



Transforming a Community
Promoting Iranian-American
Civic Participation



National Iranian American Council
Annual Report July 2002-2003



“The rise of the National Iranian American Council marks a significant milestone in Iranian-American history. For far too long, Iranian Americans have allowed others to shape their political and cultural destinies in America. With the help of NIAC, Iranian Americans can assume their rightful place in the American political and cultural mosaic. By filling a critical need, NIAC represents — in that great tradition of successful movements and organizations — an idea whose time has come.”

Afshin Molavi, Journalist and Author



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Dear Reader,

We started NIAC at a time when fatigue, apathy and indifference were prevalent throughout our community. Our goal was innovative, yet simple to grasp. It was to transform the community, one individual at a time, from an inactive and apathetic community to one that enthusiastically participates in and contributes to American political and civic life.

We challenged many of the clichés that entrapped us in the past. The idea that lack of unity is the root cause of our weakness, the belief that influence can be achieved through campaign contributions only, the impression that failure to work at the organizational level is a reflection of inherent flaws within the community, all, were false diagnoses for our lack of involvement in American society.

NIAC offered an alternative approach, one that assigns ultimate responsibility to the individual. Without a core of active, knowledgeable, and participating individuals, unity is futile. Hence, NIAC's motto is to transform our community one individual at a time by providing the necessary knowledge about how to translate our sentiments into meaningful action, and our resources and success into positive influence.

Today, as a sign of NIAC's success, the language of civic participation has been adopted by scores of Iranian-American organizations. Indeed, our community is in a state of transformation. Interest in getting involved in American politics — and not just US foreign policy — is greater than ever before, as is the readiness and capability of our community. NIAC has been at the forefront, and our activities have grown at an incredible pace.

When looking at this report, it is hard to imagine that we were only five individuals 18 months ago. Today, with hundreds of volunteers nationwide, our activity level, progress, and success have grown beyond our wildest expectations. And even though we have been successful in securing grants from major US foundations, the bulk of our activities are still undertaken by non-paid Iranian-American volunteers.

In the following pages, you will find a summary of our projects over the past twelve months, our plans for the coming months, and hopefully, inspiration to join us in our mission to support and strengthen the Iranian-American community.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Trita Parsi", is written over a light blue circular background that matches the NIAC logo.

Trita Parsi
President



Strength in Numbers

IranCensus: The Relative Concentration of Iranian Americans across the United States

The American hostage crisis caused many Iranian Americans to seek a low profile – to be unobtrusive, unnoticed and disconnected from mainstream American society. This legacy made our community voiceless, and one that lacks the necessary instruments and organizational structures to defend its rights and to become active and involved in public affairs and civic discourse.

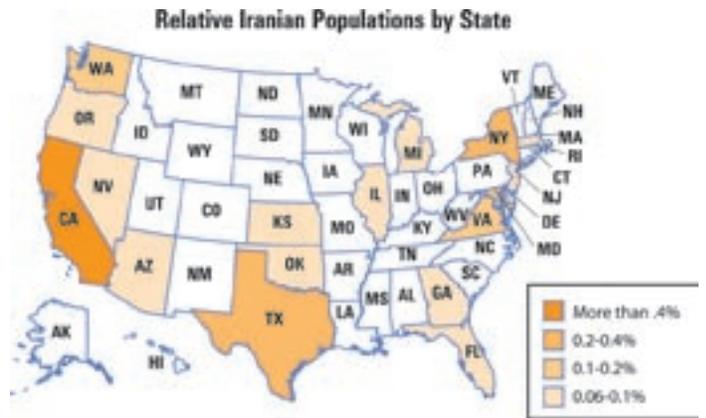
Fortunately, much of this is changing. The willingness to participate in political affairs, get organized, and voice opinions is now stronger than ever within the Iranian-American community. Despite this, the community suffers from two other major obstacles to political influence: 1) a lack of detailed statistics regarding the community's size, political inclination, location, income and other demographic attributes, and 2) the co-location of other politically active and influential ethnic groups in the same geographies as Iranian Americans, many of which have conflicting agendas.

Without reliable demographic statistics on the community, it is very difficult to mobilize Iranian Americans for collective action. Furthermore, without reliable and detailed statistics on the relative strength of the community in different Congressional districts, it is difficult to know where the community's chances of success and political influence will be the greatest.

In September 2003, NIAC published IranCensus, a study detailing the relative size of the Iranian-American community in each Congressional district vis-à-vis the

size of other communities. This knowledge is pivotal for the community to be represented in political life, as it identifies where our comparative advantage is the greatest.

IranCensus is intended to be used as a map for any group or entity that wishes to mobilize the Iranian-American community, regardless of their goals and agendas. It is NIAC's belief that increased political participation among all segments of the Iranian-American community will ultimately lead to a strengthening of democratic traits and practices in our community. Through intense participation and practical experiences of democratic exercises, a profound understanding of the true meaning of democracy, democratic approaches and a democratic mindset will emerge in our community, enabling healthy internal competition for the leadership of the community and an ability for strong external competition in the face of obstacles that confront us all, irrespective of our political orientations.



STRENGTH IN NUMBERS



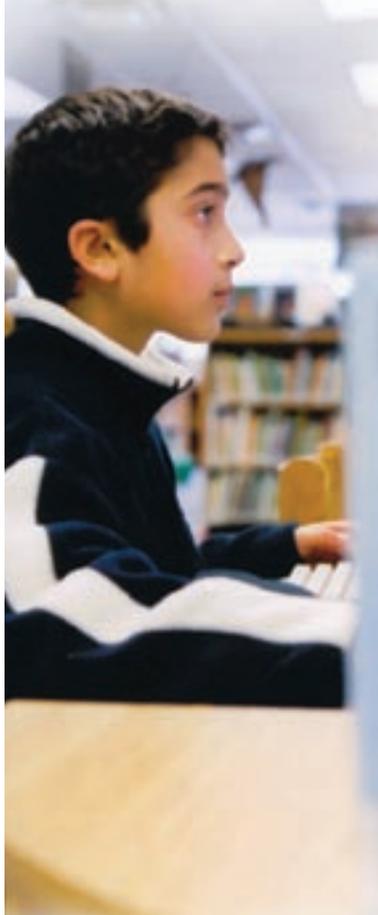


Iranian Americans have achieved extraordinary levels of professional and economic success and consistently rank as one of the most successful immigrant populations in the country. On the local level, many cultural, professional, and student organizations serve the Iranian-American community by holding events that allow Iranian Americans to gather together and collaborate on common interests, as well as educating the public on Iranian-American issues.

Unfortunately, these vital organizations have little or no communication with one another. Without the ability to share resources and experiences, as well as cooperate on issues of concern and interest, the Iranian-American community becomes severely limited in its ability to mobilize. As a result, it has often remained voiceless and ineffective in a political climate rife with issues relevant to Iranian Americans.

One of NIAC's most important projects, the IraNexus database, will provide a solution to this problem and bring us one step closer to a more unified and active Iranian-American community. IraNexus will act as a central repository that will store information regarding Iranian-American organizations nationwide.

COMMUNICATION



Through IraNexus and its newly formed network of Iranian-American groups:

- Iranian-American organizations will be able to share resources, experiences, and expertise, as well as collaborate and coordinate their activities at the local and national levels.
- NIAC will be able to assess the organizational needs of the community and design educational and capacity-building programs and workshops to assist it accordingly.
- NIAC will make accessible to the public some information from the database through a published internet-based directory of Iranian-American organizations to be used as a resource for individuals within and outside the community.

Iranian Americans deserve to play an active role in the civic life of the nation in which they live and contribute. Effective mobilization of their community is vital to their political influence. IraNexus, through its ability to “organize” Iranian-American organizations, strengthen them as focal points, and help map out the community, is the first necessary step towards the development of a strong political voice for the Iranian-American community.

The IraNexus database is scheduled to go online by mid-2004.

