

Alameda County

Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs

Implementation Study Report

"Personal guidance, trust, and access to information can empower individuals to move from merely surviving to leading."

- Focus Group Participant

540,000+

immigrants & refugees
in Alameda County

1 in 3

county residents
are foreign-born

500%

increase in rapid
response hotline calls since the start of 2025

A Decade of Commitment: The Road to ACOIRA

Dec 2016



Ad Hoc Committee Established

Supervisors Richard Valle, Wilma Chan, and Scott Haggarty launch the Ad Hoc Committee on Immigrant and Refugee Rights - convening public forums across all five districts and examining ten county agencies.

Dec 2021



Landmark Report Published

[The State of Immigrant and Refugee Rights in Alameda County](#) - authored by Dr. Peter Mancina of Oxford - documents persistent gaps and makes 10 recommendations, including the explicit call to create a dedicated Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs.

Feb - Oct
2025



Renewed Urgency: ACT for All

Following the 2024 election, Supervisors Nikki Fortunato Bas and Elisa Márquez establish ACT for All, an Ad Hoc Committee to coordinate a proactive countywide response. The Board approves \$7MM+ for immigrant and refugee legal defense, hotline services, and community organizing.

Feb 2025



County Invests over \$800K+ to Stabilize Refugee Provider Community

A Decade of Commitment: The Road to ACOIRA

Aug 2025



OIRA Recommendation Reaffirmed at ACT Committee

Oct 2025



OIRA Authorization and Initial Investment

ACT for All formally returns to the Board with the recommendation to create ACOIRA. SSA allocates two positions and a pilot budget of \$450K. Two landmark ordinances establish ICE-Free Zones and a countywide Immigration Enforcement Response Plan.

Dec 2025



Language Access Commitment Affirmed

BOS directed CAO staff to compile and prepare a language access utilization report with recommendations on how to improve employee and community knowledge/awareness of language access services.

Jan 2026



Ice Free Zones & County-Wide Immigration Enforcement Response Plan

BOS unanimously passed my office's two immigration proposals for a coordinated countywide strategy to protect immigrant communities by ensuring rapid response, safeguarding access to public services, and establishing ICE-free zones on county property.

Methodology: How This Study Was Conducted

Be the Change Consulting, in partnership with LikeWater Consulting and Immigrant Legal Defense, led a five-part research process grounded in community voice, comparative analysis, and county stakeholder expertise.

Peer Jurisdiction Scan

Comparative analysis of immigrant affairs offices examining staffing, budget, placement, and community accountability models.

County Stakeholder Interviews

Interviews with county agency leaders, department heads, elected officials' offices, and philanthropic partners to surface internal capacity, gaps, and political landscape.

Community Focus Groups

Focus groups with immigrant community members and service providers - nominated by each of the five Board Supervisors - to center lived experience in the findings.

Steering Committee

A Steering Committee comprised of electeds, senior county staff, and philanthropic partners provided ongoing guidance and feasibility input throughout the process.

Community Advisory Body

A nine-member CAB - one rep per supervisorial district plus coalition partners - reviewed all research and developed the recommendations for the office.

The Community Advisory Body: Community in the Driver's Seat

Who They Are

In January 2026, Supervisor Márquez invited each Board member to nominate community members to serve on the CAB. Nine members were selected to reflect diverse ethnic, racial, linguistic, and geographic backgrounds:

- One representative from each of the five supervisorial districts
- One representative each from the County's rapid response coalitions (ACILEP, ACCORD, ACUDIR, as well as APILO to ensure AANHPI representation)

Members brought lived experience, direct service expertise, and deep systems knowledge to the process.

How They Worked

Reviewed comparative models, county stakeholder interviews, and landscape scans - the CAB analyzed Alameda County's current state and developed every recommendation in this report.

Four Facilitated Sessions

1

Landscape & Context

Reviewed peer jurisdiction scan and county stakeholder interview findings; established shared understanding of current state.

2

Strengths & Gaps

Analyzed Alameda County's existing assets and opportunity gaps; surfaced design principles to guide recommendations.

3

Design Decisions

Deliberated on office placement, staffing model, core functions, and community accountability structure.

