# Standard Operating Procedure

Version 2.0

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# Introduction

Certified Welcoming is a program of Welcoming America that supports local governments and communities to become more welcoming and inclusive. Certified Welcoming grew from the network members at Welcoming America asking for a roadmap to welcoming efforts and a way to benchmark their work. Beginning in 2015 and over the course of 18 months, Welcoming America worked with a number of stakeholders — practitioners, academics, local government officials, business and civic leaders, and the public at large — to gather feedback and identify the policies and programs that culminated in the Welcoming Standard, a set of framework areas that underpin the Certified Welcoming program. To ensure the Welcoming Standard was rigorous and relevant across diverse communities, it was tested in three communities. This process follows best practice in standard system design set out by the ISEAL Alliance and other certification bodies.

At Welcoming America, we recognize that the work of welcoming and diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging requires constant learning and growth. We have a commitment to supporting learning and change and with that, we have made a commitment to reevaluate the Welcoming Standard every five years so that it continues to evolve based on our learnings and new research, and includes new policy and program innovations. In 2020, we revisited the Welcoming Standard to ensure that we applied learnings from the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial justice movement occurring across the country.

The Welcoming Standard version 2.0 was produced through a process similar to its initial creation with stakeholders: a content advisory board, technical committee, and the public at large participating in crafting the content and criteria that define a welcoming community. This draft of the Welcoming Standard was then tested in three diverse communities before the Welcoming Standard was finalized and published at the end of April 2023.

Updating the Welcoming Standard was accompanied by updating the Certified Welcoming program. Welcoming America now uses a new star designation system for Certified Welcoming which allows places to achieve one of five stars for their welcoming efforts. A set of criteria from the Welcoming Standard is tailored to each star designation. Far from being a "rating system," the Certified Welcoming stars ensure that all cities, towns, and counties have a chance to achieve the designation of Certified Welcoming while also providing pathways to advance their welcoming work.

This document describes the underlying procedures for Certified Welcoming. It was written with local governments participating in the certification process in mind, but the procedures apply to all parties involved in Certified Welcoming, including Welcoming America staff and independent auditors.

Questions about Certified Welcoming should be directed to certified@welcomingamerica.org or mailed to Welcoming America, P. O. Box 2554, Decatur, GA 30031.

For translation of this document into another language please contact certified@welcomingamerica.org.

# The Welcoming Standard and the Star Designation System

The Welcoming Standard captures the policies, programs, processes, and partnerships at the heart of a welcoming community, and is the backbone of the Certified Welcoming program. Developed by Welcoming America in collaboration with local governments, advocates, and diverse experts, and with input from the public at large, the Welcoming Standard provides a comprehensive roadmap for immigrant inclusion and welcome.

The Welcoming Standard is updated every five years and was last updated in 2023. The current version of the Welcoming Standard is available at certifiedwelcoming.org.

**Framework areas**
The Welcoming Standard has seven framework areas: Civic Engagement, Connected Communities, Economic Development, Education, Equitable Access, Government and Community Leadership, and Safe Communities. Each framework area is then broken down into roughly 20 criteria that require specific programs, policies, processes, and/or partnerships to be in place. These criteria are designed to be taken as a whole, and a single framework area cannot be broken out without leaving out critical components to welcoming. The goals for each framework area are included below.

*Civic Engagement (CE)*
Welcoming communities ensure that all residents, including immigrants, are able to fully participate in civic life. Immigrant residents have access to democratic spaces and shape community priorities and policies. Immigrants hold leadership roles in the community, and local institutions are invested in increasing access to leadership positions for immigrant residents.

*Connected Communities (CC)*
Welcoming communities build connections and trust between residents. Community institutions — including local government, businesses, faith communities, and nonprofits — create opportunities and spaces for immigrant and non-immigrant residents to have constructive interactions, develop relationships, and deepen their understanding of one another. Institutions support residents in building their personal capacity to engage with people different from themselves on equal footing and in sustained ways that reduce prejudice and strengthen diverse community relationships.

