



2019 Regional Public Safety Immersion

An innovative community engagement partnership between the Atlanta Regional Commission's Urban Area Security Initiative, the Interfaith Community Initiatives and the Atlanta Masjid of Al-Islam



By the Numbers

6 All **6** UASI jurisdictions participated.

30 A total of **30** distinct culture and religious communities were visited, consisting of

125 A total **125** public safety officials shared in an Immersion within their communities.

7 Muslim Mosques,
5 Jewish Synagogues,
5 Christian Churches
5 Buddhist Centers
4 Hindu Mandirs,
2 Sikh Gurdwaras,
1 Ba'hai; Center &
1 College Chapel.

18 Cohorts shared **18** ethnic and cultural meals

Highlighted Outcomes

1 Project included **1** Final Report with a 64-page evaluation measuring significant movement towards project goals.

4 At least **4** touch-points for gathering feedback (pre survey/debrief/post survey/capstone forum)

80% Percentage of officials felt more knowledgeable Post Immersion: **80%**

70% Received **70%** response rate to post-survey

92% Received **92%** response rate to pre-survey

45.2% Post immersion reported that **45.2%** of the officials felt less anxiety when interacting with diverse cultures.

2 Created **2** similar short videos to memorialize the experience.

2,500 **2,500** total person hours invested over 12 days



Cobb County Immersion

What is An Immersion?

More than an academic orientation, an Immersion is an experiential journey

To immerse oneself into anything means to completely involve yourself in it, giving it attention and great thought. Thus, an Immersion is a deep experiential involvement into a culture or program. It is a shared experience between the community and those being immersed. The concept (enhanced community engagement), was driven by the need for the region's public safety community to better engage with the citizens they serve.

Interfaith Communities Initiative, Inc. (ICI) was selected through a competitive process in December 2018. Because of their vast experience facilitating Immersions and based on a successful model of providing a World Pilgrim Program, ICI and their subcontractors were an excellent fit to expose public safety officials to diverse cultures and facilitate open dialogue.

The 2019 Public Safety Immersions allowed leaders to spend two days giving public safety officials exposure to

"The opportunity for law enforcement to attend and participate in ICI's Immersion is the first step crucial to achieving public trust and legitimacy, especially in a culturally diverse community. I was able to gain a much greater understanding of people of different faiths and different cultures in the community that I serve."

– Reflection from a Law Enforcement Participant

ethnic communities, religions, customs and traditions that are now a part of the metro Atlanta landscape. This proactive approach of establishing greater familiarity among community leaders and public safety officials builds support for sharing information or holding conversations on difficult issues. During the 2019 Immersion Experience, Public Safety Officials:

- Attended a Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian worship service and observed practices,
- Heard from leaders of diverse cultural and religious communities,

- Shared meals that were prepared according to specific religious traditions,
- Engaged in dialogues and interacted with people from diverse communities,
- Expressed thoughts and impressions through discussions, and
- Processed the experience, reflected and gave feedback.

In each Immersion doors were opened. Public safety leaders and community leaders became more integrated and networked. In total, participants intermingled with over 5,000 citizens from 20 different countries throughout the world who now regard metro Atlanta as their home and who depend upon these same officials for services, security, and safety. Each Immersion was as unique as the communities visited and the makeup of the individual cohorts. For instance, on the first Immersion officials were surprised when they were informed that a local Hindu Temple reported 250,000 visitors each year, making it one of the biggest tourist attractions in Clayton County. In Fulton County, the community and public safety officials bonded over mutual grief and empathy for the violence targeting the mosque in New Zealand as it unfolded during the Immersion. The diversity of public safety participants in Gwinnett County made for a much more open and rewarding experience. In Cobb County the thoughts, concerns, and opinions were mutually shared in a non-confrontational way. In DeKalb County,



City of Atlanta Immersion

a Sikh Temple informed the public safety officials that should an emergency arise, the County could count on them to shelter and feed about 200 people. At the final Immersion in Atlanta, participants observed a Bat Mitzvah for a young Jewish girl, an emotional experience reminding them of the value of children. In short, Immersion builds quality relationships.



DeKalb County Immersion



Clayton County Immersion

Why Immersion for Public Safety?