4

Budget & Work Plan

Finalized budget recommendations, 2-year pilot priorities, and enabling conditions for launch.

What Alameda County Has Built: Real Strengths to Build From

The honest framing is not 'what is wrong with Alameda County' - it is what would it look like to connect what already exists, resource it adequately, and hold it accountable to the communities it serves.

Genuine Political Will

The Board has passed two landmark ordinances establishing ICE-Free Zones and a countywide Response Plan. Supervisors' offices are directly engaged. Alameda County is not debating whether to act - it is figuring out how.

County Investment in Immigrant Refugee Services

SSA administers numerous programs. AC Health stood up Community Navigators for real-time problem-solving. The Community Development Agency connects unincorporated residents to housing and basic needs. The groundwork already exists.

Protective Law Enforcement Policies

The Sheriff does not honor ICE civil detainees and actively partners with CBOs to educate residents. The DA has written policies prohibiting staff from engaging with ICE. Probation does not inquire about immigration status. Amplifying awareness of these policies is within immediate reach.

Nationally Recognized Legal Infrastructure

The Public Defender's Immigration Representation Unit provides representation across the full spectrum of immigration proceedings. Investments in local CBOs continue to expand removal defense capacity.

Rapid Response Infrastructure

Multiple coalitions are coordinating on emergency response. Mutual aid networks and volunteer foot patrols are actively filling service gaps. Community organizations are functioning as real-time information hubs - this is work the county did not organize and should not seek to take over.

A Rich and Capable CBO Ecosystem

We have a network of community organizations doing navigation, legal defense, rapid response, and trust-building. OIRA enters a space where community organizations have been convening & serving for years - this means partnership, not top-down coordination, from the start.

What the Community Told Us

In addition to the CAB, focus groups were held with immigrant and refugee community members nominated by each County Supervisor. Focus group participants were asked what they hoped for from an Alameda County that truly welcomes and supports immigrants. Their answers were not primarily about services. They were about dignity, trust, and being seen.

Trust & Safety

Community members need to trust that interacting with county services will not expose them or their families to enforcement.

Language Access

Services must be available in the many languages spoken by Alameda County's immigrant and refugee communities - not just the eight threshold languages.

Legal Services

Access to qualified legal counsel remains the single most consistent and urgent need identified across all groups.

Where Services Are

Navigating government buildings is a barrier - services need to be delivered in community spaces people already trust.

Stability & Dignity

Community members are not only navigating legal status - they face housing instability, healthcare gaps, and workforce barriers simultaneously.

From Surviving to Leading

The goal is not just services - it is supporting people to develop into community leaders who help others find what they found.

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The county can create programs, but it is community organizations that breathe life into them. Without them, many of these resources simply would not reach those who need them most.

- Community Focus Group Participant



"In times of crisis, they have been the first to respond - distributing food, providing emotional support, and connecting families with vital resources."

- Community Focus Group Participant

What We Learned from Other Jurisdictions

Every office studied in this analysis was created because a small group of community members insisted it had to exist. Alameda County is no different.

Where should it sit with County structure?

Placement impacts are interlinked. Executive-level placement maximizes cross-departmental authority. Service agency placement maximizes systems access. The strongest models combine both.

What is the best way to connect services & referrals?

The most effective models build and manage networks of CBOs and legal providers, often with funding attached, rather than handling intake and casework internally.

What is its relationship to legal services?

Legal services are the highest-demand function across every model reviewed. No jurisdiction operates effectively without a well-resourced, protected connection to legal defense capacity.

How should it be funded?

The most resilient models layer multiple streams: General Fund, targeted state grants, and philanthropic partnerships structured to complement rather than replace public dollars.

How does it stay accountable?

Community accountability is the least developed dimension across all peer models. Alameda County has the opportunity to set a higher standard by building genuine accountability mechanisms into the office's design from day one.

The Challenge is Not Absence - It is Fragmentation

Two parallel crises are unfolding on different timelines. The first is immediate: escalating federal enforcement, community fear, and acute legal and safety needs. The second is looming: significant funding losses that will strip resources from the CBOs delivering the most critical services. OIRA must be designed to hold both.