NIAC's Legislative Action Center uses the industry's most powerful solution for online political advocacy. Capitol Advantage's Capwiz™ Legislative Action Center is used by leading advocacy groups in the United States, including eight of the ten most influential organizations in America. Available on the NIAC website, it provides NIAC site visitors with the necessary tools to quickly and easily submit letters and emails online to their senators or member of Congress. The Capwiz system also helps constituents track legislation and PAC money, and compile voting records for individual members of Congress.

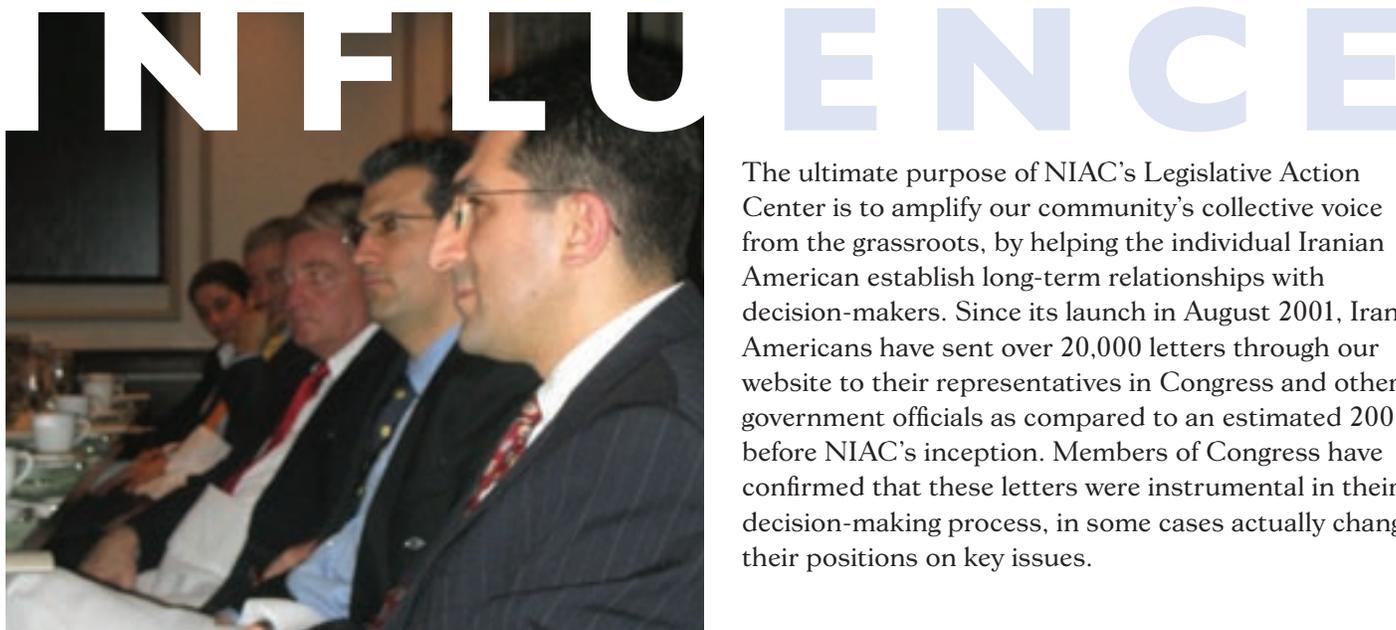
Studies have shown that constituents that correspond regularly with their lawmakers yield more influence than those that do not. Through NIAC's Legislative Action Center, Iranian Americans of all walks of life are strengthening their collective voice in US politics.

NIAC uses the technological advantages of Capwiz to compensate for the Iranian-American community's organizational disadvantages. NIAC is unique in its use of the Capwiz system in that it uses the software to promote multiple viewpoints rather than a single perspective. NIAC does not take positions on issues and does not have a specific legislative agenda. Instead, our focus is on promoting the community's general level of political activism by providing it with the appropriate tools and knowledge.