Immersion builds quality relationships among its participants. ICI provided a forum for UASI to pursue its goal of improving public safety relationships by fostering trust between law enforcement and communities of faith, while helping to prevent bias-based confrontations. Immersion can encourage this sense of trust in the following ways:

- **By establishing networks among diverse communities.** A network of trust between public safety officials and diverse community leaders can enable both to respond to incidents more effectively. This trust can also encourage faith leaders to share openly and rely on public safety as a resource.
- **By aiding in closing public safety's recruitment gap.** Immersion serves as an orientation to diverse communities, affording public safety the opportunity to expose potential recruits to the rewards of serving in the response community.
- **By preventing the targeting or labeling of communities.** Immersion begins with the premise that everyone has been the “other” at some point. Retired General Douglas M. Stone (RET.), who reversed the culture and consequences of the Abu Ghraib detention facility in Iraq, advises law enforcement to do the work of building relationships with the “other” based on trust and mutual respect (WISE p.53). Closer to home, the world’s most distinguished expert in the psychology of terrorism, Dr. John Horgan, Professor of Global Studies at GA State University, supports the fact that orientation and education of religious and cultural beliefs and practices for public safety is an innovative approach with merit.
- **By encouraging self-awareness.** Participants reflect on belief systems that are unlike their own. This self-awareness builds cohesiveness between community and encourages appreciation for public safety officials.
- **By decreasing anxiety.** One goal was to find the intersection between diverse cultures, traditions, & religions and first responder’s protocols and procedures. Proven techniques or tactics that



Clayton County Immersion

de-escalate a situation or result in community leaders sharing critical information is essential.

- **By creating a safe space for open and honest dialogue.** Immersion is the first step to ultimately having the tougher conversations.
- **By advancing the whole of communities.** As disasters and incidents may not always be prevented, the key is for the region’s systems and communities to be resilient enough to limit damage and speed up recovery.

The Atlanta region will continue to benefit from the insight gained and relationships fostered through the 2019 Immersion for Public Safety Officials. This booklet attempts to summarize and inform its readers of the experience, and most importantly, aid in enhancing our shared humanity.

It is easier to overcome fear and gain understanding when we intentionally create safe spaces to share stories and display our vulnerability. The connection that happens through relationship building is key to finding common grounds and collaboration.

– Reflection from a Law Enforcement Participant



DeKalb County Immersion

Immersion Pointers

- Research the culture you are preparing to encounter
- Keep an open mind
- Don’t expect another culture to be a reflection of your own
- Don’t be afraid to feel uncomfortable
- Be willing to listen
- Provide orientation, itinerary and etiquette guidelines
- Confirm with the host of the Immersions
- Secure and coordinate speakers, meals and transportation



Immersion Begins with Relationships

In preparing for the Public Safety Immersions, ICI relied on its successful experiences engaging faith communities. ICI relationships have been maintained through the years by visiting various houses of worship, attending holiday celebrations, festivals, keeping abreast of activities in the religious community, as well as creating opportunities for people of different faiths to connect and discuss how to make society better. These established relationships were essential to the success of the ICI programs. The ICI led visits (see list of participating sacred spaces) and helped create an air of congeniality, aiding public safety officers to be better equipped to engage persons of ethnic communities. This work could not have happened without the Temples, Synagogues, Mosques, Mandirs, Gurdwaras, and Centers that agreed to host the public safety officials. Their openness and expressions of appreciation were evident and overwhelming. These cultural and faith communities were asked to accept the officers in uniform, which allowed for full transparency and authenticity.

ARC, ICI and its subcontractors extend a tremendous amount of gratitude to the region's public safety leadership for trusting the organizers with their time (scheduled over a weekend) and taking the risk of participating in the Immersion Experience. Because each side was willing to see and listen to the other, these new relationships will continue to be nurtured by both the communities and the public safety officials.

In expanding ICI's reach to public safety, the Immersion team opened a dialogue about a time when each participant was considered the "other." This orientation exercise helped groups to begin to process what they would experience. In a safe and vulnerable environment, the Immersion's intended outcomes were:

- To build better relationships and deeper trust within various cultures and faith communities.
- To reduce risks to communities by building a network of reliable allies within the region.



- To decrease isolation of vulnerable populations within communities and limit the impacts of negative messaging.
- To encourage greater familiarity with different cultures, providing opportunities for support and decreasing anxiety during day-to-day interactions.

This proactive approach was beneficial to both the community and the public safety officials as a path to a safer community for all.

Participating Sacred Spaces

Clayton County

(02.22-23.2019)

- Congregation B'nai Israel
- Masjid Al Furqan
- Tu Vien Truc Lam Buddhist Temples
- St. Phillip Benizi Catholic Church
- Hindu Temple of Atlanta

Fulton County

(3.15-16.2019)

- Berean Seventh Day Adventist Church
- Roswell Community Masjid
- Istanbul Cultural Center
- Congregation Or Hadash
- Kadampa Buddhist Center

Gwinnett County

(03.29-30.2019)

- Temple Beth David Madina Institute
- Georgia Mindfulness Center
- Gurdwara Sahib Sikh Study Circle
- Baps Hindu Temple

DeKalb County

(04.22-23.2019)

- Atlanta Masjid of Al-Islam
- Bahai Unity Center Georgia Buddhist Vihara
- ISKCON Hare Krishna Center
- Sikh Study Circle

Cobb County

(04.26-27.2019)

