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Group aims to build immigrants' economic impact

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By Jeremy P. Kelley

More than 300 people attended Thursday's Welcoming Economies Global Network conference, which aimed to expand upon immigrant economic initiatives across the Midwest.

Melissa Bertolo, coordinator of the Welcome Dayton program, said a majority of the participants at the Dayton Convention Center represented cities and nonprofits that, like Dayton, want to better integrate immigrants into their economies and communities.

The conference opened with a video featuring mayors and leaders of Dayton, Pittsburgh, Detroit, Toledo and other cities talking about the importance of attracting and retaining talent, including immigrant talent, to their cities.

"We are all similar cities across this region," said Dayton mayor Nan Whaley. "Being able to come together to share best practices, network and learn from each other is important."

Whaley touted a new report from the Partnership for a New American Economy identifying the impact that immigrants have made on Dayton. The report said Dayton's foreign-born population increased significantly from 2009 to 2013, giving the city its first total population increase in decades. The report said foreign-born households in Dayton had \$115 million in spending power in 2012, and paid more than \$15 million in state and local taxes.

David Lubell, founder of Welcoming America, called Dayton a trend-setter for its 2010 Welcome Dayton launch, saying 57 municipal governments have adopted a welcoming approach to immigrants in the past five years.

Multiple speakers cited research showing that immigrants are more likely to be entrepreneurs. David Kallick of the Fiscal Policy Institute said while foreign-born individuals make up 13 percent of the U.S. population, they own 28 percent of "Main Street businesses" such as groceries, restaurants, salons and other small retail establishments.

Dayton's Ayman Salem said he came to the United States from Egypt because better laboratories and access to funding "cause knowledge to grow faster in this country."

Salem's company, Materials Resources LLC, is a material data science firm employing six Ph.D.-level scientists full time, on projects such as analyzing the microstructure of metals to make them stronger. He said Dayton's Entrepreneurs Center helped him learn how to pitch his business plan.

Felicia Escobar, special assistant to President Obama for Immigration Policy, lauded Dayton for going beyond slogans to provide that type of business and educational support to help people like Salem.

Escobar said a White House task force is about to launch the Building Welcoming

Communities Campaign, which would boost efforts like those, as well as strengthening existing pathways to citizenship and working on language and education barriers.

Conference attendees got a head start on that Thursday via sessions on how colleges can better work with immigrants (Wright State participated), and how immigrant businesses can overcome language and cultural barriers (the Ohio Small Business Development Center participated).

City commissioner Matt Joseph said he hopes Dayton's approach toward immigrants becomes part of its DNA and its legacy.

"In 10, 20, 50 years, I want people to look back and say, 'Oh, Dayton – the Wright brothers, the Dayton Peace Accords, and welcoming immigrants. What a friendly city.' "