



Regional Community Leaders Examine Role Of Immigration In Economic Growth

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By Deanna Garcia

As the national debate on immigration reform continues, local officials are examining the role immigrants play in helping communities grow.

Pittsburgh and other Rust Belt cities have struggled for years to grow the economy while the population continues to decline.

“In order to be a growing place, an economically growing place, you have to have people – talent – that’s contributing as workers, as entrepreneurs, as job-creators, as educators, as students – you need to have individuals making those contributions, anchoring themselves in your community, doing great things,” said Melanie Harrington, president and CEO of Vibrant Pittsburgh.

The second annual convening of the Global Great Lakes Network is in Pittsburgh this week, highlighting the ways in which immigrants can help communities grow and thrive. The Global Great Lakes Network is a coalition of economic development organizations, government agencies and others that support fostering immigrant communities as an economic development tool.

“We need to be able to attract and retain and sufficiently engage and include and integrate immigrants into our community,” Harrington said. “These will become the new Americans that will ensure the economic prosperity of our region.”

There are some challenges in attracting immigrants to the area, including perceptions of Pittsburgh.

“We have to change the old thinking of what Pittsburgh is and what it has to offer,” Harrington said. “I think the other thing is, we have to make sure that *here* is welcoming.”

Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald and Pittsburgh Mayor Bill Peduto addressed the conference. Both said immigrants will be key in helping the region grow. Fitzgerald pointed out that unlike decades ago, the opportunities for immigrants now are varied and include education, healthcare, manufacturing, energy, information technology, the movie industry and more.

On the statewide level the area leaders highlighted a bill introduced by state Sen. Jim Ferlo which would create the Office of New Americans which would serve as a liaison between the state and the immigrant community. Harrington said buy-in from local, regional and state leaders is key and added that if this region doesn’t grab hold of the opportunity, others will.

“And our standing in the world will diminish because this is a train that has already left the station,” said Harrington. “It behooves us to be on the competitive edge, to be forward-thinking about how we go about this so that we can stay ahead of the pack.”

Discussion topics at the gathering include, among other things, changing perceptions of immigrant communities, working across sectors to advance immigrant integration, international student retention and improving municipal resources for immigrants.