

Turning to Immigrants to Help Drive Economic Growth

BY STEVEN ROWE



A number of American cities are discovering a unique way to strengthen their economies. It's not improving infrastructure, lowering energy costs or giving tax breaks. Rather, these cities are finding that a key to economic vitality is welcoming and retaining foreign-born immigrants. That's because a high percentage of immigrants are innovators and entrepreneurs. They start businesses and create jobs at higher rates than others.

For this reason cities like Dayton, Ohio; Nashville, Tenn.; Boise, Idaho; and Greensboro, NC have taken the initiative to attract and welcome immigrants and include them in civic and economic life. Their leaders know it's smart economics to do so.

Take the postindustrial Rust Belt city of Dayton as an example. Since implementing the Welcome Dayton Plan in 2011, the city has reduced barriers to full participation in civic and economic life and made it easier for immigrants to open businesses. Strategies have included connecting immigrants to community supports, increasing access to English classes and providing marketing support for specific neighborhoods that have become hubs of immigrant entrepreneurship. This has helped to turn the tide on more than 50 years of population loss and economic decline. Between 2011 and 2012, Dayton's immigrant population increased 40 percent, compared to a 7 percent increase for Ohio overall, leading formerly empty business districts to fill with vibrant new businesses, according to *Forbes*.

Nashville, which led the nation in job growth in 2012, provides mentoring programs to assist immigrant and refugee families to learn to navigate the school system. Support is also offered to immigrants who

aspire to become U.S. citizens. Mayor Karl Dean has also established a New Americans Advisory Council, ensuring that newcomers have a voice in Metro Nashville government.

The mayor of Baltimore, Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, established an Office of Immigrant and Multicultural Affairs and introduced a plan to retain and attract immigrants. Additionally, Baltimore is implementing recommendations from the New Americans Task Force, encompassing a range of economic development, housing and citizenship initiatives that support and capitalize on the strengths of newcomers.

Like other American cities, communities in NH can experience economic benefits by welcoming immigrants. Laconia, Concord, Manchester and Nashua understand this and are leading the way. Groups in these four cities are developing an array of policies and practices to reduce barriers to full community inclusion faced by immigrants.

Concord plans to establish a neighborhood-based welcoming center, increase immigrant access to English and higher education classes and improve social connections between new arrivals and established residents. Greater Nashua plans to create a cultural navigators program that helps newcomers acquire the skills needed to succeed economically and socially, as well as to diversify civic leadership and engagement and promote culturally effective organizations.

Laconia plans to address barriers to employment for immigrants, including the challenges of obtaining documentation of prior education and skills, and promote inclusion of immigrants and refugees on local boards and civic organizations. Manchester plans to create a virtual welcoming center, provide services for immigrant small business development and programs that address

urgent needs, to include access to English classes and employment support services.

Diversity Pays

Census data shows that more than 58 percent of foreign-born immigrants in NH have completed some level of college education. That's higher than U.S.-born residents. Immigrants are also 30 percent more likely to start a business compared to their U.S.-born counterparts, according to the Brookings Institution. And research shows immigrants contribute to local housing values. Many tend to gravitate toward affordable neighborhoods that have fallen out of favor revitalizing areas in decline. This serves to keep properties on the tax rolls, boosting their value and reducing crime.

New Hampshire's economic future depends on welcoming and retaining immigrants. From a demographic perspective, we are an old state that is growing older. We simply cannot birth our way out of an impending decline in population. We need more people moving into the state. Rolling out the welcome mat and helping immigrants integrate into NH communities is not just about human decency or social responsibility. It's about economic survival. ■

Steven Rowe is president of the Endowment for Health, NH's largest health foundation. The Endowment for Health provides funding and technical support for immigrant integration initiatives in Laconia, Concord, Manchester and Nashua. Rowe can be reached at 603.228.2448 or srowe@endowmentforhealth.org. For more information, visit endowmentforhealth.org.

