

Grand Rapids Business Journal

Immigrants and refugees are invaluable part of economy

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Over the last 10 years, immigration and refugee resettlement have had no shortage of political maneuvering and executive branch controversy. You might expect an executive of the largest refugee resettlement organization in Michigan with a faith-based mission to appeal to your heart or moral compass. I'd like to make a different argument — that pro-immigrant and pro-refugee policies make good economic sense.

In 2016, foreign-born residents of Kent County contributed nearly \$3.3 billion to the county's GDP.

As we measure our economic success, immigrants have a big role to play. For all of our wonderful growth, employers still are starving for labor. We wouldn't be such a strong economy, and growing rapidly, without the contributions of our foreign-born residents, which is why we need to embrace the idea of making Kent County and Grand Rapids even more welcoming for immigrants and refugees, if we want to see our economy soar.

Between 2011 and 2016, Kent County's population grew by 4.6 percent, while the immigrant population increased by 15.3 percent. Eight percent of our population is foreign-born, more than 50,000 residents.

Last year, the city of Grand Rapids, in partnership with Samaritas and the Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce, received a Gateways for Growth Challenge, a national award granting us tailored research on the economic impact of immigrants and refugees in Kent County. This study attracted the involvement of the West Michigan Hispanic Chamber, The Right Place and a number of nonprofits involved with refugees. Collectively, we will release the report Sept. 12. While this is exciting, the more important message is how significant the economic impact of immigrants and refugees is for our community — and the urgent need for us to welcome this diversity and support initiatives to attract more foreign-born talent to our community.

Think about this: 45.3 percent of workers in the local agricultural industry were born abroad. In manufacturing, that number is 15.1 percent, and in transportation and hospitality, it's more than 11 percent apiece. These industries are critical to Kent County.

Do we think foreign-born individuals are a valuable source of talent to secure our future and are we willing to position ourselves to make sure their success is part of it? Do we expect immigrants and

refugees to be an important source of innovation that comes from a diversity of talent, thought and experience? In 2016, 1,971 immigrant entrepreneurs generated \$47.6 million in business income in Kent County. I think the answers to these questions must be a resounding YES.

The majority of West Michigan's population traces its roots to German, Dutch and Irish immigrants, with English and Polish close behind. But as a whole, Kent County's residents trace their ancestors from all over the world. Today, the top five origins of our foreign-born population (first generation) are Mexico, Guatemala, Vietnam, Bosnia and Canada. Over the last 75 years, large segments of our foreign-born population arrived as refugees. Frankly, so did many of our ancestors, too.

While leaving their homeland was never their first choice, refugees are motivated, brave and resilient — and have few choices but to succeed for the sake of their families. A great majority of refugees are self-sustaining within 90 days of arriving — even with English as a second, or fourth or fifth language. Data shows that while household income of refugees nationwide is below the national average for the first 10-15 years, it becomes on par, and after 25 years, outstrips the average American household.

Recognizing this enviable work ethic, we must position our community to advocate for immigrants and refugees and welcome them more fully. Grand Rapids can leverage the findings of this report into a multisector planning process that purposefully creates an even more welcoming environment with benefits for us all.

If we want to set the stage to attract talent and labor, to guarantee our future in the world business community, one of the best ways we can do this is by welcoming immigrants and refugees to Kent County.

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