*Economic Development (EC)*

In welcoming communities, all residents — including immigrants — can participate fully in the economy. Workforce and economic development infrastructure address the priorities and needs of immigrant residents and immigrant jobseekers. Programs that support entrepreneurship, business development, and workforce development are accessible to all residents, including immigrants. Local businesses are committed to diverse hiring and retaining employees with diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.

*Education (ED)*

In welcoming communities, the education system ensures all students, including immigrant students, have the support they need to thrive in school and the knowledge they need to succeed in the workforce. Schools and community education programs are informed by the needs and priorities of immigrant students and families and are accessible to all residents, including immigrants. Welcoming and inclusion efforts are not siloed within a single school or program, but incorporated into the schools and school districts that serve the community.

*Equitable Access (EA)*

Welcoming communities ensure local services are accessible to all residents, including immigrants. Immigrant residents provide feedback to local government and community based organizations to identify and address demographic disparities and gaps in services, and to improve access to programs, particularly in the areas of housing, health, transportation, financial services, and the justice system.

*Government and Community Leadership (GL)*

Welcoming communities have infrastructure in place to support immigrant participation, inclusion, and equity. The local government and community-based organizations regularly seek feedback from immigrant residents to understand the challenges and priorities of immigrant residents. Institutions work closely together to prioritize and build capacity to implement immigrant participation, inclusion, and equity strategies.

*Safe Communities (SC)*

Welcoming communities prioritize safety for all residents, including immigrants. Policies and practices are in place that prevent discrimination. Strong, trusting relationships are built between immigrant residents and local safety services, such as law enforcement, fire departments, code enforcement, and emergency response. Effective bidirectional communication between safety services and immigrant residents exists, and programs

are in place to address implicit and structural bias. Community partnerships are built to identify and address needs and gaps in services.

**Star designation system**

The Welcoming Standard 2.0 uses five star designations, creating clear pathways for creating a welcoming community. The star designations are intended to build upon each other and become increasingly more difficult to achieve. The star designations also help to differentiate work among Certified Welcoming places. Thus, 5-star certified localities will be more advanced in their work and one star certified localities are likely to just be getting started.

To achieve certification at a particular star designation, all criteria for that star designation and below must be fully compliant. For example, if a city were seeking a 3-star designation, they would need to demonstrate compliance with all crtieria for the 1-star, 2-star, and 3-star designations.

# The Certification Process

The certification process is rigorous. The process itself also yields some of the most significant benefits for participating communities. Each step provides opportunities to engage or reengage partners, identify best practices and potential for innovation, and leverage new resources. In later stages of the certification process, local governments receive an extensive report on local welcoming efforts including areas for growth and programs in their community that are on the cutting edge nationally.

**Eligibility**

Local governments are required to be the lead applicant for Certified Welcoming; however, the designation would not be possible without the work and support of community partners. Community partners — such as refugee resettlement agencies, chambers of commerce, and local schools — typically contribute to the certification process by providing information for the self-assessment and being interviewed during the audit.

**Certification fees**

Welcoming America charges a fee for participation in Certified Welcoming. The current certification fee amount is available at certifiedwelcoming.org. This fee is calibrated to cover the staffing, travel, and administrative costs related to each certification process. Members of the Welcoming Network receive a discounted rate.

**Onboarding**

Local governments enter the Certified Welcoming program by completing an application. The application covers general information about the local government and community including government structure, authority, and budget.  You will also be asked to provide billing information.

Once you submit the application, you have formally entered the certification process and you will be invoiced for the certification fees and sent a contract. The contract outlines the legal obligations, such as the use of confidential information and payment of fees, for both the local government and Welcoming America.

Additionally, at this point, Welcoming America will schedule an onboarding call with the local government point of contact. You may invite others to attend, but the local government's participation is required.

**Self-Assessment**

Upon completing the onboarding, local governments focus on conducting a self-assessment (SA) of current welcoming efforts. Localities will seek the star designation at which they would like to be assessed. An online pre-assessment and a Regional Manager from Welcoming America are available to assist with this process.

