

Land of opportunity

Centerpiece

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Jim Courtney

Western New York lacks an economic development agenda that identifies ways to leverage the area's growing foreign-born population, including Iraqi native Majid Aliessa, who arrived two years ago. Aliessa took language classes to improve his English speaking skills and got hired at Litelab Corp.



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It was never [Majid Aliessa](#)'s plan to leave Iraq, but when his job as a transportation helper for the [U.S. Army](#) made him fear for his life, he knew it was time to get out.

Now the 47-year-old married father of two has settled in Western New York and works at Litelab Corp. in downtown Buffalo. Since being hired last year by the maker of high-end lighting, he has fixed machines, assembled parts and painted walls.

"I have some skills for electric so I got this job," said Aliessa, who arrived in Buffalo in 2012 and lives in Amherst. "This company is very nice. All the bosses and supervisors and all the people here are very kind. I'm not feeling now what I felt in Iraq."

He and his family are part of the growing foreign-born population in the greater Buffalo metropolitan region, a group that in 2013 totaled more than

67,600, according to a new [Brookings Institution](#) report. Some say the foreign-born – refugees, immigrants and international students as a whole – hold unparalleled potential to both reinforce and elevate the workforce. But that potential may go unrealized if the region doesn't incorporate refugees and immigrants into broader economic-development strategies. [Dottie Gallagher-Cohen](#) is president and CEO of the [Buffalo Niagara Partnership](#), a regional economic development organization for the private sector. She said she considers the foreign-born population to be a largely untapped "talent pipeline" that could support the labor pool in the short-term and, over a longer period, stabilize the area's population. But they will leave, she warns, if they can't find meaningful work and be part of society.

"We have a lot to lose if we lose this group, including the diversity they bring to the community and to the workforce, as well as the multi-generational long tail that comes with helping foreign-born families integrate into our community," she said. "That's why this is without question an economic-development opportunity that we shouldn't miss."

Foreign-born men and women work in all sorts of industries in Western New York. Hospitality and manufacturing are two of the most obvious sectors, but refugees and immigrants also get jobs in retail, restaurants, production, warehouses and construction.

Many of them are filling positions that have been hard for employers to fill in the past. Some of them have struck out on their own, opening shops and restaurants in the city.

No matter the job path they choose, the impact is critical for the country's economy now and in the future, according to [Audrey Singer](#), a demographer and senior fellow at Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program who studies immigrant issues. She said places such as Buffalo have an opportunity to capitalize on the foreign-born who are moving here, including more than 1,000 refugees who arrive every year to make a new life in the city.

"It's about creating an environment that not only welcomes immigrants but helps them thrive in place as a way of attracting them and retaining them," Singer said. "The idea is, how do we get people to come here and do well and like it and tell their family members and friends about it? It takes a certain amount of economic opportunity on the ground."

There is no regional agenda that includes the refugee and immigrant population in Western New York. Instead, four independently operated resettlement agencies handle the bulk of housing, language and job-placement matters. County workforce programs and state labor departments offer job training and other employment assistance, but none of the programs are geared specifically to foreign-born workers. The City of Buffalo, however, is planning to open an Office of New Americans that will focus largely on legal issues — including how to obtain permits to open new businesses, said [Brendan Mehaffy](#), who's in charge of the Office of Strategic Planning. At the same time, the city is drafting a report on new Americans that includes local demographics of the foreign-born, existing service agencies and ways the city can help. According to Mehaffy, the city's foreign-born population rose 56.1 percent between 2000 and 2012. That amounts to approximately 7,200 additional people in 12 years, he said.

"The reality is that refugees and immigrants are contributing significantly to many of our neighborhoods. Grant Street is a prime example of that," said Mehaffy, referring to the West Side corridor where many immigrants have opened businesses in recent years. "So having this report allows us to be more strategic in terms of our day-to-day interactions and also in developing policies related to language and cultural sensitivity."

Though the report is not finalized, it's a start toward creating a regionwide initiative that promotes immigration as an economic development opportunity, said [Eva Hassett](#), former deputy mayor of Buffalo who now directs the International Institute of Buffalo, one of the four resettlement agencies.

She pointed to cities such as St. Louis and Detroit as examples of places that have created plans to attract and retain immigrants.

Over the summer, she met with the leader of Global Detroit, an initiative that grew out of a May 2010 study of the impact of immigrants on Southeast Michigan's economy. Focused on making Detroit a more welcoming place, director [Steve Tobocman](#) said the initiative has raised more than \$7 million in philanthropic funds to invest in a series of programs.

Hassett said it makes sense for Buffalo to move in the same direction, not only for the benefit of plugging refugees and immigrants into the workforce

but for the benefit of the region's employers, many of whom struggle to find qualified, reliable workers.

"This is a giant pool of talent and human capital that's of economic value," said Hassett, whose organization placed 198 people in jobs in 2013. "If we don't connect that population to as many companies as possible, think of the downside for those companies. Why would those companies stay in Buffalo if they can't find the employees they seek?"

Some companies have already turned to agencies such as the International Institute when they have jobs to fill. Buffalo NewsPress, a 34-year-old printing company that employs 160 at its Broadway facility, has 20 Burmese refugees on staff and plans to hire more. Ditto at Buffalo Wire Works Co. Inc., a wire cloth and screen manufacturer with 20 refugees on staff that pays them between \$12 and \$14 an hour at the time of hiring. [Larry Christ](#), COO of Litelab, is a former board member of the International Institute who hired eight refugees and immigrants in the past 18 months. He said he has an "emotional attachment" to doing so because of his own family history.

But it also makes good business sense, he said, because the people he hired are good workers. He acknowledged the language barrier but said there's support for that.

"This is a part of the available talent pool that's different and we will keep hiring them," Christ said. "I don't think enough people in business understand this opportunity."

But they should. According to Singer, immigrant workers have been a growing segment of the American workforce for decades. They work in both high- and low-skilled jobs and many work in occupations that are among the fastest-growing, she said.

Singer identified Buffalo as a "former immigrant gateway" that experienced lots of immigrant resettlement at the turn of the 20th century, but it now has fallen behind other cities in terms of the numbers of foreign-born who make up the overall population. Consequently, the immigrants who live here tend to be higher-skilled with bachelor's degrees or higher because they have been here awhile and increased their education.

That's both a blessing and a curse for Buffalo and foreign-born residents, she said.

"The interesting thing about Buffalo and other former immigrant gateway

labor markets is that part of the dynamic is skilled, native-born people tend to leave in higher numbers to go elsewhere," Singer said. "So getting into the workforce requires higher skill levels if you're foreign-born in order to fit into many of those open slots."

Hassett and Gallagher-Cohen said more funding for training programs is needed. In the meantime, employers such as Bak USA LLC are starting from the ground up.

The company recently announced plans to make lower-cost tablet PCs from the top floor of the former Sheehan Memorial Hospital in Buffalo and hire 100 people to do the work. [Ulla Bak](#), president, said the company hired its first eight employees — five of whom are refugees — and expects to hire more refugees in coming weeks.

Global Detroit's Tobocman visited Buffalo in June and met with Mayor [Byron Brown](#), the Buffalo Niagara Partnership, elected officials and local organizations. His takeaway from those meetings: the area has a "tremendous opportunity" to capitalize on its new Americans, if it wants to do so, he said.

"All the pieces are there to move this forward, but what's needed is a little bit of organization and some resources to guide this," Tobocman said. "It involves lots of stakeholders, but what's critical is that it focuses on this question of the regional economy. How does the regional economy benefit from this?"