

Building Respect in Diverse Groups to Enhance Sensitivity Meeting Addresses Key Issues

Wednesday, 20 August 2008

On Tuesday, August 19, 2008, Building Respect in Diverse Groups to Enhance Sensitivity (BRIDGES) held its bi-monthly meeting at the Shenandoah Country Club in West Bloomfield. BRIDGES is a forum of constructive dialogue between federal and local government representatives and leaders of the Arab American community, which enhances understanding and the concept of trust. This week's meeting hosted representatives from various government agencies, including: the U.S. Department of Treasury, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Among the topics discussed was the Department of Treasury's Charitable Giving Guidelines, which many have claimed are too vague and ambiguous. Many in attendance were openly concerned with the risk that individual donors face when contributing to a charity with connections to the Middle East. A representative from the Treasury Department agreed that there are many ongoing challenges that must be addressed to help protect the integrity of good faith charities and donors. Also discussed during the meeting were the FBI Guidelines that the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) will soon release, which many fear will specifically single out Arabs and Muslims. The new guidelines will reportedly give the FBI authority to investigate individuals without any evidence of wrongdoing, relying instead on a "terrorist" profile. During the meeting, an FBI representative spoke about discrepancies between media reports and the actual draft of the guidelines which were viewed by certain government agencies earlier this year. The meeting also featured remarks by a representative of USCIS, who spoke about the improvements made by the organization to accelerate the processing of Naturalization applications. He stated that there was a significant increase in Naturalization applications in recent months, and that the USCIS had taken considerable steps to process these applications at a faster rate. The meeting went on to address several other matters of mutual interest to the Arab American community and government agencies. BRIDGES is currently Co-chaired by Imad Hamad, ADC Sr. National Advisor and Regional Director, and Daniel Sutherland, Officer for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, Department of Homeland Security.