

Immigrants Welcome Here

By DAVID BORNSTEIN

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Fixes looks at solutions to social problems and why they work.

Earlier this month, John Boehner declared that it was unlikely that the House of Representatives would pass major immigration reform legislation this year. Given the desperate need for an overhaul of the system, the political gridlock is dismaying. But thankfully it's not the whole immigration story.

While Congress is locked in ideological battle, an incipient “welcoming” movement is taking root around the country as elected officials and community leaders are increasingly adopting “welcoming plans,” forming “welcoming committees” and issuing “welcoming resolutions” — to attract immigrants and improve relationships between newcomers and those who receive them.

Historically, efforts to assist immigrants have tended to focus on services and overlook the relationship-building process. “If you think of an immigrant as a seed making its way to a new garden, we’ve traditionally focused on the seed, but not on the soil,” says David Lubell, the founder of Welcoming America, a network that has helped to define, galvanize and spread this movement. “You need to focus on both the immigrant community and the receiving community.”

The need has rarely been greater. From 1990 to 2010, the United States immigrant population increased by 20 million, roughly the same number of people who entered the country during the great wave of immigration between 1880 and 1920. Today, there are about 40 million foreign-born people in the United States (about 46 percent are naturalized citizens).

Unlike the immigrants of the past, the new immigrants are more diverse and more scattered — many living in midsize cities like Boise, Idaho; Louisville, Ky.; Dayton, Ohio; and Memphis, where, until recently, the foreign-born populations were small.

Such rapid change would produce tensions under the best of circumstances, let alone coming out of a deep recession, and at a time when the nation is rapidly aging and shifting its fundamental racial and ethnic composition. Addressing these tensions honestly and directly is difficult. But some communities are trying — and their experiences are worth noting.

Consider Nashville. In 2012 Nashville led the nation in job growth and was voted the nation's friendliest city by Travel+Leisure magazine. But eight years ago, the city appeared to be on a different trajectory.

Tennessee has seen a 400 percent increase in its immigrant population since 1990, with the influx of many immigrants from Mexico, Kurdistan and Somalia. Tensions flared. Between 2005 and 2007, talk radio turned particularly ugly, a mosque outside Nashville was burned, numerous efforts to pass anti-immigrant legislation were introduced (including a measure to ban food trucks, a thinly veiled attack on taco trucks), and Nashville's Metro Council passed (by 23-14) an ordinance requiring all government documents to be in English only, except in special cases. If the measure hadn't been vetoed by the mayor, Nashville would have become the largest American city by a large measure to take such a step.

At the time, David Lubell was running the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition (T.I.R.R.C.), a group he had founded in 2001, and for years he had been fighting to defeat anti-immigrant legislation at the city and state levels. But for every bill that was defeated, another came along. When Lubell heard about a welcoming initiative from Iowa, it gave him the idea to start Welcoming Tennessee in 2005. Instead of playing defense, perhaps it was possible to connect people in ways that reduced the underlying rancor.

There are many arguments to be made in favor of immigration. For example, immigrants are twice as likely as nonimmigrants to start businesses (pdf), and most economic research indicates they boost the economy. In fact, immigrants or their children founded 40 percent of the country's Fortune 500 companies.

In the face of anger or resentment, these arguments fall flat. Stephen Fotopulos, who worked with Lubell to start Welcoming Tennessee and is now the executive director of the T.I.R.R.C., described a conversation he had with a woman in a church in 2007 about Nashville's proposed English-only ordinance.

“She was against it, but her husband was for it,” he recalled. “She told me, ‘I’ve tried to talk rationally about this with him. He understands that the ordinance is not going to save the city money or encourage immigrants to learn English faster. But he grew up in South Nashville, and the corner he grew up on looks nothing like it did then. He can’t read many of the signs. And he’s afraid that his children are not going to recognize the city he grew up in. So this is a way to take a stand.’”

The issue here is not economics; it’s what happens when people feel they are losing their sense of belonging and continuity with the past.