The self-assessment is completed through an online portal at portal.certifiedwelcoming.org. You can invite others from your team to join you on the portal and submit evidence.

*Evidence*

Evidence is required to show compliance with the Welcoming Standard. This might be in the form of a flier, policy, presentation information, or website. Please note that if a website is provided as evidence, at least one additional piece of evidence is required. Completing the self-assessment often requires reaching out to partners, and we have found that the process of mapping current work can lead to new or renewed partnerships across agencies and a deeper understanding of the extent of work in your community.

For the 3 to 5-star designations, there are a number of criteria in the Government and Community Leadership framework area that refer to government departments as a whole. For these criteria the self-assessment should include evidence from the following government agencies if they are under the jurisdiction of the local government:

- Child protective services
- Communications
- Department(s) that enforce building, construction, fire, health, and housing codes
- Economic development
- Emergency dispatch
- Emergency management
- Emergency medical services (EMS)
- Fire
- Human resources
- Law enforcement
- Neighborhoods
- Planning
- Purchasing
- Public health

- Zoning

**Desktop review**

Once your certification team receives the completed self-assessment form they will begin the desktop review.

The desktop review verifies information provided in the self-assessment and prepares the certification team and the local government to make the best use of the audit. The desktop review will include:

    a. A preliminary assessment of compliance based on evidence provided in the self-assessment,
    b. Identification of and research on stakeholders involved in welcoming work,
    c. Online research to verify evidence to the extent possible,
    d. A review of media coverage related to the local welcoming work,
    e. A screen of civil rights investigations and infractions, and
    f. Additional research regarding local government jurisdiction and programming.

After submitting your self-assessment, the certification team may request additional information from what they have learned during the desktop review. We ask that you reply to the additional information request within 10 business days.

**Audit**

The purpose of the audit is for the certification team to verify evidence provided in the self-assessment and gather additional evidence and context that is difficult to ascertain through a desktop review. This includes identifying relationship dynamics, feedback channels, and challenges the community faces. Audit interviewees typically include local government and community leaders, nonprofit partners, immigrant leaders, and other stakeholders.

Localities seeking a 1-star designation will receive a one-day virtual audit. Localities seeking a 2 to 5-star designation will have a two- to three-day in-person audit and typically one or two additional days of virtual interviews post-audit.

Audits are announced and your certification team will work with you to determine a mutually convenient date and the scope of the agenda.

Although your certification team will work with you to develop the agenda for the audit, it is your responsibility to schedule the meetings with stakeholders. If someone is not available for an in-person meeting during the scheduled audit, your certification team may require a virtual interview or e-mail correspondence to complete the audit.

*Audit Details*
In addition to meetings with stakeholders engaged in partnership programs, an audit will typically include meetings with:
- Immigrant community leaders
- Senior government leadership
- Public school officials
- Local law enforcement

Audits typically begin with an opening meeting with the staff involved in the local government's immigrant inclusion and welcoming efforts. The opening meeting provides an opportunity for you and the certification team to review the agenda and ask/answer any remaining questions. Audits typically end with a closing meeting with you, the certification team, and any additional stakeholders or government leadership you would like to include.

During the closing meeting of the audit, the certification team will present a summary of initial findings and discuss next steps, including additional evidence, follow-up interviews, and outstanding questions. Delay in providing the requested evidence or an introduction for the follow-up interviews may cause delays in the certification report being written and available.

Filming or recording of audits is not allowed without prior approval by Welcoming America and the auditor(s).

**Report**
The certification team will produce a detailed final report with their findings, including compliance with the Welcoming Standard, as well as local strengths and opportunities for growth. Reports often provide communities with a roadmap for identifying priorities and next steps to continuously improve work.

**Addressing non-compliant criteria with additional evidence**
Localities that do not meet all of the criteria for the star designation they are seeking may choose to submit additional evidence within six months of receiving their final report.

*Compliance with criteria for a star designation*
All criteria must be fulfilled in order to receive the designation. Each star designation builds on the previous star — for example, a 2-star designation requires meeting the criteria for both 1-star and 2-star.

