



US cities race to attract immigrants

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by [David Lubell](#) @WelcomingUSA

In October, I shared a stage with Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed at the historic Georgian Terrace Hotel, where “Gone With the Wind,” the epic 1939 film based on Margaret Mitchell’s novel on the war-torn American South, held its opening gala. Surrounded by local civic and business leaders, [Reed announced](#) plans to make Atlanta’s immigrant population feel more welcome in order to boost the city’s “cultural fabric, economic growth and global competitiveness.” Atlanta is not the only city in the South embracing a vision that recognizes the potential benefits of demographic change. Memphis and Nashville, Tenn.; Charlotte, N.C.; and Louisville, Ky. [have all pledged](#) to create an immigrant-friendly climate, bucking not only a recent trend in the region but also the rhetoric on immigration coming from some corners on Capitol Hill. These cities are joined by dozens more pursuing policies that celebrate their diverse communities and ensure inclusion and opportunity for all people, including immigrants.



New U.S. citizen Eden Villanueva gives her godson Nathan Santa Cruz a big kiss after taking the Oath of Allegiance along with over 200 other immigrants Monday April 30, 2012, during a mass naturalization ceremony at the Cannon Center in Memphis, Tenn.

Jim Weber/The Commercial Appeal/AP

This recognition comes as a growing body of research and evidence points to positive economic impact of immigrants on local communities. A recent study from the National Bureau of Economic Research [established](#) a correlation between increased immigration and better earnings for American workers and an overall benefit to the community. As consumers, [entrepreneurs](#) and home buyers, immigrants’ contribute their formidable purchasing power, which boosts the local economy. There is also a growing sensibility among local leaders that they don’t need to wait for Washington to initiate policies that promote a culture of inclusion. Many local governments in places like New York City and San Francisco have undertaken such initiatives for some years — by developing policies and programs that make government services easily accessible to newcomers, by bringing immigrants into business sectors like the

banking system, by creating programs to celebrate diversity and by encouraging new immigrants to work on collaborative community projects with natives in order to build trust. However, communities where immigrants are relatively novel are just beginning to undertake this work.

Global cities

This year my organization, Welcoming America, launched an initiative called [Welcoming Cities and Counties](#) that offers local governments the opportunity to commit publicly to advancing a welcoming culture and policy agenda. With 25 municipal governments representing regions with a total population of 24 million and with several mayors and county executives on board, civic and business partners have shown a willingness to join in collective efforts to promote a more welcoming atmosphere. Many cities are responding to a challenge put forward by Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, who declared that his city would make itself the most immigrant-friendly in the world. In 2011 he created Chicago's Office of New Americans to help the city achieve this ambitious goal. In partnership with an advisory committee made up of business leaders, academics, representatives of civic and philanthropic organizations, the city came up with set of initiatives called the Chicago New Americans Plan, which outlines strategies for welcoming immigrants and maximizing their contribution to the city.

Now we have put that challenge out to all U.S. cities — and many are already entering the race.

Immigrant entrepreneurs and immigrant workers of all skill levels want to reside in places that welcome them. Thus creating an all-inclusive environment becomes a key to attracting businesses that are vital to economic development. Some cities are already seeing the economic benefits of immigrant-friendly policies. Some of these cities, like Nashville, have had to do some work to get locals to buy into this enlightened vision. In 2008 a handful of city councilors in Nashville responded to a rapid influx of immigrants by proposing an English-only referendum aimed at making English the only language used by city departments and employees. Fortunately, local leaders — including me — worked to build bridges between locals and newcomers and ultimately persuaded Nashvillians to reject the referendum and embrace a more welcoming ethos.

This effort proved a turning point for the city's approach to its immigrant community. A slew of new welcoming policies and programs, shepherded by Mayor Karl Dean, followed. For example, in 2009 a New Americans Advisory Council (NAAC) was established to create a stronger connection between local government and newer Nashvillians. This was further bolstered by the creation the MyCity Academy program in 2012, which helps new immigrants better understand and participate in Nashville's government. Around the same time, a program launched by the Metro Nashville Police Department, called El Protector, began to be recognized as a national model. Launched in 2004, El Protector fosters dialogue and builds trust between local police and the Spanish-speaking community of Nashville.

