



Welcoming Immigrants: Why Empathy Is Smart Economics For Cities

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Why should a local government care about welcoming immigrants and becoming an actively empathetic institution? Not only do immigrants add social and civic value to towns and cities, they also help their communities become stronger economically. More localities are recognizing this, and with immigration reform stalled at the federal level, they are taking the lead to attract and welcome their immigrant neighbors.

Research demonstrates the important role immigrants play in local economies across the nation. According to a Brookings study, they are [30% more likely](#) to start a [business](#) compared to their U.S.-born counterparts. Not only do immigrants create jobs as natural entrepreneurs, but [research shows](#) that immigrants also contribute to local housing values—they tend to gravitate towards affordable neighborhoods that have fallen out of favor and often revitalize areas in decline. According to a [report by Partnership for a New American Economy](#), “By keeping properties on the tax rolls, immigrants support local government. By moving into once-vacant homes, they help reduce crime.” Thus, “immigrants can simultaneously boost housing prices in some areas while easing housing affordability problems elsewhere.”

By lifting up declining neighborhoods, starting businesses, and creating jobs, immigrants enrich their adopted hometowns in ways that create a positive magnetic effect for those communities. According to a [report by Americas Society/Council of the Americas](#), because immigrants tend to make communities more attractive through greater demand for businesses and preservation of jobs in industries such as manufacturing, for [every 1,000 immigrants that arrive to a county, 270 U.S.-born residents move there](#) in response.



Immigrants who are helping to make their community stronger are featured in an ad campaign by Nebraska Is Home, an initiative of Nebraska Applesed that is working to welcome immigrant families and strengthen communities.

Creating an environment that is friendly toward immigrants is both a matter of human decency and smart economics. A welcoming city is more likely to thrive, thus illustrating the “empathy imperative”—the critical importance of empathy within communities today. A person who is welcoming to another resident shows *active* empathy—the kind that involves concrete steps on behalf of the “welcomer” to help make the resident’s journey smoother. In this way, the empathy imperative is a powerful economic driver that also makes a city a more vibrant, inclusive, and pleasant place to live.

Recognizing these benefits, city governments across the country are leading local efforts to promote empathy throughout their communities. Over the past 12 months I’ve seen 37 cities—from my hometown of Atlanta, to Los Angeles, to Dodge City, Kansas—join [*Welcoming Cities and Counties*](#), a program of Welcoming America that works with local governments to create immigrant-friendly environments where residents can find common ground and shared prosperity. These 37 cities are passing policies and starting programs—such as English classes, support for small businesses, and civic engagement

efforts—that reduce the barriers to full community inclusion faced by immigrants.

The city of Dayton, Ohio was one of the earliest cities to capitalize on the empathy imperative. A postindustrial Rust Belt city, Dayton has faced steady economic decline, combined with a rapidly shrinking population over the last twenty years. In 2010, a respected city leader named Tom Wahlrab decided he wanted new immigrant arrivals to feel more welcome in his city. Tom also understood that from an economic perspective, a larger inflow of immigrants—who are exceptionally entrepreneurial—could help revitalize the economy and increase the city’s declining tax base.

In collaboration with city leaders and a diverse planning group, Tom helped create [the Welcome Dayton Plan](#), a blueprint for positioning Dayton to become the most immigrant-friendly city in Ohio, if not the entire country. The plan, adopted unanimously by the city council in 2011, includes programs that provide marketing support for specific neighborhoods that have become hubs of immigrant entrepreneurship, community gatherings that create dialogue and empathy between U.S-born and immigrant residents, recommendations for educating immigrants about social services, and increasing access to ESL and literacy courses. All of these efforts to make current immigrant residents feel more a part of the broader community are helping immigrants and their children to fully participate as community members and builders.

The results, although still preliminary, have been impressive. Between 2011 and 2012, Dayton’s immigrant population increased by over 40%, compared to about a 7% increase for Ohio overall, and a national average of 13%. Business districts and neighborhoods that were previously half empty are now thriving due to the arrival of new immigrants, and local population and tax revenue decline has all but halted.

Since Dayton, many other cities across the country have seized upon the empathy imperative. This exciting national phenomenon would have been unimaginable just a few years ago, but thanks to the courage of leaders like Tom Wahlrab, many of these cities are now actually competing with one another in a “virtuous competition” for immigrants. They are finding that becoming a more welcoming community means more customers for local businesses, more jobs created by immigrant entrepreneurs, and a thriving economy that benefits us all.

David Lubell is the founder and Executive Director of Welcoming America and a thought leader of [Building Vibrant Communities: Activating Empathy to Create Change](#), an online competition launched by Ashoka Changemakers and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation.