



How Immigrants Are Revitalizing Local Economies

A new economic development movement is rapidly growing across the Midwest and Northeast United States. It's a movement that is centered upon both making our communities the center of innovation and entrepreneurship —and revitalizing the distressed neighborhoods in older cities like Nashua, Manchester, and Concord. It's a movement that focuses on a core element of the economic environment that gave rise to the industrial pioneers, that made mill towns thriving places, and that provided the workforce that manufactured their dreams into industrial products.

A century ago, 22.4 percent of New Hampshire residents were foreign-born. Today that number has fallen sharply and is little more than 6 percent. Despite these small current numbers, immigrants and refugees provide important opportunities for New Hampshire's greatest economic challenges—talented STEM workers, entrepreneurs to launch new businesses in high-growth areas of the economy, new workers to bolster a graying workforce and new residents buying vacant homes in struggling neighborhoods and starting new retail businesses. Growth in New Hampshire's foreign-born population can be the foundation for a high-growth urban and regional strategy that will raise wages and provide jobs for everyone in the state.

New Hampshire would be in good company in recognizing and pursuing immigration as a cornerstone of its economic development strategies. More than a dozen Rust Belt cities and states facing many, if not all, of the same challenges as New Hampshire—including slow economic growth, aging workforce, vacancy and disinvestment in older cities, lack of technical skills demanded by new economy jobs, etc—have launched ambitious immigrant economic development initiatives in just the last five years alone. [Global Detroit](#) (of which I am the founder and director), St. Louis Mosaic, Welcome Dayton, Vibrant Pittsburgh, Global Cleveland, and the Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians in Philadelphia represent just a few of these efforts to revitalize cities and towns across America and make them more vibrant for everyone.

Earlier this year, these groups launched the [Welcoming Economies \(WE\) Global Network](#) to highlight best practices in immigrant economic development and assist in the development and implementation of these strategies. WE Global believes that immigrants are central to expanding economic opportunity and revitalizing our region and that by welcoming immigrants into the economic and social fabric of the community, we can energize the economies of small towns and older cities in ways that benefit both new and existing families.

WE Global members are blazing new ground by aligning local economic development programs with immigration. Global Detroit, for example, served as the impetus for launching the nation's first international student retention program in the country, attracting national nonprofits who help college-educated immigrants and refugees find meaningful employment in their areas of expertise, developing ambitious micro-enterprise training, lending support for Detroit residents, building a connector program to assist new arrivals in building local professional networks, starting a national award-winning program in immigrant welcoming, and building the first online searchable database of integration services.

These programs are largely embedded in and supported by the region's leading institutions—the Detroit Regional Chamber, major universities, corporations—and elected officials, including Michigan Governor Rick Snyder, Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan, Macomb County Executive Mark Hackel, and other local mayors and city councils.

WE Global has found that the most important programs are those that include a broad spectrum of stakeholders at the table including local economic development and business leadership, immigrant and refugee communities, as well as organized labor, local government, and the African American and Latino/a communities. WE Global members have developed innovative and effective programs because most have included an explicit focus on the benefits and impacts that non-immigrant stakeholders experience, in addition to the challenges and opportunities facing immigrants and refugees. Often the resulting strategies center on leveraging and tweaking existing resources and programs rather than creating new bureaucracies.

Over the past several months, I have had the pleasure of working with visionary leaders in New Hampshire who desire to create inclusive economies that work for all. Together, we've begun to discuss how local communities in the Granite State can begin the process of developing similar strategies and programs. The specific strategies need to be tailored to the needs, opportunities, and challenges of New Hampshire. They need to have specific benefits for senior citizens, laid off workers, and struggling homeowners, in addition to ensuring that immigrants and refugees find New Hampshire to be a great place to call home.

Few, if any, economic strategies can do as much for so little cost. Small cities in the Northeast and Midwest built the highest middle-class quality of life ever known on the planet. And we have enjoyed the fruits of that innovation, industriousness, and entrepreneurialism for the better part of a century. The 21st Century offers new challenges and new promise. Immigrant economic development is uniquely suited for New Hampshire to aid in our prosperity.

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