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Cities that welcome immigrants reap benefits, national official says

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The United States started as a nation that folded immigrants into its cultural, economic and social fabric, and cities that are still working to attract foreign newcomers are revitalizing their economies despite tough times, President Barack Obama's top immigration-policy adviser said on Thursday.

Leaders such as Columbus and Dayton can help "lift up other cities, too," Felicia Escobar told about 250 government officials, policy makers and other professionals who work with immigrants and refugees, at a conference in Dayton.

The U.S. has more than 40 million immigrants and refugees from countries that circle the globe, Escobar said. They start nearly 30 percent of new businesses. Immigrants or the children of immigrants also have founded more than 40 percent of Fortune 500 companies, employing more than 3.6 million people.

And their impact will only grow, she said. Over the next 20 years, immigrants and their children will account for 85 percent of the net growth in the U.S. labor force, studies show.

Escobar is a special assistant to Obama. The Dayton conference, sponsored by Welcoming Economies Global Network, delved into the country's first-ever immigrant-integration policy, released in April. Also discussed were efforts across the U.S., including several in the struggling Rust Belt, to promote immigrants as valued contributors to daily life.

The industrial belt is an "American innovation started by immigrants," said Steve Tobocman, executive director of Global Detroit.

In 2004, Columbus Mayor Michael B. Coleman announced he was creating a New Americans Initiative to remove the obstacles that often keep immigrants and refugees from being successful.

In 2011, the Dayton City Commission voted to make the city more "immigrant friendly" as a way to revive its economy and stem job losses. It's working, city officials said on Thursday.

Immigrants "inject new life into our neighborhoods, they patronize and create local businesses, and they contribute to our state and local communities' tax bases," Dayton Mayor Nan Whaley said.

In 2012, foreign-born households in Dayton held more than \$115 million in spending power and contributed more than

\$15 million in state and local taxes, according to a study released on Wednesday.

Immigrants and refugees also are helping to reverse Dayton's population decline, according to the report by the Partnership for a New American Economy and Welcome Dayton.

Cincinnati, Cleveland, Springfield and Toledo also have extended welcoming hands to immigrants.

Obama established the White House Task Force on New Americans late last year, Escobar said. And in April, that governmentwide effort released a report aimed at better integrating immigrants and refugees civically, economically and linguistically.

The task force identified four main goals in its new federal policy:

- Building welcoming communities.
- Strengthening existing pathways to naturalization and promoting civic engagement.
- Supporting skill development, fostering entrepreneurship and small-business growth, and protecting new American workers.
- Expanding opportunities for linguistic integration and education.

Critics say that Obama created the policy, which includes 48 recommendations to achieve the four goals, as a way to strong-arm communities into participating in the administration's larger immigration-reform efforts. They point out that he set up the task force a day after issuing an executive order to offer temporary relief from deportation for up to 5 million undocumented immigrants.

Ohio and 25 other states are involved in a lawsuit to stop Obama's immigration plan from being implemented.

An injunction bars the Department of Homeland Security from acting on the plan, which would expand a program offering quasi-legal status and work permits to undocumented immigrants who arrived in the U.S. as children. The plan would also start a program for those who are parents of U.S. citizens.

The 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals is scheduled to hear oral arguments related to the lawsuit today in New Orleans.

Critics also say Obama's plan will weaken communities by delivering a steady dose of low-skilled immigrants. Unable to find good-paying jobs, many will require food stamps, subsidized housing and other government assistance just to get by, they say.

But advocates say that such problems occur when the country turns its back on immigrants, not when it embraces them.