If you are not fully compliant with the criteria for the star designation you are seeking, you may either choose to be certified at a different star designation, or submit additional evidence to gain full compliance and receive the star designation you originally sought.

Welcoming Network members are encouraged to work with their Regional Managers for additional coaching on meeting non-compliant criteria.

**Certificate and announcement**
Once compliant with all of the criteria for the star designation, local governments receive their certificate and coordinate a public announcement. Welcoming America communications staff provide additional support to amplify the achievement, including a press release, a quote from Welcoming America, and branded marketing materials to use.

**Certification timeline**
From start to finish, the certification process takes about one year. It typically takes less time to be certified at 1-star than a 3-star or 5-star designation.

|  | Self-Assessment | Desktop Review | Audit | Report | Approximate Total Time |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1-Star** | 2 months | 2 weeks | 1 month after SA completed | 1 month after audit completed | 4-10 months |
| **2-Star** | 3 months | 3 weeks | 6 weeks | 6 weeks after | 6-12 months |

| | | | after SA completed | audit completed | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **3-Star** | 4 months | 4 weeks | 8 weeks after SA completed | 8 weeks after audit completed | 8-14 months |
| **4-Star** | 5 months | 4 weeks | 9 weeks after SA completed | 10 weeks after audit completed | 10-16 months |
| **5-Star** | 6 months | 4 weeks | 10 weeks after SA completed | 12 weeks after audit completed | 12-18 months |

All localities have an additional six months to correct any non-compliances and resubmit evidence post-report to receive their certificate.

**Recertification**
Your certificate is valid for four years. We recommend beginning the recertification process during the third year of your certification cycle. If your certificate lapses, you may be required to re-enter the process as a new applicant.

The recertification process is very similar to the initial certification process and follows the same steps outlined above. However, if an observation was made on a particular criteria from your initial certification, it must be addressed in order to be considered compliant for recertification.

Localities may seek a new star designation at recertification or may decide to continue to be assessed at the same star they are already certified. Recertification outcomes may include a lower, higher, or same star designation based on how much of the work has changed.

# Decisions and Appeals

**Certification decision making**
Certification teams may require additional guidance and assistance when making decisions about compliance with criteria. For cases that require additional expertise and insight, certification teams may consult with content experts. For examples of content experts, please see the list of individuals consulted for creation of the Welcoming Standard.

**Appealing non-compliance with the Welcoming Standard**
You have the right to appeal any decision made about your certification. If you wish to appeal a decision, additional evidence must be submitted for the appeal to be considered. Appeals are accepted online at https://bit.ly/CWappealform.

If you decide to appeal a decision made about compliance with any of the criteria in the Welcoming Standard, you must file the appeal form within 20 business days of receiving the final report. Your assigned certification team will review appeals made. If you are uncomfortable with the certification team reviewing your appeal, you may request it be sent to the Welcoming America leadership staff for review.

Welcoming America will make a decision regarding the appeal within 20 business days of receiving the submitted appeal form. All appeal decisions are final.

# Complaints and Critical Incidents

Welcoming America takes certification very seriously. Maintaining compliance with the Welcoming Standard between certification cycles is expected. While Welcoming America staff monitor news for critical incidents and frequently check in with certified localities, a community member or stakeholder is likely to be aware that a client is no longer compliant with the Welcoming Standard before Welcoming America.

Welcoming America encourages community members and stakeholders to address concerns of non-compliance directly to the local government holding the Certified Welcoming certificate. In the case that the local government does not appropriately address non-compliance concerns or if someone does not feel comfortable addressing their concern directly with the local government, individuals may file a complaint directly with Welcoming America.

**Complaint process**

*Complaint submission and review*
Any party that is not satisfied with the compliance of a Certified Welcoming community with the Welcoming Standard may file a complaint with Welcoming America. All complaints must be submitted in writing, explaining the nature of the complaint and including all documented evidence to support the claim. Complaints can be filed online at https://bit.ly/CWcomplaintform or sent via USPS to the Welcoming America office. This information is posted online at certifiedwelcoming.org

Welcoming America will assess the complaint submission. Complaints may be submitted anonymously. If the complainant includes their name and contact information, it may be shared with the certified locality. Welcoming America will have the option to contact the complainant for additional information or clarification, where necessary.