No Shared Picture of Community Need

There is currently no systematic way to understand which populations are coming in, what they are asking for, or where benefits are being denied - because the coordinating function to gather this has never existed.

Broken Referral & Navigation System

"I continue to refer people to a hotline that I know won't be manned, because I don't have another resource." - Focus Group Participant. The absence of coherent referral infrastructure strains providers and prevents people from accessing services that already exist.

Political Will Without Implementation

The January 27 ICE-Free Zone and Response Plan ordinances are Board directives, not yet implemented realities. Language access policy implementation remains uneven across departments. The gap between mandate and practice is the defining challenge.

CBO Infrastructure at Risk of Fracture

The county does not deliver most services directly - CBOs do. And they are facing a funding cliff, capacity constraints, and geographic concentration that does not match where needs are growing. Any strategy that does not stabilize CBO infrastructure is building on sand.

Law Enforcement Partnership Needs Care

The Sheriff and DA are doing more than most community members know - but live issues remain: ICE arrests reportedly occurring near county facilities, and community groups have been explicit that law enforcement presence at OIRA itself would make the office feel unsafe.

Recommendation: Mission & Vision

VISION

A county where strong public infrastructure, partnerships, and data-informed policies, programs and strategies ensure immigrant communities are supported, protected from harm, and able to fully participate in the social, civic, and economic life of the region.

MISSION

To build and sustain the infrastructure that supports immigrant communities by convening partners, coordinating programs and services, analyzing data to identify gaps, and advancing policies and investments that strengthen outcomes for immigrant and refugee residents.

Recommendation: Eight Core Functions

These eight functions represent OIRA's permanent, standing responsibilities - the work the office holds in perpetuity, regardless of the political moment or phase of implementation.

Community Partnership & Engagement

Convening community-led efforts; elevating community voice in policy and budget decisions; managing CBO contracts for rapid response, legal services, and engagement.

Population Needs Assessment, Planning & Evaluation

Ongoing assessment of population needs, service utilization, and program outcomes; developing shared indicators with CBOs and county departments.

Clearinghouse & Navigation Hub

Maintaining a multilingual hub for service referrals and county system navigation to connect residents with what they need.

Public-Private Partnership

Cultivating private resources to support the office's mission; maintaining mechanisms for blending public and philanthropic funding beyond what either can support alone.

County Coordination, Compliance & Capacity Building

Coordinating cross-county policy implementation; providing technical assistance and training; tracking external compliance and language access violations.

Policy Development & Advocacy

Tracking policy changes at local, state, and federal levels; informing and shaping county policymaking from the inside.

Communications & Intergovernmental Affairs

Public-facing narrative strategy; proactive communication about county activities; coordination with peer offices and local jurisdictions.

Learning & Innovation

Cross-jurisdictional learning; sharing best practices; building the county's capacity to adapt as conditions change.