The service is available through the NIAC website. The website provides two or more sample letters on each featured issue – for example, one letter in favor of a proposed bill or resolution and one against it. It is up to the writer to decide whether to use one of the two sample letters, edit one to suit an individual's personal views, or write a new letter to send to lawmakers.

Capwiz offers several advantages over other forms of communication with representatives. According to congressional staffs and the representatives themselves, personal letters from constituents have a much stronger impact on decision-making than petitions. Another advantage is that the Capwiz program requires constituents to include their entire mailing address for verification purposes since mail without a complete mailing address is not read by members of Congress or their staff. With Capwiz, constituents can be confident that their representative or a staff member will read their mail.



The ultimate purpose of NIAC's Legislative Action Center is to amplify our community's collective voice from the grassroots, by helping the individual Iranian American establish long-term relationships with decision-makers. Since its launch in August 2001, Iranian Americans have sent over 20,000 letters through our website to their representatives in Congress and other government officials as compared to an estimated 200 before NIAC's inception. Members of Congress have confirmed that these letters were instrumental in their decision-making process, in some cases actually changing their positions on key issues.



Befriend Your Lawmaker

Congressional Breakfast Series

Influence starts at the individual level. NIAC is helping Iranian Americans befriend their representatives, so that they can express their support, convey their concerns and help educate decision-makers on the interests and viewpoints of our community.

NIAC's Congressional Breakfast Series allows members of the Iranian-American community to host meetings with their respective lawmakers and establish long-term relationships with them.



Planning these breakfasts can be a daunting task, as well as time-consuming. Many Iranian Americans are not familiar with this process or simply feel uncomfortable making the initial contact. Furthermore, lawmakers prefer to meet constituents in groups rather than having one-on-one meetings. In response, NIAC has organized these meetings on behalf of the Iranian-American community.

The Congressional Breakfast Series is designed to allow participants to control the agendas of their meetings with members of Congress. As a non-partisan organization, NIAC acts solely as the facilitator of these events. The participants decide themselves what issues to talk about, and what positions to take on issues, while remaining in complete control of the discussion throughout.

NIAC successfully launched its' Congressional Breakfast Series in 2003, holding several meetings with representatives from districts where NIAC members reside. We aim to continue organizing Congressional breakfasts through our Chapters nationwide to increase our community's access to lawmakers.

“NIAC helped me overcome my self-imposed barriers in contacting my Congressman. Thanks to NIAC, I have found a receptive Congressman that I can educate about my concerns and the concerns of Iranian Americans.”

Dr. Farrokh Alemi

Assistant Dean for Graduate Health Science
George Mason University



The Key to Influence: Civic and Political Participation

Civic Participation Workshops

NIAC has conducted a series of workshops called “Demystifying Democracy – The Seven Ingredients of Influence” in major Iranian-American population centers that serve to advance the participation of our community in American civic life, particularly the political process. The workshop demonstrates the characteristics of influential individuals and communities in the US, and teaches Iranian Americans how to emulate these behaviors.

“Institutions are gateways to established ethnic identities in the United States, and NIAC is the first true institution working to make Iranian Americans visible within the expanding cosmopolis that is America.”

Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak

Professor of Persian Language & Literature
University of Washington



The tools of influence, such as knowledge about the political system and how to leverage money in politics, are provided at these workshops in order to help transform the Iranian-American population – beginning with the individual – from a politically apathetic group without a voice in politics to a vibrant, participatory and influential community.

Through these Civic Participation Workshops, we help provide a speaking platform for the Iranian-American community. NIAC members have come to realize the importance of a systematic approach to civic participation. As one member stated after attending a workshop, “I was really surprised to learn that I didn’t know how the society I live in works. I feel empowered!”

The results have been tremendous for our community. Iranian Americans of all political convictions have used the knowledge and skills they obtained through the workshops to meet with their lawmakers, send letters to decision makers, communicate with the media, volunteer with different organizations, and become involved in local politics in their respective home communities.

And this is just the beginning! Due to the success of the first round of workshops, NIAC is developing an advanced version, which will include practical training in advocacy.