- Temple Kol Emeth
- Masjid Al Furqan
- Holy Transfiguration Greek Orthodox Church
- Catholic Church of the Transfiguration
- Sanatan Mandi

City of Atlanta

(05.03-04.2019)

- Catholic Shrine of the Immaculate Conception
- The Temple
- Al Farooq Masjid
- SGI-International (Buddhist)
- M.L. King Jr International Chapel at Morehouse College



Clayton County Immersion

Planning the Immersion

There were as many as six major components (with 25 corresponding sub elements) involved in the planning for the successful Immersions: 1) Institution and Management Partnerships; 2) Immersion written educational information; 3) Funding; 4) Public Safety personnel; 5) Equipment and food; and 6) Program development and evaluation. Building upon the strength of the existing relationships, which included an ICI team member physically visiting each of the sacred spaces beforehand, the leadership of the region's public safety agencies were asked to provide a single point of contact or local champion. This person recruited other officials for the Immersion and coordinated scheduling. With the host organizations secured, the local champion was provided with an itinerary, a brochure, and information about engaging with different cultures and customs.

Simultaneously, the process of securing speakers, meals, and transportation, creating and sending out pre-surveys, and even ordering challenge coins to memorialize the experience was ongoing by ICI facilitators, the subcontractor, and ARC. During the actual program



Fulton County Immersion

orientation (often at public safety headquarters) the Immersion team shared their experience and passion for their work, how best to prepare for the journey, and what public safety will gain.

Every aspect of the Immersion experience contributed to making the program extraordinary. The planning and preparation to receive guests, the conversations on the bus to and from visits, the sharing of meals often within these sacred spaces or intermingling with community members attending a worship service added to enriching

the experience. Each Immersion also included a time for learning and fellowship. A speaker, who was a part of the organization's leadership, clergy, or board was identified by the faith community to lead the period of learning. Participants were encouraged to ask questions without fear or judgement. One of the four touchpoints (pre- and post-surveys and a capstone forum were the others), was gathering feedback in the form of debrief sessions among participants. During the debriefs, participants were encouraged to give their authentic reactions to the experience in a judgement-free space. The debriefs yielded opportunities for improvement and other feedback from the participants.

An objective evaluation was also built into the Immersion's planning process. The evaluation design used a logic model methodology. The assessment consisted of open-ended focus groups (qualitative) and pre-and-post surveys (quantitative). The purpose of the mixed methods was to elicit as much response as possible within a group (public safety officials) whose positions in interacting with the public may make them cautious about offering opinions on sensitive topics – faith, culture and immigrants. The responses revealed that the participants

Immersion Pointers

- Begin with an orientation, preparing officers for the day
- Use a bus for transportation to keep the group together & invite discussion
- If possible, plan for Public Safety Officials to attend worship service
- Arrange an ethnic meal and a time of fellowship
- End the Immersion with a debrief session

felt the program contributed to a public safety system that would be more integrated, with officers that could perform more adeptly in a diverse environment. Every jurisdiction felt that Immersion was a value-added program, and a number of post Immersion follow-up initiatives by public safety officials have already occurred as a result of relationships or knowledge gained during the Immersions.





After the Immersion

The Atlanta UASI region is currently home to 3.6 million people and that number is constantly rising. People come to Atlanta from all over the world with different cultures, languages, foods, dress, and ideas about life and how to respond to it. The Immersion experience confirmed that acceptance of these differences can help public safety officials better engage with the needs of others and ultimately enrich lives. At many of the sites visited, the officers were given a tour of the sacred space and attended a worship service. Attending a service was an important part of the Immersion because it allowed the group to be “shoulder to shoulder” with those in the community. Thus, it provided the officers an opportunity to engage with the worshippers on a more intimate level.

An aspirational goal of this initiative for public safety officials was to develop friendships in diverse communities. The ICI team expected most of the learnings would be realized by the participants in the weeks following the experience as they would continue to encounter people and places that represent cultural diversity. The man in the turban, the Temple on the hill,

and the Kosher section of the grocery store would now have new meaning.

Immersion Pointers

- Process what you experienced
- Be open to further learning
- Become more observant of the uniqueness of your jurisdiction
- Attend activities hosted by communities of different cultures and faiths
- Keep your new friends abreast of activities related to public safety
- Offer your services — a safety inspection, activities for children, etc.



One of the questions on the post-survey asked, “Do you believe an understanding of diverse faith/cultures can be a determining factor in preventing a confrontation?” This question got to the heart of whether the project’s purpose was accomplished. Prior to Immersion, some officers had experienced difficulties when interacting with other faiths/cultures due to cultural differences. However, after Immersion, 100% of the participants from five of the six jurisdictions stated that an understanding of other cultures could be a determining factor in preventing a confrontation.