Recommendation: Office Placement & Staffing

Vision

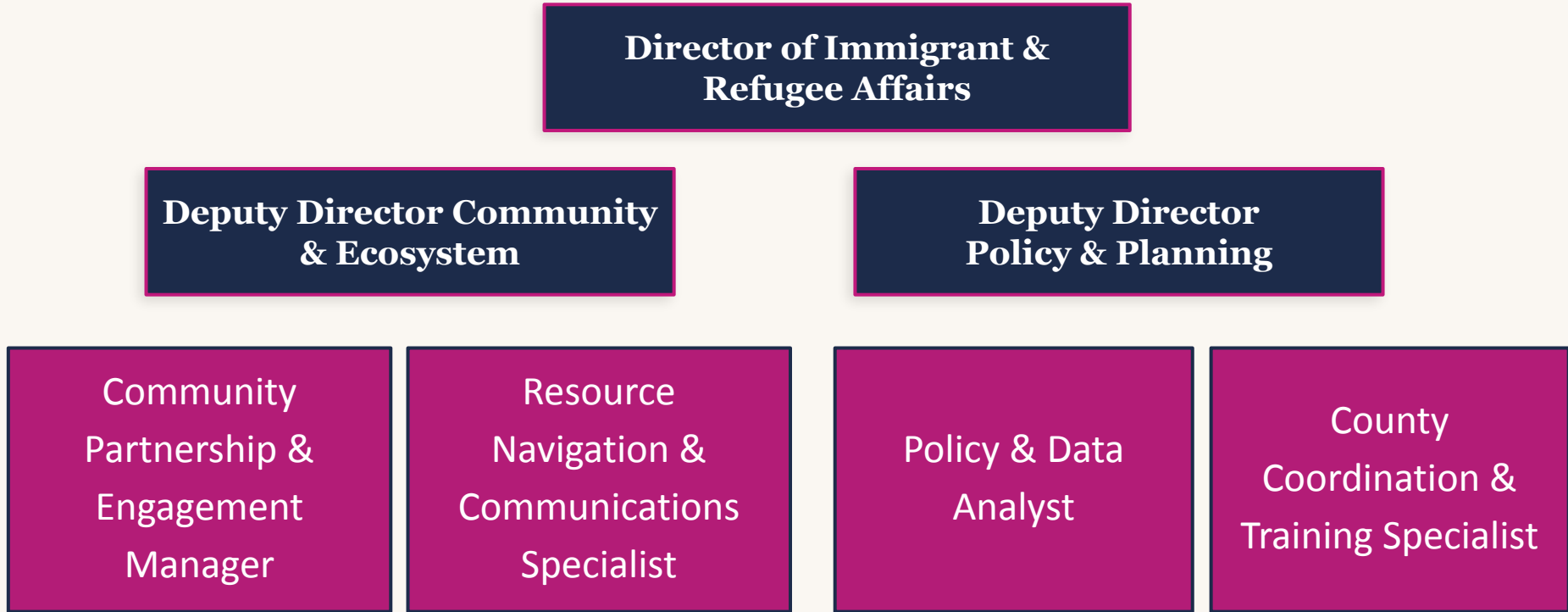
The CAB envisions this office as an independent entity within the County, with a two-year incubation period, where it is supported by the CAO (ideally, the CAB's preference) or another department (if necessary) during the 2-year pilot to establish itself. Through conversations with the steering committee and county staff the technical constraints and context of Alameda County came to light, illuminating that the CAB won't have the level of intra-county administrative and operational insight to make useful recommendations.

Pilot Phase Placement Criteria

This incubation period choice for OIRA placement should consider the following criteria:

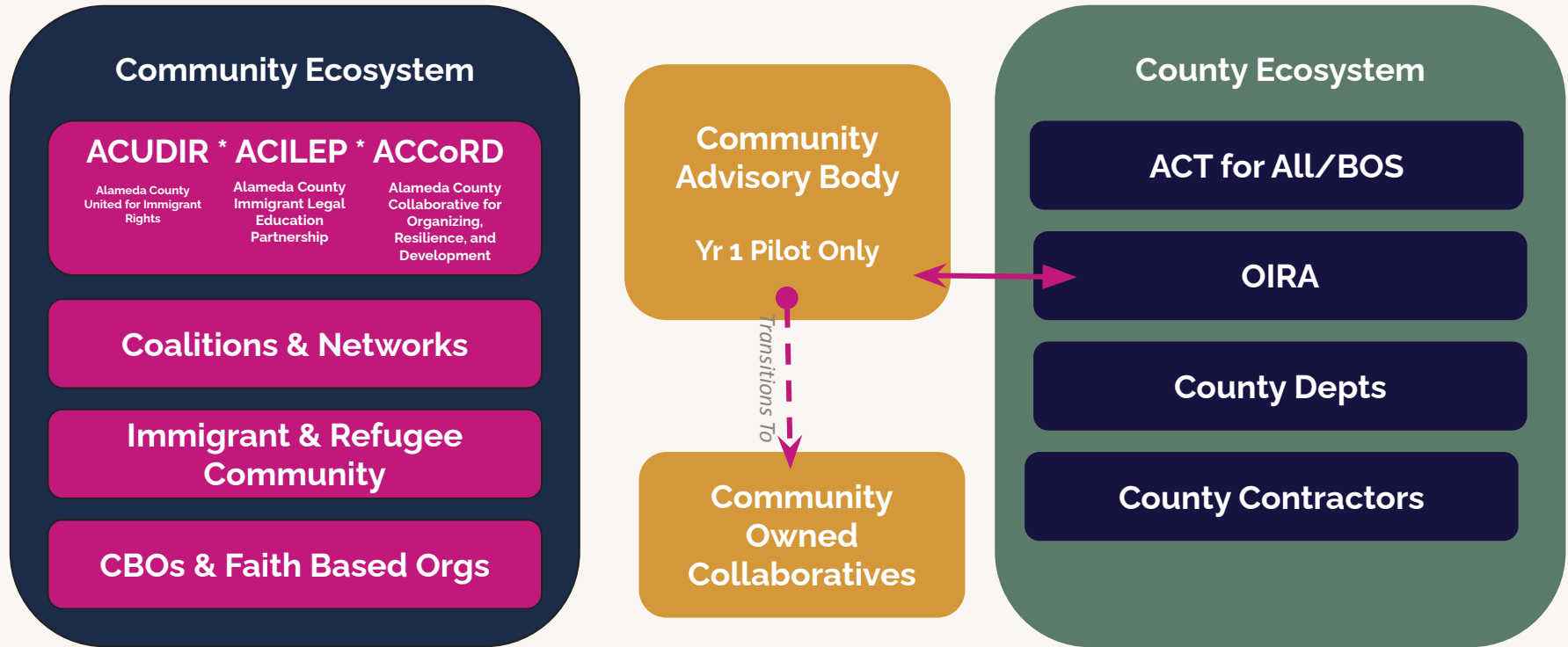
- Agency/Department Head Champions the Work
- County Collaboration Track Record
- Trusted by BOS & CAO
- Incubation that supports transition
- Strong Community Connections
- Access to operational infrastructure
- Formal accountability mechanisms