Set on a new course, Nashville was able to position itself as a [global city](#), attract and retain international investment and talent and create a flourishing cultural scene that celebrates both the old and the new. Thanks in large part to its global positioning, Nashville led the country in job growth in 2012 and attracted significant corporate investment and entrepreneurial start-ups. The city's [growing economic strength](#) shows how a welcoming culture creates benefits not just for the immigrants but for the community as a whole. Nashville has even been named the friendliest city in the nation by Travel + Leisure magazine, an identity that encapsulates the pragmatic thinking that is driving more and more communities to recognize that inclusion and growth are inextricably linked.

Becoming a more welcoming place for immigrants can give the U.S. an edge in global competition.

Leaders in Tucson, Ariz., are hoping to communicate a similar message to its residents. In 2012, Mayor Jonathan Rothschild and the Tucson City Council adopted a resolution saying that the city was an “immigrant welcoming city,” and it launched a new Web portal with resources for immigrants. “Tucson is a city with roots in many cultures,” Rothschild [said](#) at the time. “That diversity adds to our strength. It helps us not fear change even as we celebrate our traditions.” The city’s proactive efforts are motivated by what is right as much as by what is practical: Many leaders in Arizona have now learned that an unwelcoming climate that drives immigrants out has [disastrous economic consequences](#).

The initiative gives Tucson an opportunity to attract new investment and demonstrate that, despite the state’s approach to immigration, that they can take a proactive approach that represents the values and interests of their community. Such commitments to local policies that support immigrant integration help Americans — both immigrant and native born — foster stronger economic and social ties. In other cities, strategies have run the gamut from helping grow small businesses to organizing English-language programs supported by community volunteers. These measures have allowed immigrants to bring new businesses to the tax base and step forward to give back to their communities.

Several U.S. cities are also following suit by embracing immigration as the centerpiece of their economic-growth efforts. For example, in June, St. Louis Mayor Francis Slay and a coalition of business and civic leaders [launched](#) the St. Louis Mosaic Project with the support of the St. Louis County Economic Council to remake the city into “a cultural mosaic, a place that is truly welcoming” to new immigrants, according to its website. Over the past decade, St. Louis lost more than 25,000 jobs compared with cities like Nashville, Indianapolis and Baltimore, which have gained roughly three to four times as many jobs. With the initiative, leaders in St. Louis hope to transform the city into the [fastest-growing](#) U.S. metro area for immigration by 2020.

During [National Welcoming Week](#) this September, Slay emphasized immigrants’ contributions to the city, saying, “Immigrants bring work skills, add to our neighborhoods, pay taxes and buy goods in our region. We need new residents to add to our own multicultural perspectives, so our regional enterprises can compete effectively in the widening global market.”

Another Midwestern town, Dayton, Ohio, is a postindustrial Rust Belt metropolis facing a declining population. In 2011 the community [created the Welcome Dayton Plan](#), an initiative that promotes immigrant-friendly policies and practices. These policies range from increasing English-language classes and multicultural soccer tournaments to the creation of a community-wide campaign on immigrant entrepreneurship that seeks to facilitate start-up businesses, open global markets and restore life to Dayton neighborhoods.

A [recent study](#) by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation recognized Welcome Dayton as a key strategy for building prosperity, noting efforts to create a more welcoming culture that are already attracting new immigrants to the city.

Compared with the vitriol and enforcement-focused immigration laws that were passed by leaders in Alabama and Arizona a few years ago — [displacing](#) hundreds of workers from Alabama farms and disrupting children’s schooling — the current trend in immigrant-friendly policymaking is a hopeful sign. Along with the groundswell of [local welcoming initiatives](#) across the country — from Florida to Nevada, Arkansas to New Jersey — the trend is clear. It is a new dynamic that Welcoming America is working to foster, one in which cities are competing to absorb and attract all the talent and drive that our newest neighbors bring.

Communities across the U.S. and around the world are in a race to the top to attract the human capital they need to thrive in a globalized economy. Becoming a more welcoming place for immigrants can give the United States an edge in that competition. For cities, it demonstrates how, even as other levels of government are gridlocked, municipal leaders can continue to innovate and lead. As the debate over comprehensive immigration reform continues, leaders in Washington cannot afford to ignore the fact that so many local elected officials are recognizing the economic imperative of welcoming and inclusive policies.

If your community is ready to help write this next chapter, we hope you will join us.

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The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera America's editorial policy.