

Changing of the guard at Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians

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There's a certain similarity to most immigrant journeys. They often begin with relentless work, saving to open businesses and learning English. Today's immigrants are also responding to more contemporary demands, including the need for a labor force that is fluent in the language of technology. For the past nine years, the Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians has been focusing on giving immigrants the tools for entrepreneurial success.

Abu Diallo sells handbags, belts, scarves and other wares in a sidewalk stand on 52nd Street near Chestnut, one of the traditional business corridors in West Philadelphia. The Mauritanian man, in his late forties, says he credits his mentor Herman Nyamunga for what he's achieved so far.

"This is the guy who teach us how we do our business. He helped us so much," said Diallo.

Herman Nyamunga, a small-business development coordinator for the Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians, is following up on a series of business workshops for immigrants. The workshops are designed to train vendors to master the language of retail business, interact with customers, display merchandise, and keep current on all the permits and paperwork required by Philadelphia's authorities.

"One of the things I was doing last year was mapping the corridors," said Nyamunga, "knowing which businesses are here, knowing the country of origin, what languages they speak, what things they sell, how many people they employ, because part of the Welcoming's Center mission is to measure economic impact of mid-level businesses."

Nyamunga is originally from Kenya. He's experienced in import-export enterprises and has an MBA. But he's just part of the center's team.

"We see immigrants as assets," said Anne O'Callaghan, an Irish immigrant who came to Philadelphia in 1970 for a post-graduate degree in Physical Therapy. "Immigrants don't come here, don't go through the pain of leaving family. The folks that do that are people that have this human drive to make something of themselves, to do better."

O'Callaghan founded the Welcoming Center nine years ago. To begin with, she wanted to measure the entrepreneurial spirit immigrants bring to the U.S. economy

"You have to do the work and then you have the results," said O'Callaghan. "You have to be able to say, 'Here's the economic impact of what we're doing.' Because it's one thing to say it in theory, but it's quite another to have the facts and to be able to show what you're able to do."

According to the center's statistics, there are approximately 500,000 foreign-born residents in the greater Philadelphia region. That's about 11 percent of the population, says Amanda Bergson-Shilcock, director of program evaluation.

"About 49 to 52 percent of the immigrants in this region are naturalized U.S. citizens, eligible to vote," said Bergson-Shilcock. "One of the things ... really different in the Philadelphia region is that we have a pretty substantial population of immigrants who have college or graduate degrees. It's consistently about six percentage points higher than American-born community residents."

As the Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians hits its stride, it's also going through an important transition. Anne O'Callaghan is retiring this week. Peter Gonzales, an experienced immigration lawyer, is taking the helm.

He plans to continue and expand the work of the center and help immigrants navigate the present economy. Gonzales also wants to engage and attract foreign university students and young entrepreneurs "who are creating businesses in their dorm rooms and houses via Internet."

"What frustrates me ... is the lack of connection that is made for the foreign students who come through the universities in our region, get their graduate degrees, and then leave," said Gonzales.

All immigrants, he says, take risks when they move to a new country. That risk-taking spirit, he adds, is essential for entrepreneurs and small-business owners. It's also at the core of creating new jobs.

That's exactly what motivated Anne O'Callaghan to start the Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians.

As she retires to make way for new leadership, she equates the transition to something she knows all too well.

"I feel this displacement," she said. "In a way, it's like immigration. With immigration, you leave. You make the decision to go and you prepare. We left our countries and our families for whatever reasons. And you're excited for the opportunities, and you're excited for the new possibilities. You also feel a great sense of loss. So I'm starting to pay attention to that now and to feel it and to notice it."