NIAC is currently seeking funding for 10 such workshops to be held nationwide at an estimated annual cost of \$45,000.

The workshops have been held in Washington DC, New York, Chicago, Sunnyvale, Orange County and most recently, in Atlanta. Funding was provided by the Tides Foundation and the Open Society Institute.

The purpose of NIAC's Washington Policy Watch is threefold: to bring transparency to debates on issues affecting Iranian Americans, to allow members of our community to react to and affect these debates at an early stage, and to give young Iranian Americans first-hand experience and exposure to the policy world in Washington, DC.

The policy process "inside the beltway"—a common phrase in Washington—can be quite complicated. Ideas and solutions may float around in search of an appropriate problem, rather than the other way around. New policies can be formed months before they are picked up by the media, giving latecomers little opportunity to affect them. Policy speakers often speak one language within the protected circles of the policy world in Washington, and another in front of the cameras.

Policy seminars at think tanks, seldom covered by the press, can often give a taste of policies to come. Unfortunately, Iranian Americans have not had access to policy meetings and, as a result, have been unable to affect the formation of new policies at the crucial initial

stages. Furthermore, the complexities of the issues, as well as the motives of key political actors, are unknown to the vast majority of Iranian Americans.

NIAC's Washington Policy Watch program aims first to bring transparency to debates on issues most important to Iranian Americans. Second, by covering policy conferences and hearings in Washington DC, NIAC allows Iranian Americans to react to, and influence policy at an early stage. Exposure to these debates and knowledge of the issues by our community makes it more difficult for policy makers to ignore the Iranian-American public.

By sending Iranian-American college and graduate students to cover these events, NIAC meets its third objective and provides our youth with first-hand exposure to Congressional hearings, think tank conferences and policy seminars. Early in their careers, our youth will be afforded practical knowledge and networking opportunities, which will serve them well in their future careers.

KNOWLEDGE



NIAC has covered all Congressional hearings and policy conferences in Washington DC that are of relevance to the interest of the Iranian American community since the Fall of 2002. Our published reports on these events are not only read by Iranian Americans, but also by members of the National Security Council, the US State Department, the Department of Defense, Congressional staffers, and members of foreign ministries overseas. This program gives our Iranian-American interns the invaluable experience of not only attending these hearings and conferences, but also writing for a highly sophisticated audience. In turn, their hard work enhances our community's knowledge of the policy process and further strengthens our ability to affect the outcomes.



“Before the establishment of NIAC, the Iranian-American community desperately needed to be heard on Capitol Hill. Through CapWiz and other means, NIAC made this possible and ensured that politicians would not ignore the wishes of our community. But NIAC’s activities toward Iranian-American participation and recognition are not limited to political avenues only. Bringing Monster.com to their senses is another example of NIAC’s leadership, which should motivate us to put our hands together and support each other as Iranian Americans.”

Dr. Mina Houtan
President, Houtan Foundation



Standing Up for Iranian-American Rights: Monitoring and Responding to Discrimination

Civil Rights Watch



of their nationality, from using Monster.com's service.

What Monster.com called a "technical glitch" in its system also removed these countries from the drop down box under the education section of online resumes, preventing individuals educated in these countries from listing the locations of the institutions where they received their degree. As a result, a U.S. citizen with a PhD secured from a university in Iran would have seemed like a high-school dropout if he or she used Monster.com's service under the new policy.

guarantees of a partial reversal. Individuals could again relist their educational experiences in the education section of their resumes.

This was a monumental victory for the Iranian-American community, and NIAC's leadership was widely quoted in the media, including a front-page story in the Washington Post on July 9, 2003. However, in the post-9/11 era, discrimination will continue unless organizations like NIAC monitor institutional behavior, bring such policies into public light, and challenge them. NIAC is particularly worried that such forms of institutionalized discrimination

On April 24th, 2003, Monster.com, with no specific directive from the U.S. Department of Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), removed references to Iran and six other countries from its standard format for job-seekers' resumes – effectively preventing individuals in these countries, regardless

A few days before Monster.com's new policy went into effect, numerous NIAC members requested that direct action be taken to reverse Monster.com's decision. NIAC organized a nationwide campaign aimed at ending this corporate discrimination, and within two days – with over 1,500 complaint letters sent to Monster.com via our website – the company offered written

will become common practice and thereby, informally redefine the law – unless NIAC and other organizations are there to stop them.

As a result, NIAC is developing a Civil Rights Watch Program to monitor and, when needed, challenge government and private sector policies to ensure that discrimination against Iranian Americans is eradicated. The program will require two full-time staffers, as well as part-time legal and public relations consultants.

NIAC Prevents Iranian-American Deportation

NIAC was also intimately involved in the process of ending the deportation of Iranian-Americans after the initiation of the NSEERS program in December 2002.

After hundreds of Iranian men were detained on immigration technicalities following September 11, the community recognized the tremendous need for a national organization with the required expertise and resources to mobilize against such discriminatory policies.

Through NIAC, more than 5,000 letters by Iranian Americans nationwide were sent to lawmakers in Washington protesting the NSEERS program. NIAC staffers also visited numerous members of Congress to personally convey the community's outrage toward this new policy. In May 2003, the Department of Homeland Security, under pressure by Congress, ended this program.

The Civil Rights Watch Program is scheduled to be launched in early 2004 once its seed-money has been raised. The annual cost of the program is estimated at \$250,000 and approximately \$50,000 in seed-money is needed for its launch.

Giving Iranian-American Businesses a Fair Chance

SBA 8(a)

NIAC has begun researching and developing a course of action to apply for the Small Business Administration's 8(a) program on behalf of Iranian Americans. The 8(a) Program is designed to give assistance to small business owners who are deemed to be at a social and economic disadvantage. Currently, many ethnic groups and other minorities enjoy 8(a) status, which qualifies them for special consideration under the law. NIAC's goal is to include Iranian Americans in the program in order to assist eligible small, disadvantaged firms in competing more effectively in the American economy.

Participants of the SBA 8(a) Program receive business development assistance at various levels from the SBA and other government agencies. One key benefit is the opportunity to receive "sole-source" contracts of up to \$3 million for sales of goods and services, and \$5 million for manufacturing. Participants can also bid for "set-aside" contracts of any size in competition with others in the 8(a) Program.

Participants typically remain in the 8(a) Program for a period of nine years, during which they are encouraged to grow their competitive and institutional know-how through a monitored combination of 8(a) and

non-8(a) contracts. Recent regulatory changes have made the 8(a) Program even more beneficial by permitting participants to form teaming arrangements with other companies, and allowing government agencies to streamline the process by which 8(a) contracts are awarded.

The Iranian-American community has been seeking this status for several decades to no avail. As a result, thousands of Iranian-American businesses have been forced to deal with unfair competition. NIAC's research shows that earlier attempts to be included in the 8(a) program failed due to faulty applications. After studying several successful applications, NIAC is working on a strategy for the Iranian-American community based on proven successful strategies.

Our plan of action includes: demonstrating that NIAC is an adequate representative of Iranian Americans; establishing Iranian Americans as an identifiable, separate, and unique group; proving that a pattern of chronic racial and ethnic prejudice or cultural bias has existed; and confirming that Iranians are a significant group of small business owners. NIAC is also attracting political support for the application from elected officials.

NIAC is finishing Phase I of this project and we anticipate having our community win 8(a) status by late 2004. The estimated total cost for the project is \$32,000.



BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

Jump-starting the Careers of Iranian-American College Students

NIAC Summer
Washington DC
Internship Program

As Iranian Americans participate more in American civic life, it becomes increasingly important, particularly for Iranian-American youth, to be exposed to the workings of various organizations that have their headquarters in the nation's capital. Many other ethnic groups assist in opening doors to valuable career opportunities for their youth through representative national organizations. Iranian Americans deserve the same. NIAC aims to launch its Washington DC Internship Program in 2004 and provide 10-20 outstanding Iranian-American college students per year with internships in political and media organizations in Washington DC.

CAREER DEVELOPMENT



Our youth in America deserve the opportunity to be exposed to these institutions in order to broaden their perspectives and networks, strengthen their resumes, and become more competitive in the US job market.

Summer 2004 interns will participate in a 9-12 week internship program at such Washington, DC institutions as Congressional offices, agencies of the federal executive branch (the White House, Departments of State, Defense, Labor, and Health and Human Services), mass media (*Washington Post*, *US News & World Report*, NPR, PBS, NBC), think tanks (Heritage Foundation, Cato Institute, Brookings Institute, the Carnegie Endowment), and advocacy groups (National Association of Manufacturers, The Business Roundtable, Common Cause, ACLU).

NIAC summer interns will live in a dormitory facility in Washington, DC

and will participate in bi-monthly NIAC events to discuss their internships and get to know one another. Additionally, each intern will be required to complete a summary report on their internship experience. Currently, NIAC is identifying the most appropriate organizations for internships, securing accommodations at Washington-area university dormitories, and arranging special events for the program.

NIAC is still fundraising for this project and needs your help!

The estimated cost is \$6000 per intern to secure and coordinate internships, promote the program, review applications, provide room and board, and includes a small weekly stipend.

The total cost of this project will be \$60,000 to \$120,000 per year. Our youth are worth it!

Making an Iranian-American Difference in the 2004 Elections

The 2004 Elections are just around the corner and NIAC wants the Iranian-American community to be prepared. What candidate cares about your issues? Whose policies represent you best? Which candidate has shown sensitivity to Iranian-American concerns in the past? Who cares about our issues today? NIAC will answer questions most media outlets don't ask.

NIAC's primary goal in developing this project is to educate Iranian Americans on the electoral process and to encourage their participation by volunteering for, and donating to local, state, federal and presidential campaigns. We also encourage Iranian Americans to run for public office themselves.

“NIAC came out of nowhere to become one of the leading Iranian-American organizations in less than one year. The organization has empowered Iranian Americans and given them a voice in the American discourse. I was impressed with NIAC's professionalism and high quality work product from its very inception.”

Cyrus Mehri, Mehri&Skalet, named by *Regardie's Power* magazine as one of “Washington's Ten Most Feared Lawyers.”

NIAC will publish a newsletter that explains the electoral process. Topics will include: The primary/caucus system; third-party candidates; fundraising (including direct donations); Political Action Committees (PACs); individual donations; and campaign volunteering. NIAC will also contact all main candidates and map out their positions on issues that are of particular concern to Iranian Americans.

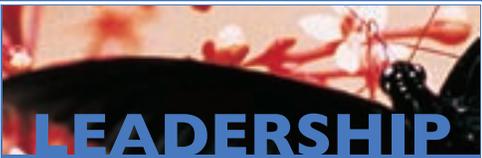
Although NIAC has just begun this project, work on informational brochures is well underway. With this project and similar efforts in the future, we hope to strengthen Iranian-American participation in U.S. elections through both knowledge of the electoral process and increased participation in it.

The estimated total annual cost for this project is \$19,200, but annual benefits for the Iranian-American community are incalculable!

Through the 2004 Elections project, NIAC will help you make an informed decision — and have an impact — when you cast your vote in November 2004!



IMPACT



LEADERSHIP

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BALANCE SHEET

REVENUE

Grants and Business Contributions	\$80,260
Individual Contributions	\$22,430
Membership Dues	\$11,505
Workshop Revenue	\$1,620
Fundraising Events	\$7,667

TOTAL REVENUE

\$123,482

EXPENSES

Advertising and Promotion	\$11,735
Administrative Fees	\$2,376
Professional Fees	\$37,400
Communications	\$2,466
Dues and Subscriptions	\$3,000
Printing and Reproduction	\$2,425
Travel Expenses	\$6,172
Transportation	\$920
Rent	\$12,295
Research Material and Expenses	\$649
Depreciation Expenses	\$476

TOTAL EXPENSES

\$79,438

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Tides Foundation
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