



## Six Ohio cities to share immigrant-attracting best practices

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Cleveland is in a competition for high-skilled foreign-born talent, its opponents being regions throughout the country fighting to fill open positions in the knowledge economy.

A new proposal with local ties has immigrant attraction proponents statewide finding common ground in the battle for outsider brainpower.

The newly formed network, called "Ohio Welcoming Initiatives," is comprised of six Ohio cities brought together to share best practices on what their respective regions are doing to attract and welcome immigrants. The venture, launched with help from economic development nonprofit [Global Cleveland](#), convenes representatives from Cincinnati, Columbus, Dayton and Toledo, as well as officials from [JobsOhio](#) and the state's Office of Workforce Transformation.

All half dozen metros are members of the [WE Global Network](#), a Midwestern web of development groups working to harness immigrant talent.

"Cleveland is not alone in trying to attract foreign-born talent," says Global Cleveland interim director Richard Konisiewicz. "We want to support and learn from each other in our similar efforts to attract immigrants and refugees."

The coalition will meet quarterly in Columbus and engage in conference calls throughout the year. On the docket will be policy development in such areas as retention of international students, career pathway assistance for skilled immigrants, and easier access to capital for foreign entrepreneurs.

For a transforming Ohio economy, immigrants are among the best sources for high-tech jobs as they exceed the number of native residents in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) college classes and professions by large proportions, Global Cleveland officials say.

In practice, that could mean smoothing the career licensing pathway for an engineer from Moscow, or pointing a Somali startup owner to a lending opportunity that could help kickstart her business. The group also backs Ohio's [Postsecondary Globalization Initiative](#), which supports engaging and retaining the skills of foreign college graduates. A partnership with the state's [Ohio Means Jobs](#) portal further connects this talent to open positions in the region.

"We're helping our employers become more knowledgeable about the why and how of hiring international talent, thus broadening the employment opportunities for this valuable talent pool," says Konisiewicz.

Partner city Toledo has an immigrant welcoming program encompassing both the city and Lucas County, with melting pot plans that include hosting community conversations and linking immigrants to support services and economic growth opportunities.

Though active within their respective neighborhoods, immigrants make up less than four percent of the regional population, says Brittany Ford, an assistant with the Welcome Toledo-Lucas County Initiative core committee. Sharing trade secrets with Cleveland or an actively immigrant-friendly city like Dayton will only help Toledo become more upwardly global.

"There is so much we can learn from each other," says Ford. "Those involved with these programs are inspiring, and the type of people you could lean to and get answers from."

Commissioner Pete Gerken, the lead elected official on the initiative, is excited to join a statewide team that is part of the national movement to welcome immigrants. "Welcoming immigrants and refugees is an important component of any talent attraction and retention strategy," says Gerken. "Toledo-Lucas County has a unique immigrant population and history that has served us well in the past and we think that it will serve us well in the future."

Participating in this state-wide collaboration is an enormous first step in creating a more welcoming and international Ohio, and can only lift the economic prospects of the individual metros involved, Konisiewicz believes.

"What helps Ohio, helps Cleveland as well," he says. "This idea of immigration and talent attraction is a new field of work. There is no textbook or proven track record. Sharing best practices with each other is a way we all can succeed."