Within five business days of receiving the complaint, Welcoming America will notify the complainant and the certified locality it has received the complaint. You may provide a response to the initial notice, but are not required to before Welcoming America determines if the complaint has merit. Within 10 business days of receiving the complaint, Welcoming America will inform the complainant and certified locality of the complaint's merit.

All complaints will be reviewed by Certified Welcoming program staff to determine if the complaint has merit within 10 business days of receipt. This determination will be based

on whether the complaint raises legitimate and substantiated issues about noncompliance with criteria under which they are certified. A complaint having merit does not indicate that the local government is not compliant with the Welcoming Standard. A complaint having merit indicates that there is concern that non-compliance may exist and that Welcoming America will initiate an investigation to determine compliance.

If a complaint does not have merit, the complaint is closed and no further action is taken. If a complaint does have merit, Welcoming America will initiate an investigation to determine if the local government continues to meet the criteria under review.

A complaint investigation includes:

1. Background research and review
2. Collection of additional information from the local government and/or community stakeholders
3. Interviews (typically via video conference, but may be in-person) with local government officials and/or community stakeholders
4. Final analysis and report with findings

The final analysis and report is expected to be completed within 90 days of receiving the complaint. There are three possible outcomes for an investigation:

1. ***Compliant***: This status indicates that the investigation found no determination of concerns related to compliance with the indicator under investigation.
2. ***Compliant with observations:*** This status indicates that the investigation found the indicator to be compliant, yet there are items that are significant concerns that must be addressed for recertification.
3. ***Non-compliant, corrective action required:*** This status indicates that the criteria under investigation is determined to no longer be compliant.The local government must come back into compliance to maintain its status as Certified Welcoming.

If the local government is found to be non-compliant with any criteria, Welcoming America will provide technical assistance to the extent possible to rectify it. During these efforts, Welcoming America expects to propose reasonable timetables for exploring cost-effective ways of coming into compliance.

*Appealing a decision*

You have the right to appeal the decision made about the complaint. If you wish to appeal a decision, additional evidence must be submitted for the appeal to be considered. Appeals are accepted online at https://bit.ly/CWappealform.

Welcoming America will make a decision regarding the appeal within 20 business days of receiving the submitted appeal form. All appeal decisions are final.

**Critical incidents**

Welcoming America staff monitor news of all certified localities and those in progress. In the instance a critical incident has occurred, Welcoming America staff will reach out directly to the certified local government with the goal for the local government to come into voluntary compliance. Welcoming America may provide technical assistance to the extent possible to rectify it. During these efforts, Welcoming America expects to propose reasonable timetables for exploring cost-effective ways of coming into compliance.

Examples of critical incidents include, but are not limited to: the local government signing a 287(g) agreement; leadership from the local government making statements directly attacking immigrants and/or members of a protected class.

**Records**

Welcoming America will maintain a record of each complaint received, including all correspondence and related evidence, from initiation through final outcome. Complaint and critical incident records will be kept on file for at least four years.

# Decertification and Expiration

It is possible that a client may lose their designation as a Certified Welcoming locality. This may occur as a result of being decertified or the certificate expiring without an attempt to renew it. In the event a client is decertified or its certificate expires, it must stop using the Certified Welcoming seal and referring to itself as a Certified Welcoming locality immediately. It may continue to refer to itself as Certified Welcoming from YEAR-YEAR, reflecting the years of certification. Welcoming America will also remove the locality's name on its website and will discontinue mention of it as a Certified Welcoming locality. Welcoming America may continue to refer to the locality as a previously certified place.

**Explanation of decertification**
When a certified locality comes out of compliance with the Welcoming Standard, Welcoming America attempts to resolve it through coaching, technical assistance, and other means of reasonable support. In the event Welcoming America cannot secure compliance, Welcoming America may decertify the locality.

