

The Columbus Dispatch

Refugees bring economic boost to central Ohio, supporters say

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A woman clutches an American flag and her certificate of U.S. citizenship during a ceremony at Columbus State on Thursday.

Since 1983, central Ohio has resettled 16,596 refugees from around the world, most arriving in the past decade.

Despite myths that refugees drain more resources than they add to the local economy, the opposite is true, the directors of Columbus' three resettlement agencies said on Thursday.

The three agencies spend about \$6 million a year helping refugees start a new life in the U.S. From that investment of mostly federal dollars, the central Ohio community reaps an annual economic impact of \$1.6 billion, including nearly \$36 million in spending, according to a new study.

Also included in that figure are economic benefits — jobs, for example — from refugee workers and refugee-owned businesses, as well as the three resettlement agencies that serve them.

Just as important: Refugees add to the social and cultural fabric of the community, the directors said.

“By definition, refugees are survivors,” said Kay Lipovsky, office director of World Relief Columbus. “They have courage, ingenuity and the strength to come here and try to make it work.”

A year ago, the city of Columbus commissioned a study to look at how refugees can boost depressed neighborhoods and add economic vitality. Key findings were released on Thursday at an event at Columbus State Community College honoring National Welcome Week and Hispanic Heritage Month.

The full report, done by Community Research Partners with help from the resettlement agencies, will be released next month.

The issue of refugees is attracting international attention as record numbers of Syrians and other people seek asylum throughout Europe in what many experts are calling a crisis of epic proportion.

“The current events in Europe underscore why so many of us are motivated by the humanitarian need to help those forced to start over,” said Angie Plummer, executive director of Community Refugee & Immigration Services.

Local officials hope the media attention to the plight of those Syrian refugees will inspire the community to be open to even more refugees coming to Columbus. The three agencies have welcomed a total of five Syrian refugees so far.

Several years ago, communities were competing to drive out immigrants, said Rachel Peric, deputy director of Welcoming America, a Georgia-based group that promotes respect between foreign-born and native Americans. Now, they’re competing to welcome them.

“What is so wonderful is the response of everyday people,” Peric said.

Refugees are legal immigrants who flee persecution, torture or war in their homelands. They are resettled in countries such as the U.S. because they can’t return home safely — not because they want to live somewhere else, said Nadia Kasvin, director of US Together.

“We often tell the story of struggle, but this is not the whole story,” Kasvin said. “It is about struggle, survival and success.”

Since 2002, nearly half of the refugees resettled in Ohio have come to Franklin County.

More than half of those refugees came from Somalia. The other countries making the top 10 for refugee arrivals in Franklin County are Bhutan, Iraq, Burma, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sierra Leone, Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia and Iran.

The median age upon arriving in Columbus is about 21, and the average family size is about five people, according to state statistics. Nearly 30 percent of refugee families have

six or more people.

The refugees are almost as likely to go to college as Franklin County natives: 41.8 percent compared with 43 percent, according to the report. Despite that education, they generally experience higher levels of unemployment and earn less household income, suggesting that stigma and misperceptions about refugees still exist, according to the report. Language barriers and a lack of understanding of workplace norms likely play a role as well.

Still, they're less likely to give up trying to find a job than native residents, and they're more than twice as likely to start their own business, the study found.

Central Ohio has an estimated 873 refugee-owned businesses that employ almost 4,000 workers. Local refugees work or have created a total of 21,273 jobs in the region.

"Not only is the city a great place to live, work and raise your family, but it is global," City Councilwoman Eileen Paley said.

Thursday's event also featured 40 immigrants being sworn in as new citizens.

"You were already American in your hearts and minds," City Council President Andrew J. Ginther told the excited group. "Today, you'll be citizens on paper, too."

Unable to control her joy any longer, 45-year-old Claudette Brady of Jamaica started to cry as she stated her name and gave her country of origin to the court officials conducting the citizenship ceremony.

"It's been a long journey, and I'm just so overwhelmed," she said afterward. "I am so blessed, honored and proud."