Program evaluation confirmed that Immersion fosters relationships that can decrease the distance between public safety officials and diverse faiths/culture and ethnic groups. In addition, the program was shown to lessen anxiety and improve morale for public safety participants. Equally, Immersion lessened the isolation of vulnerable communities. Findings from the evaluation also reported that Immersion can help to create protocols for communication where none previously existed.

Post-Survey

	Yes	No
Atlanta	100.0%	0.0%
Clayton	100.0%	0.0%
Cobb	100.0%	0.0%
DeKalb	84.6%	15.4%
Fulton	100.0%	0.0%
Gwinnett	100.0%	0.0%





Challenges & Conclusion

There were some concerns that arose during the Immersions. Some officers were concerned about the mandate to take off their shoes when entering the Mosque, Gurdwara, Buddhist, and Hindu Temples. However, when the officers learned more about the requirement – which was practical as well as sacred – only a few decided to keep their shoes. Shoe covers were provided for those officials that were not comfortable with removing their shoes. Similarly, a few of the female officers had concerns about wearing a hijab (scarf) when entering the Muslim Masjid and Sikh Gurdwara. Therefore, scarves were available, and most women wore them without opposition.

Because the Immersions were scheduled for full days on Friday and Saturday, visits to Protestant churches were eliminated because most Protestant churches regular worship day is Sunday. Overall the Immersions weekends went smoothly. Conversations related to communication between cultural leaders and the officers repeatedly arose during debriefs. During one of the visits to a Buddhist Temple in Riverdale, Georgia (Clayton), the monk at the

Temple was not proficient in speaking American English and had a strong Vietnamese accent. Some public safety officials advised that it was important that the presenters be able to speak so they could understand. The response from the facilitators was that those are the types of challenges that many public safety officials would face in their day-to-day activities. It is important that both public safety officials and members from diverse communities learn to listen attentively to each other to reduce misunderstandings.

“Everyone has a story, everyone’s story is different, and everyone’s story is the same. We believe experiencing that fact will lead to increased understanding, create empathy and improved relations across the participants.”

– Reflection from a Law Enforcement Participant

Immersions are designed and implemented for cross-pollinations and are indeed a two-handed approach. Each of the communities visited had a great desire to have



Clayton County Immersion

favorable and productive relationships with public safety officials who served their community. On the one hand, individual souls have been significantly affected, which will reverberate within the communities. On the other hand, the foundation for the public safety officials to develop relationships with members of these ethnic communities has been set and safety protocols, procedures, and perspectives are already being impacted. Immersion is about exposure that increases awareness, knowledge, and understanding, which hopefully produces better community relations.

In providing a safe experience for officers to get to know these communities more intimately – communities they may not have known existed within their jurisdiction – Immersion helped them to understand the benefits of the diverse citizenry of Metro Atlanta, and that the people they met all wanted the same thing: to be safe.

The evaluation results infer that in every category, public safety increased their capacity to serve their community.

“I’ll be going back to some of the locations, but we do have to stay engaged. I don’t want it to be a one time, we showed up, here we are and then we’re going again and then like, “what happened to” No, we have to keep that engagement, so I plan on going back”

– Reflection from a Law Enforcement Participant



Fulton County Immersion



DeKalb County Immersion

Resources

- Immersion Videos
https://atlantaregional.org/community-development/community-preparedness/homeland_security_recovery/
- Immersion Experience Brochure
<https://atlantaregional.org/wp-content/uploads/uasi-immersion-experience-brochure-2019-final.pdf>
- Clayton County Article 02/28/2019
https://www.news-daily.com/features/clayton-cops-take-interfaith-tour/article_f107f80d-c56d-5cb8-9965-f75e3b874f56.html
- Final Report Immersion Experience 2019 for Public Safety Officials
<https://atlantaregional.org/wp-content/uploads/immersion-final-report-june-2019.pdf>
- Interfaith Community Initiative Immersion
<http://www.interfaithci.org/immersions.html>
- Building Quality Communities
<http://www.buildingqualitycommunities.com/>
- Religious Studies - Open Educational Resources (OER) - Research Guides at Humboldt State University
<https://libguides.humboldt.edu/openedu/rs>
- Dept of Homeland Security Center for Faith and Opportunity Initiatives
<https://www.fema.gov/faith>
- Resources to protect houses of worship
<https://www.fema.gov/faith-resources>
- How to Serve Diverse Communities
https://s3.truandjustice.org/misc/COPS_ServingDiverseCommunities.pdf
- Multicultural Law Enforcement: Strategies for Peacekeeping in a Diverse Society
<https://www.pearsonhighered.com/assets/preface/0/1/3/4/0134849183.pdf>
- Community Conversations and Other Efforts to Strengthen Police-Community Relations In 49 Cities <http://www.usmayors.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/0810-policecommunity-report.pdf>

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