."

**I don't see anybody who looks like us.** Kiatamba noted that children of color make up 52 percent of the students in the Osseo School District, but 95 percent of the district's staff is white. "We need to create a more diverse staff," he said. "When I go to the district's office, I don't see anybody who looks like us. AIS and the parent group have pushed to hire more faculty of color."

He said sometimes the immigrants are loud, but they are not aggressive. "But teachers will panic," he contended. "There is a lack of cultural competence and responsiveness. The nature of the district is to respond in the traditional way. The school district will not hold itself accountable."

Kiatamba said there are three main issues in the immigrants' relationship with the Osseo School District:

1. How do we make sure the community is involved in designing the solution for problems?
2. How do we get cultural responsiveness? How does racial equity impact the education of our students? "The principal is our advocate," Kiatamba stated. "But training in race and culture is resisted by the staff."
3. How do we get authentic engagement? "Before any policy changes, we should hear all the voices in creating a solution," he said. "Accountability around teaching is strategically more culturally responsive. How do we fast-track teachers of color, because there are now more white folks in the pipeline?"

**Some of the African immigrants AIS works with haven't integrated into society** . In response to an interviewer's question about whether the immigrants have found employment, Kiatamba said, "Minnesota is very welcoming. The largest concentration of Liberians in the U.S. is in Minnesota. If it weren't cold, probably 10 times as many would be here."

He stated that there are a lot of social services here to help the immigrants find work. Some of them go through professional training to get jobs that pay well. "But there is a transition process," Kiatamba said. "Some with Ph.Ds. are working as waitresses."

The immigrants must learn English to become more attractive to employers, he said. "Long term, we must create economic stability in the community. That's an important aspect of becoming change-makers."

**Many groups are doing different things to ultimately produce a more just community.** An interviewer asked for examples of organizations that stand out in bringing ethnic and immigrant groups into being part of the solution to problems. Kiatamba noted several organizations: the Citizens League, the Civic Caucus, the African American Leadership Forum, TakeAction Minnesota and Black Lives Matter. He called Black Lives Matter more of a mobilizing force in the community, while AIS does more long-term community organizing.

"Minnesota is a progressive community," he said. "There are lots of progressive groups doing amazing things."

**AIS collaborates with a number of African immigrant organizations.** An interviewer noted that African immigrants in Minnesota come from a number of countries, including Liberia, Ethiopia, Somalia, Ghana and Sudan. He asked how the Liberians interact with other communities that have different backgrounds.

"We connect our tragedies together," Kiatamba responded. "People handle things from their own experiences." He noted, for example, that Somalis have clans. He said AIS has done a lot to build a good relationship with the Somali immigrant community. "We try to have all groups in the room."

An interviewer commented that there are things America could learn about community engagement from the way African communities interact and solve problems. If we don't include people from immigrant cultures, we miss all the wisdom they bring with them. "We must draw from that wisdom," the interviewer said. "Some have survived war, hunger and other terrible things. We must draw from the wisdom from those cultures to solve problems."

**All of the work of AIS has three elements.** Kiatamba described the elements as (1) create consciousness around problems and wisdom in the community; (2) determine what will lead to change in the system; and (3) organize the community to bring leadership to the problem. "Throwing money at a problem is not a solution," he said. "That's creating a problem."

**A number of communities are collaborating closely.** Kiatamba noted a lot of collaboration among immigrant communities, including those in Brooklyn Center, Brooklyn Park, New Hope and Champlin. "We have to determine how to develop an immigrant agenda to deal with problems," he said. "We have to find a niche and have impact as a model for other situations. Otherwise we get stretched all over."

Kiatamba mentioned AIS's work on the voter ID issue as an example of how the immigrant community can affect a general statewide problem.

**Being at the table is crucial.** An interviewer asked Kiatamba to what extent having members of the immigrant community at the table where decisions are being made can make a difference. The interviewer noted that even if one representative of the community is at a meeting, it can change the whole tenor of the meeting.

Kiatamba responded that being at the table is crucial and has been an issue. "White people can be good," he said, "but they're missing the perspective of other people in the community, who can help their allies to think in a broader way. Getting different perspectives is important. We need to get engagement from everybody, so we know what our right and left hands are doing."

"Immigrants think they're not smart enough to be at the table," he continued. "Leadership development is the issue. We're trying to create a pipeline of leadership in the immigrant community. We help people develop confidence."

Kiatamba said we need to create a more integrative community: one that is more inclusive and more just, where people are respected and their cultures are valued. "We are one common people with a shared humanity," he said.