Recommendation: Pilot Phase Staffing Model



We proposed positions with specific functions, but leave identifying levels and titles to County staff.

Community Accountability Structures



CAB serves as bridge during pilot phase; Community Collaboratives with expanded capacity to hold accountability post-pilot

Recommendation: Community Accountability Structure

"Through trust, personalized guidance, and a constant presence, community organizations break down barriers such as fear, language differences, and misinformation." - Community Advisory Body Member

1

Extend and Expand the CAB

Continue the pilot-phase Community Advisory Body through Year 2. Reconfirm member commitment and expand membership to address gaps in geographic, linguistic, and population representation.

2

Map Before Building

Conduct a systematic mapping of existing coalitions, convenings, and coordination spaces across the county before building any new structures - honoring what community organizations have built.

3

Convene County Contractors Regularly

Establish regular convenings - monthly or quarterly - for all organizations under county contract. The purpose is cross-provider learning and collective troubleshooting, not compliance reporting.

4

County-Wide Ecosystem Convenings

Separately establish regular county-wide convenings open to all immigrant and refugee-serving organizations, designed in partnership with community - not run by county staff alone.

5

Fund Collaboration Through Contracts

Revise contract language to explicitly fund cross-sector collaboration among grantees, and support private fundraising efforts that build community capacity independent of county funding.

6

Invest in Community Collaboratives as Post-Pilot Anchors

During the pilot, invest in building existing community collaboratives' capacity to serve as the ongoing accountability bodies for a permanent OIRA.

Recommendation: \$10M+ Budget

The question before the Board is not whether to spend money on immigrant and refugee services - that decision has been made, repeatedly and unanimously. The question is whether to spend it strategically, with a coordinating infrastructure that makes every dollar go further, or to continue spending it in fragmented ways that produce fragmented results.

1

Contract Renewals

3 contracts · min. through June 2029
Most urgent action

\$4.63M

Maintain continuity of services while initiating reassessment and RFP. Require structured coordination across providers.

2

Staffing

Supplement \$450k baseline

\$1.92M

Assumes 7 staff at an average of \$200K salary/benefits.

3

Implementation Operating Budget

Needs assessment · clearinghouse · referral platform · convenings

\$450K

Minimum needed to operationalize core functions.

4

Public-Private Partnership Fund

Deportation defense · healing services · community organizing · coalitions

\$3M

Dedicated fund to support power building, mutual aid, innovation, and crisis response.