**Explanation of expiration of certificate**
To maintain the designation of Certified Welcoming, localities must undergo the recertification process every four years. Welcoming America suggests beginning the recertification process in the third year of the certificate. In the event the certified locality does not confirm they are seeking recertification by the date of the expiration of the certificate, Welcoming America will assume they no longer wish to be certified.

**Reentry after decertification or expiration**
A client may reapply to Certified Welcoming after it has been decertified or its certificate expired. The locality would be expected to pay the certification fees and complete the full certification process to become recertified after decertification or expiration of the certificate.

# Confidential and Sensitive Information

Welcoming America recognizes that the rigorous certification process may require clients and stakeholders to share sensitive information. Welcoming America guarantees to treat all information obtained during the certification process with care and caution.

Welcoming America will not share information gathered during the certification process except with staff working with the client for certification, coaching, and/or communications purposes.

Clients are encouraged to proactively share their certification report with their stakeholders and the public at large. However, if someone requests the report or other information about the certification from Welcoming America, we will refer them back to the local government who applied for certification.

**Confidential information**
Welcoming America considers all proprietary information about clients confidential. Such information includes:
1. Self-assessments
2. Audit reports and related correspondence
3. Appeals
4. Complaints
5. Additional information as identified by the client

**Public information**
The following is considered public information:
1. Certification status of client
2. Name and location of client
3. Any information that does not allow the client to be identified

# Guiding Certification Principles

Welcoming America uses the Welcoming Standard and Certified Welcoming to achieve its mission and vision. As such, it is important that our work observes the values of the organization, as well as widely recognized credibility principles.

**Welcoming America's values**
Welcoming America is driven to build a more welcoming America, achieving excellence in all they do and is guided by the following values and principles:

**Diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging** are the fundamental elements of building welcoming societies for all. Welcoming America's approach is rooted in an understanding that the factors impeding success for immigrants and non-immigrants alike are often rooted in a legacy of colonialism, structural racism, and interpersonal bias that must be overcome in order to achieve our vision of an inclusive society in which people can thrive.

Our ultimate aim is a more just world where every person can thrive and prosper because they are within the circle of human concern.  We believe in opportunity for all, and that all of us are created equal.

Our purpose is to **enable belonging for everyone, and explicitly immigrants.** Our founding and focus since inception has been around the inflection point of demographic change and immigration, and the gaps that exist to understand and respond to xenophobia. We recognize that belonging is a shared human need, but can be expressed in ways that both hinder and advance a healthy multiracial democracy and successful organizational culture in which the rights and responsibilities of minority groups are not only protected, but deeply valued.

We commit to **equitable outcomes** as the ultimate measure of our success, and will use quantitative and qualitative data and continuous learning to close gaps and strive for excellence.  Our outcomes will ultimately contribute to greater racial and social justice.

We recognize that **we contribute to an ecosystem**, and cannot act alone nor take responsibility alone for equitable outcomes or for closing gaps in communities or broader culture. We are one star in a constellation of efforts that work to undo and

replace the beliefs, norms, and policies that propagate inequality and create a hierarchy of human value.

**Our processes will be inclusive and well-designed** for the end user, especially those with the greatest barriers to access. We believe that proximity gives rise to good design and good policy, that those closest to the problem should design the solutions, while those who are not proximate should be brought into a deeper understanding.

We consider **all facets of diversity,** including the areas of gender, race, ethnicity, status, ability, religion, class, and sexual orientation, as well as cultural aspects including values, preferences, and beliefs.

When we find **strength in our diversity** — and actively resist fear and division — we can build a resilient community that fully harnesses the talents, skills, and contributions of every resident so that all can thrive. We operate from a research and evidence base that shows that effective and innovative decisions about complex problems are reached when multiple backgrounds and perspectives are meaningfully engaged.

We strive to create an **inclusive and collaborative** environment in the workplace and in communities, in which differences are embraced and harnessed to achieve the most equitable results.

