

## Multi-Cultural Metropolis

The St. Louis Mosaic Project and International Institute work together to increase the city's foreign-born population.

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**When a 2012 study revealed** that St. Louis didn't compare favorably to other regions regarding immigrant population, two local organizations decided to do something about it. "We're missing an economic opportunity by not having more foreign-born people here," explains Betsy Cohen, executive director of the [St. Louis Mosaic Project](#), which was founded in 2012 in an effort to draw more immigrants to the area. "We need to grow our population by attracting more."



International Institute's Anna Crosslin and St. Louis Mosaic Project's Betsy Cohen

The statistics are in Cohen's favor. Less than 5 percent of our region is foreign-born, while other top regions nationwide average 20 percent. Studies show that foreign-born citizens are more likely to have a college degree, a master's degree, and are 50 percent more likely to start a business. Now the International Institute, an organization founded in 1919 to support incoming immigrants to the city with services like housing and citizenship attainment, and the more recently founded Mosaic Project are working together toward a common goal while focusing on each end of the spectrum.

### Growing Organically

The goal is to make St. Louis the fastest growing major metropolitan area for foreign-born by 2020. Currently, St. Louis is number six. "We're growing at about 2.3 percent per year," says Cohen. "The No. 1 region (Baltimore) is growing foreign-born population at about 5 percent per year."

The International Institute is well situated to handle a rising immigrant population. Since its founding, the organization has worked to help immigrants to the city succeed by providing basic services, like finding housing, to more complicated efforts, such as attaining citizenship—as well as championing ethnic diversity. Last year alone, the Institute served 7,500 people from more than 75 countries. Most recently, the organization purchased St. Elizabeth Academy for \$1.6 million as its new headquarters. Another \$2 million will be spent on renovations. The campus includes five connected buildings, quadrupling its space to 132,000 square feet. Services offered by the Institute include refugee resettlement, English classes, citizenship preparation, job training and placement, and specialty services like social work, counseling, immigration assistance and small business loans. “Small businesses are the backbone of the US economy,” says Anna Crosslin, President and CEO of the International Institute. “And immigrants are more likely to start them.”

### Welcome Wagon

Since her appointment as director of the Mosaic Project last March, Cohen has worked with a steering committee of 22 community leaders and her three co-chairs—Joe Regan, head the Regional Chamber; Denny Coleman, Regional Chamber CEO; and Rodney Crim, president of the St. Louis Economic Development Partnership—to form programs to help St. Louis attract and retain more foreign-born people. First, Mosaic Ambassadors was established, a group of 350 people who are working to make the region more welcoming to immigrants. “People need to understand that the foreign-born in our community are everyone from professors and executives to teachers and people who work in hospitals and restaurants—they all add value,” Cohen says.

Next, Mosaic launched a professional connector program of globally minded local experts who meet with skilled foreign-born people with visas to help them network for a job. Now Mosaic is focusing on immigrant entrepreneurship to assist foreign-born people in all areas ranging from high-tech to neighborhood businesses. Programs are in development to connect them with business plans, funding, startups and activities so immigrant entrepreneurship can grow faster. In addition, its leaders are working on programs through select universities and companies to hire more international students. On Sept. 7, a major initiative by the Mosaic Project will occur in partnership with the Arts and Faith concert at the Sheldon, which will focus on welcoming the foreign-born. “To be a growing, globally-oriented region, we have to open our thinking and our welcome to people who bring other cultures here,” Cohen says.