

Commentary: Make Philly more welcoming to immigrants

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By Jim Kenney



JONATHAN WILSON / FOR THE INQUIRER

Volunteers assist mural artist Michelle Ortiz last year with her Familias Separadas Project by laying down a message next to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Building. It read: "We Are Human Beings, Risking Our Lives, For Our Families and Our Futures."

Today, immigrants are contributing to the economic fabric of Philadelphia more than ever before. Seventy-five percent of the city's workforce growth is due to the influx of immigrants and immigrant-owned businesses account for \$770 million in annual "main street" business earnings. Just as importantly, Philadelphia's increasing immigrant population is also helping to reverse 50 years of population loss, strengthening our city as a whole.

In recognition of the special role immigrants play in Philadelphia, the 4th Annual Welcoming Economies (WE) Global Network Convening is coming to our city Wednesday through Friday. With more than 300 attendees from around the country who are pursuing new strategies to welcome immigrants to rebuild central cities and spark regional economic growth, the WE Global Convening will demonstrate the growing energy and momentum in these local practices. Philadelphia's Office of Immigrant Affairs (OIA) and Department of Commerce are proud to co-host this event with the Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians.

The gathering is a prime opportunity to showcase Philadelphia to the nation as a leader in welcoming immigrants to our city. In 2001, when I was on City Council, I worked with Anne

O'Callaghan to establish the Welcoming Center, which has become a national model. It stands with a vibrant and growing network of organizations that are committed to the vitality and support of immigrant communities throughout the city. Together, these organizations work not only to make Philly a more welcoming economy, but also on accelerating immigrant integration.

In order to achieve this goal, they work with both newcomers - who are acquiring language and cultural skills, securing meaningful jobs, or launching businesses - and with the receiving communities who are also adjusting and sharing, educating and learning from newcomers. OIA is working to make city government a better receiving community. In 2015, Philadelphia voters overwhelmingly approved a change to the city's charter requiring that all departments, offices, boards, and commissions implement a language-access plan. OIA is leading that charge and making city services and information about those services available to everyone, regardless of language barriers.

The Department of Commerce also has a number of programs in place that help integrate newcomers to Philadelphia's workforce. The department's Talent Development Unit is focused on ensuring that our schools and technical training programs are properly preparing residents for the jobs available in Philadelphia. This includes creating a strong workforce pipeline that will ensure that immigrants have access to training and employment opportunities, filling gaps that exist in both high- and low-skill jobs across various sectors.

Additionally, the Commerce Department is dedicated to supporting the viability and success of immigrant-owned businesses. The department's Office of Business Services has staff members fluent in various languages, including Spanish, Mandarin, and Korean. Program materials are also available in multiple languages, and the new version of the city's online Business Services Center (www.phila.gov/business) has improved language translations to level the playing field for all Philadelphia businesses. The department also provides extensive support to commercial corridors throughout the city, including immigrant communities. Their work with community development corporations and business improvement districts includes funding and other resources.

How well Philadelphia succeeds in integrating immigrants - so that newcomers become Philadelphians in one generation, not two - will be the true measure of our success as a welcoming city. I look forward to hosting and learning from our peer cities at the WE Convening, so that Philadelphia can continue to be a place where newcomers and immigrants can live and thrive.

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