

Detroit Free Press

Refugees can drive economic growth in faltering Midwest cities

September 19, 2015

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(Photo: AFP Getty Images)

year-old son Adiv — on a Turkish shore is enough to shock even the busiest American parent. Considering that the UN High Commission on Refugees has now registered more than 4 million Syrian refugees and some 2,500 refugees have perished at sea trying to escape the conflict, the humanitarian issues facing the current crisis are truly catastrophic.

Last week marked the fourth annual National Welcoming Week, during which communities across America celebrated the nation's welcoming nature and the contributions that immigrants and refugees have made to our communities. The week's events brought immigrants and refugees together with their neighbors in a spirit of unity.

Given the gripping headlines about the Syrian refugee crisis, this year's Welcoming Week provided ample opportunity for metro Detroiters to reflect on how our region could play a pivotal role in responding to the crisis and how our response would impact our local communities. In May, the New York Times ran a guest column headlined "[Let Syrians Settle Detroit](#)," by Stanford University political science professor David D. Laitin and Marc Jahr, former president of the New York City Housing Development Corporation. The column noted that metro Detroit's "vibrant and successful" Arab-American community could help make our region more welcoming than others for resettling Syrians. Specifically, the authors wrote: "From its original Native Americans to the Great Migration of Southern blacks to the infusion of Hispanic and Arab immigrants, Detroit has been a melting pot of religions, ethnicities and cultures."

As the grandson of Jewish grandparents who fled Poland in the early 20th Century only to have all of their remaining family perish in the Holocaust, I grew up with a strong belief in the United States as the world's haven for those fleeing persecution, oppression and tyranny. I remember during my temple's Sunday School classes learning the powerful words of Emma Lazarus that are inscribed on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty: "From her beacon-hand glows worldwide welcome . . . 'Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!'"

The gripping pictures of a lifeless Syrian boy — about the same age and dress as my own 2-

Refugee resettlement in our region would provide tangible economic benefits to the communities that serve as the new home for suffering families. A recent [study](#) on refugee resettlement efforts in greater Cleveland concluded that the resettlement of some 4,500 refugees from 2000-12 in the Cleveland metro area created \$48 million in economic activity and 650 jobs in 2012 alone. Metro Detroit's refugee resettlement agencies have settled as many as 4,500 refugees in a single year and more than 20,000 refugees between 2000 and 2012.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel has grabbed headlines and praise for her leadership in pledging to accept as many as 800,000 Syrian refugees in the coming year. In addition to the deep humanitarian significance for Germany to define itself as a safe harbor for refugees, observers have been quick and correct to point out that her actions are motivated also by economic self-interest. With declining birth rates and a rapidly aging workforce — conditions that plague metro Detroit, the state of Michigan, and nearly the entire Midwest — Syrian refugees (a relatively well-educated and skilled refugee group) represent an opportunity to inject new labor and energy into Germany's economy. Merkel is planning for Germany's long-term economic prosperity.

In metro Detroit, Lutheran Social Services of Michigan has started resettling Syrian refugee families. Although the 16 families — comprising 62 individuals — that have been resettled in Wayne and Oakland Counties is a relatively modest beginning, it is important to note that all of these families already have at least one family member gainfully employed. Detroiters need to look no farther than the Minneapolis-St. Paul region to realize that serving as a hub for refugee resettlement can strengthen our economy. Home to tens of thousands of Hmong, Somali, Vietnamese and other ethnic residents — most of whom can trace refugee resettlement histories as part of their community's migration story — the Twin Cities possesses one of the fastest-growing economies and highest per capita incomes in the Midwest.

No doubt there are complex geopolitical issues that need to be carefully considered in resolving the Syrian, other Middle Eastern, and African refugee crises, but one aspect that should not be in dispute is the local economic benefits to economies like metro Detroit, Cleveland, Minneapolis/St. Paul, and Germany. Refugees bring new energy, resourcefulness, and an eagerness to pursue freedom and opportunity. It's the same recipe that brought my grandparents to Detroit and millions of others' families to metro Detroit.

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