The work of welcoming – and of DEIB – requires **constant learning and growth**, as well as a sustained commitment to supporting one another as a team and as a community. Our approach will be invitational and abundant, embracing change, learning, science, and divergent perspectives, with space to wade through ambiguity.

**Empathy** and a belief in the capacity for human growth and evolution are vitally important, as are the unique roles that different actors play in a system, whether working from inside or outside it.

We prioritize the **importance of culture** — the domain of attitudes, values, and beliefs — recognizing that to achieve welcoming communities and thriving multiracial democracies, individual, group, systems and culture change are all needed and reinforced. Our work necessarily deals not only with actual but perceived disparities, and addressing misconceptions, biases, and disinformation is a necessary and important part of the work.

**ISEAL Alliance principles of assurance**

Welcoming America subscribes to the ISEAL Alliance credible sustainability standards and works to incorporate its best practices throughout the Certified Welcoming Program and the Welcoming Standard. Included in the ISEAL Alliance credible sustainability standards are the principles of assurance, which are defined below.

For additional information on ISEAL Alliance please visit www.isealalliance.org

**Accessibility:** Assurance programmes that are accessible help support the sustainability objectives of the standards system. Accessible assurance is affordable to clients who fall within the scope, is culturally sensitive, comprehensible, and within reach of the target clients.

**Competence**: Competence applies most directly to the individuals who are engaged in different aspects of the assurance process. Competent personnel have technical knowledge of assurance and are able to interpret and apply the intent of the standards. Having competent management of the assurance programme ensures greater integrity and efficiency in the implementation of the system.

**Consistency**: Assurance systems that achieve the same results when applied in different contexts or involving different staff are consistent. The objective of having a consistent assurance programme is to ensure replicable results across the programme.

**Impartiality**: Clients of impartial assurance programmes are treated fairly and objectively. Impartiality can be demonstrated through independence or through provisions for transparency and stakeholder engagement.

**Rigor**: A rigorous assurance programme is more likely to provide accurate results. The level of rigor refers to the intensity of the assurance process e.g. how many clients are sampled, how often, and how thoroughly, intensity of surveillance, and the breadth of stakeholder engagement in the assurance process.

**Transparency**: Assurance that is transparent is under the scrutiny of stakeholders so has less risk of corruption or conflict of interest. Transparency also builds confidence in assurance as the public is more trusting of institutions that are open.

www.certifiedwelcoming.org

**Ethical considerations**

Welcoming America promotes an ethical culture and assures that the certification process is conducted in an ethical manner.

Welcoming America recognizes that clients often wish to show hospitality to their certification team during an audit. Small gifts, under the amount of $25, such as a t-shirt, pens, and other swag from the community are acceptable. Any gifts or gratuities, including meals, which could influence or be perceived as influencing their independence and impartiality, are not permitted.

Certification teams should not use their official position or information gained through the position for private purposes.

If any member of the certification team has a relationship with a client that may raise doubts about their ability to remain impartial, the relationship should be made known to their immediate supervisor. If it is determined that impartiality is not able to be maintained through the certification process, the individual will be recused from participating in the client's audit and certification.

# Appendix

**Key definitions**

**Audit:** A virtual or in-person site visit consisting of a series of interviews with immigrant and non-immigrant key informants, including government officials and community members. The purpose of the audit is to verify information provided in the self-assessment and collect additional evidence.

**Certificate:** The document issued by Certified Welcoming that formally recognizes a local government meets the criteria set out in the Welcoming Standard. Certificates are valid for four years.

**Certification:** The process of receiving a certificate from Certified Welcoming. In addition to the initial certification, local governments must go through certification every four years in order to maintain their certificate. This is called recertification.

**Certification Fee:** The amount payable to Welcoming America for services provided by Certified Welcoming.

**Criteria**: The policies, programs, processes, and partnerships set out in the Welcoming Standard. For certification, criteria are listed according to a star designation.

**Observation:** Comments expressing potential flaws or shortcomings about criteria listed as compliant in the Final Audit Report. Observations made concerning criteria compliant in the certified star designation must be addressed for recertification.