

# COMMUNITIES MUST BE READY

By SCOTT LANG



City and town governments across the state are confronted daily with the complex challenges of the 21st century, not the least of which is the pressing issue of long-term municipal financial sustainability. While communities like New Bedford are working hard to promote new growth, create jobs, and enhance their roles as cultural and economic hubs, residents across Massachusetts continue their struggles with the effects of an economic crisis.

Added to this mix is the changing nature of our population, and the resulting shift in the service needs of our residents. Data from the 2010 U.S. Census show that while the overall growth rate is slow in Massachusetts, the state's diversity is increasing quickly. Like all communities, New Bedford strives to ensure that each of our residents, in neighborhoods across the city, has access to all of the

---

*Scott Lang has been the Mayor of New Bedford since 2006 and is president of the Massachusetts Mayors' Association.*



# TO MEET CHANGING HUMAN SERVICE NEEDS

services and resources that he or she needs to enjoy a high quality of life and fully participate in our community. We work closely and creatively with a wide range of organizations to ensure that the needs of each unique population group are met, and we have found that such partnerships are essential to success.

## Increasing Diversity

New Bedford has a population of 95,072, according to the 2010 U.S. Census, making it the sixth-largest city in Massachusetts. From 2000 to 2010, the city's population grew by 1.4 percent.

Although 2010 census data has not yet been released in full, the latest data from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey (2008) show that New Bedford has experienced decreases in both young and senior residents in recent years, while the population of adults aged 25 to 55 continues to rise. A large part of this boom in adults in the prime working ages (25-55) can be attributed to a growing immigrant population. While New Bedford has seen a 10 percent decrease in white residents, as this demographic

has migrated to surrounding communities, there has been significant growth in the Hispanic, African American and Asian population over the past twenty years.

Historically, New Bedford has been host to immigrants from Portugal, Cape Verde, Puerto Rico and Latino countries. Over the past ten years alone, however, the Hispanic/Latino (Central and South American) population has climbed from 10.2 percent of the city's residents to 16.7 percent.

We believe that our strength lies in our diversity. We regularly celebrate the contributions of our city's many cultures with flag raisings, events and festivals, and we stay in close contact with the embassies and consulates of the countries from which our residents have immigrated. (In fact, the office of the Consul of Portugal is right across the street from City Hall.)

The city has worked hard to develop services to meet the needs of the city's growing immigrant population. The following are some examples:

- Over the course of the past five years, the Neighborhood Community Outreach Unit, established in the city's



## COMMUNITIES MUST BE READY TO MEET CHANGING HUMAN SERVICE NEEDS

### Demographic Shifts in New Bedford's Population

	2000	2010
Caucasian/White	78.86%	67.9%
Hispanic/Latino	10.21%	16.7%
African American	4.39%	5.2%
Native American	0.62%	0.4%
Asian	0.65%	0.91%
Pacific Islander	0.05%	0%
Other	5.92%	4.4%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Office of Human Services, has provided constituent services to more than 10,000 New Bedford residents in five different languages.

- The city collaborated closely with numerous community-based organizations, the Community Foundation of Southeastern Massachusetts, the Executive Office of Health and Human Services and the Patrick administration, and members of the state's congressional delegation in order to minimize the impact on families of the 2007 Immigration and Customs Enforcement raid on the Michael Bianco factory.
- Residents applying for U.S. passports at City Hall are offered linguistic support in Spanish, Portuguese and Cape Verdean Creole.

The city has worked hard to develop services to meet the needs of the city's growing immigrant population.

- Major renovations were completed at the Casa da Saudade branch library, which highlights the contributions of the Portuguese community to New Bedford and commemorates its rich history.
- An initiative consisting of regular conversation circles was launched at the Howland-Green and Casa da Saudade branch libraries to help non-native English speakers with their English.
- Opportunities were expanded for free English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) instruction for adults and their children through the Office of Human Services' Shining Lights/New Beginnings programs, which have served more than 200 immigrants over the past five years.
- The Local Consumer Protection Program, established in 2008 using grants from the Massachusetts Office of the

Attorney General, provides free consumer assistance and mediation services in three languages.

- The city invested in simultaneous translation equipment that is available for use by all departments to provide linguistic support at public meetings and conferences.
- Multilingual community forums, focus groups and a public survey were used to enhance public participation and input in the search process for a new superintendent of the New Bedford Public Schools.
- Linguistic support in Spanish and Portuguese was provided for citizens with limited English at polling centers for local elections.

### Elder Services

Interestingly, and counter to national trends, census data indicate that New Bedford's population is not growing older. Although the city ranks seventh in Massachusetts in terms of its elder population, it has seen a small decrease in residents aged 60 or older, from 19,162 in 2000 to 18,765 in 2010. To promote the well-being of this important group of residents, the New Bedford Council on Aging and its partners provide a range of services:

- Five senior centers feature a wide array of social activities, including regular table games, discussion groups, exercise classes, yoga, painting, choral groups, computer classes, and dancing.
- The Senior Law Project offers free legal services to residents in areas such as public benefits, housing, and document preparation.
- Regular blood pressure clinics, flu immunization clinics, and vision and hearing clinics are offered.
- The city provides advocacy services with administrative agencies around Medicare, Medicaid and pharmacy needs; offers crisis intervention services; runs a durable medical equipment loan program; runs a tax preparation assistance program; and provides transportation to health appointments.
- The city's Meals on Wheels program delivers hot meals to homebound seniors.
- The city coordinates a senior travel program, with destinations ranging from Washington, D.C., to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston to Atlantic City.

New Bedford recognizes the tremendous resource that this group is in our community, and we encourage volunteerism in many areas to allow our elders to share their expertise and knowledge with younger generations.

### Accuracy and Innovation

The city is now working to ensure that our entire, diverse population is being counted accurately. We believe that the reported 2010 Census figures are lower than the actual number of people in our city, and we feel that this is directly due to the language of the census forms. In New Bedford, where the primary language of a substantial number of individuals

is not English, using a form printed only in English presents an obstacle to having an accurate count. Making census forms available in Portuguese, Spanish, K'iche and Creole would have ensured a more accurate count of the people who live within the city's boundaries.

If the purpose of the census is to count every person, regardless of their immigration status, then the federal government's methods must be user-friendly. New Bedford is consulting with the Massachusetts Secretary of State's Office to determine whether the city should formally challenge its count and join with other cities who believe that they have been undercounted.

As populations continue to grow or change in our communities, it is essential that local governments have the capacity for innovation and responsiveness in the provision of services, and that we continue to build partnerships with community-based organizations whose work is so essential to the vitality of our neighborhoods. ❁