We often think of diversity as a good in and of itself. But diversity is hard. The political scientist Robert Putnam has observed that residents of ethnically diverse neighborhoods tend to “hunker down” and develop *lower* levels of altruism and trust. To turn around this state of affairs takes deliberate effort; it doesn’t happen by itself. People have to get to know — and come to like or respect — individuals from different ethnic or religious groups. Then they become more positively predisposed towards those groups as a *whole*. Putnam calls this the “My pal Al effect,” and he notes that it hinges on having encounters with people who are different from you (pdf).

That’s what Welcoming Tennessee sought to make happen. They organized community dinners, gatherings at churches, talks at Rotary clubs. They trained hundreds of community ambassadors to bring people together across racial and ethnic lines. They worked with media and put up billboards with positive messages about immigrants. “People were only hearing negative things,” recalled Lubell. “But most of the immigrant population were there to make their families’ lives better. They wanted to contribute to the community.” And many were struggling themselves with the loss of a sense of belonging.

“If we had come in and told people they should start liking immigrants, it wouldn’t have worked,” added Lubell. “We needed to identify people within the

local community who could reach out to the receiving community, longtime Tennesseans, and have empathy for them, to connect with their concerns, not call them racists.”

It led to difficult but constructive conversations. “If you are able to create a space and give people an outlet to honestly express their frustration,” explained Fotopulos, “they are less likely to demonize and stigmatize people and more likely to come up with constructive solutions.”

From 2006 to 2008, according to a regular statewide poll conducted by Middle Tennessee State University (pdf), attitudes toward immigrants softened in Tennessee. In 2009, the English-only measure was put to a popular ballot and was rejected by Nashville voters 57 to 43 percent. Local leaders, including groups like Nashville for All of Us and the Coalition for Education About Immigration, which worked to defeat the English-only measure, began adopting “welcoming community” language (pdf). The city government launched three new welcoming initiatives: the New Americans Advisory Council, MyCity Academy and El Protector, all aimed at strengthening relationships between immigrants and the receiving community.

“It’s difficult to establish causality between Welcoming Tennessee and improved attitudes, but something is happening in Tennessee that isn’t happening yet across the South,” notes Fotopulos. A 2013 poll found that three quarters of Tennesseans now have strong or moderate support for immigration reform with a path toward citizenship for undocumented immigrants. This past summer, both of Tennessee’s Senators voted for the immigration overhaul bill, the only southern Republicans to do so who weren’t part of the “Gang of Eight” drafting committee.

After word spread about Welcoming Tennessee, immigrant advocate groups from other parts of the country got in touch to pursue similar initiatives. “We saw that there was a welcoming imperative that needed to be tapped into,” said Lubell. That led to the creation of Welcoming America in 2009. Since then, 22 nonprofit affiliates have come onboard, and a program launched this past June called “Welcoming Cities and Counties” already has 27 municipal government partners.

One of them is St. Louis. After a study in 2012 revealed that less than 5 percent of the population of the St. Louis metropolitan area was foreign-born — and that the relative scarcity of immigrants was the primary cause of the region’s poor economic growth (pdf) — the city launched the St. Louis Mosaic Project, with the goal of becoming “the fastest growing major metropolitan area for foreign born residents by 2020,” said Betsy Cohen, the project director.

To date, St. Louis has recruited 300 “mosaic ambassadors” and has created a network of local professionals who commit to share contacts and make introductions with foreign-born residents, modeled after a successful program from Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Another city in the network is Dayton, Ohio, which passed a “Welcoming Dayton” plan in 2011. Like other industrial cities in the Midwest, Dayton’s population had declined dramatically — by 40 percent since its peak in 1960. Most of the new growth is coming from immigration. City counselors sought to see if Dayton could take steps to accelerate it.

“When we started this, we didn’t expect that there would be a national wave of welcoming initiatives,” said a Dayton city commissioner, Matt Joseph, whose wife is from Bosnia and whose grandparents immigrated from Lebanon. “Three years ago immigration was a third-rail conversation. But our citizens said they wanted us to try new things to bring jobs, vitality and a more active civil society back to Dayton. We were hit pretty hard by factories closing and the housing crisis. And we haven’t had a refreshing wave of immigration for a long time.”