What Must Happen Now: Immediate Actions

1

Extend funding for existing CBO services through at least June 2029 at augmented levels (\$4.6M/year) - before the office is operational.

2

Establish Office Placement That Enables Real Authority. The CAB envisions a two-year incubation within a host office or department, leading to an independent standalone office.

3

Launch the Director search immediately. The Director must be hired before the office is considered operational. Key qualifications: deep Bay Area community rootedness; genuine political acumen; background in deportation defense, social services, advocacy, or community organizing; and experience managing both public and philanthropic funding.

4

Fund a Full 7-Person Staff Team to include a Director, two Deputy Directors, and four specialist positions. This is modeled on the leanest effective offices nationally.

5

Grant OIRA Explicit Cross-Departmental Authority. The Board should explicitly authorize OIRA to require departmental cooperation on the Language Access Ordinance, the countywide Immigration Enforcement Response Plan, and the ICE-Free Zones policy.

6

Allocate Programmatic Operating Budget (min. \$450K/year)

Critical Enabling Conditions

These recommendations are achievable only if certain structural conditions are in place:

1 Authority

The office must have real authority, not advisory status.

2 Hiring Sequence

The Director must be hired before the office is operational. The staffing sequence matters.

3 Contract Continuity

Contract action cannot wait. Service continuity must be preserved while the office is being stood up.

4 Community Safety

Law enforcement engagement requires an explicit, community-developed protocol. Law enforcement presence at OIRA in ways that make community members feel unsafe would undermine the office's core function.

5 Shared Accountability

OIRA cannot be the county's only accountability structure. All county departments must understand that supporting immigrant and refugee residents is their shared responsibility.

6 Authentic Partnership

Community engagement must be genuine, not performative. Ongoing proactive reporting, real partnership, and community-owned accountability structures are essential to the office's credibility and long-term success.

Recommendation: 2-Year Pilot Phase Priorities

Before any of these priorities are fully operational, the most urgent task is ensuring existing rapid response infrastructure does not collapse while the office is being stood up - extending contracts, resourcing the hotline, and supporting community organizations during the gap.

P1	Build the Foundation for Long-Term County Integration	End-of-Pilot Outcome: An interdepartmental coordination table with real authority; a policy tracking and guidance function; permanent budget line; alignment with the Office of Equity as needed.
P2	Assess Needs, Identify Vulnerabilities & Stabilize the CBO Ecosystem	End-of-Pilot Outcome: A shared picture of who the county is serving and where gaps exist; a stable, multi-year-funded CBO infrastructure; a population data workgroup informing program and budget decisions; practices in place for evaluating existing contracts.
P3	Build a County-Wide Hub for Resource Navigation & Warm Referrals	End-of-Pilot Outcome: A multilingual resource database maintained by a CBO partner; shared referral protocols across county and CBO providers; a pilot intake platform.
P4	Coordinate Implementation of Existing County-Wide Policies	End-of-Pilot Outcome: Language access compliance infrastructure with real enforcement; ICE-Free Zones implemented across all county facilities; a functioning countywide Response Plan with community co-developed scenario plans.
P5	Build Community Accountability, Partnership & Transparency	End-of-Pilot Outcome: A Community Advisory Board with real influence over OIRA priorities; contractor and cross-county convenings; durable, community-owned accountability structures ready to carry the work beyond the pilot.

The County Has the Will. The Community Has the Knowledge. What Comes Next Is the Hard, Essential Work of Building.

Alameda County is not starting from zero. The political will is real. The community infrastructure is real. What has been missing is not commitment - it is the connective tissue that turns commitment into coordinated, accountable, durable action. That is what OIRA is designed to be.

Not a ceiling.

These recommendations are a floor - the office this report envisions for Year 2 is not the office Alameda County ultimately needs. It is the office from which the right office can be built.

Not a symbol.

The community members who contributed to this process did not ask for a symbolic gesture. They asked for infrastructure - real authority, real resources, a genuine relationship.

Not optional.

The infrastructure this county needs is within reach. What it requires now is the will to build it deliberately, resource it adequately, and hold it accountable to the people it was always meant to serve.

Proposed Next Steps