They brought together civic leaders from health, education, government, business, social services and faith communities. They reached out to immigrant entrepreneurs and managers, asking them how the city could better meet their needs. They started providing language classes for teachers in Dayton’s public schools. They enlisted help from Wright State University to find the simplest pathways to help immigrants get credentialed for education or skills acquired abroad. They launched the Dayton World Soccer Games with two dozen teams representing immigrants’ countries of origin.

Melissa Bertolo, who heads the initiative for the city, recalled: “A man said to me, ‘This is the first time that my son has ever been asked to represent

Turkey.’ He was very thankful.”

In 2012, Dayton’s mayor, Gary Leitzell, traveled to Turkey with a group of local business leaders to strengthen the city’s reputation as a hub for Turkish immigrants. The city reports that between 2011 and 2012, immigration increased 40 percent (pdf).

One partner with a state-wide mandate is “Welcoming Michigan,” which was launched in 2012. (In the last census, Michigan was the only state to record a population decline.) Welcoming Michigan currently works in a handful of communities in the southern part of the state, each with distinct needs. For instance, Hamtramck, Mich., which is surrounded by Detroit, was originally dominated by German farmers and later by Polish immigrants, but today the more than 40 percent of its residents who are foreign born come from places like Yemen and Bangladesh.

Local teams meet monthly with Christine Sauve, the project leader, who helps them think through strategies to overcome barriers to becoming more welcoming. “In Hamtramck, there is still a lot of physical segregation,” she explained. “One of the first things we need to do is just to get people in the same physical spaces more often where they can interact with one another.”

So the city organized the Hamtramck World’s Fair (a little one — Hamtramck occupies roughly two square miles), with performances, celebrations, food and opportunities to get to know your neighbors. “One of the most popular booths was done by a group of Bangladeshi high school girls who just answered questions about things people were curious about,” explained Sauve. “Why some women wear the hijab and others don’t. They also held a fashion show.”

“It’s simple things that often build bridges,” she added. “Older residents helping newer ones learn how to pronounce English words properly or make sense of Valentine’s Day, or being aware of Ramadan when they plan their barbeque.” To date, at least one independent survey of Bangor and Hartford in southwest Michigan showed significantly improved attitudes toward immigrants. From 2011 to 2012, the proportion of people who agreed with the statement “Immigrants should be encouraged to settle in your community” rose from 39 to

47 percent.

“The simple act of assembling a group of leaders from the city to work with you around the issue of welcoming is such a big step forward,” she added. “Just to say this is something we care about sets a tone that can have a big effect. People were aware of the need to be more welcoming — but they weren’t sure what to do. The biggest mistake that communities make is not doing anything.” Welcoming America is gathering experiences like these from around the country and sharing them (pdf).

It’s also looking into developing an identification and certification program: a U.S. News and World Report-style ranking for the country’s most welcoming cities.

Although its partners work in many ways — everything from helping immigrants with language, education, credentialing, vocational training, business support, networking and housing — some insights are crosscutting. For example, it’s important to have a local organization, like TIRRC, that can serve as a coordinating clearinghouse for welcoming activities. It’s important for civic or government leaders to bring people from the immigrant and receiving communities together, as well as to train ambassadors who can lead their own successful welcoming activities. And it’s crucial to use media to communicate authentic stories of immigrants and challenge negative stereotypes. Otherwise the conversation is likely to be co-opted by the loudest and angriest voices.

“At some point, communities have to make a choice,” says Fotopulos. “You can decide to resist change and create policies that express that resistance, in effect making life harder on folks who weren’t there a generation ago. Or you can embrace growing diversity and recognize its economic, cultural and social benefits, finding creative ways to manage the change well. It’s a natural act for people to move — and it’s a sign of great promise and prosperity if your community is the place they choose to invest their talents, raise a family and build a new life.”

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This post has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: February 24, 2014

An earlier version of this article incorrectly referred to Bangor and Hartford as counties. They are cities in Michigan.