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Cities in Midwest, Rust Belt Say They Need Immigrants

Republican and Democratic leaders cite the need for new residents and workers as former industrial region loses population

By **WILL CONNORS**

An array of Republican and Democratic officials from across the Rust Belt and Midwest are united in concern about [President Donald Trump's clampdown on refugees](#) and certain immigrants for one overriding reason: Their communities need more people.

Large Democratically-controlled “sanctuary cities” including Chicago, San Francisco and New York have been outspoken in resisting the administration’s ban on refugees and immigrants from seven Muslim-majority countries, citing political and moral reasons.

But officials from a second tier of smaller cities, from Columbus, Ohio, to Troy, Mich., to Garden City, Kan., are highlighting the economic importance of welcoming refugees and immigrants to bolster declining populations and add manpower, skills and entrepreneurial know-how.

“I understand that the president is trying to protect the U.S. However, there are many good people that have located here that are escaping wars and political actions, and they’re just looking for a chance to raise their families in a safe environment,” said Janet Doll, a Republican city commissioner in Garden City, Kan. “The immigrants we have here are productive members of society. They have nice jobs and want to contribute to the quality of life in our community.”

Some regional officials in the Rust Belt, however, support the president’s ban.

“When [refugees] come in, you don’t know who’s coming across,” said Brooks Patterson, the Republican county executive in Oakland County, Mich., which encompasses several wealthy Detroit suburbs. “Some of them are legitimate refugees, others are embedded terrorists,” Mr. Patterson added, without evidence.

Some refugees got a last-minute reprieve from President Trump’s order. Almost 800 of them already in transit from nations not subject to the executive order [will be admitted into the U.S.](#)

[through Thursday](#), according to agencies charged with receiving them in partnership with the government.

Many cities and states in the Rust Belt have been working for several years to attract foreign-born residents, aiming to boost dwindling populations and spur business growth in the wake of manufacturing-industry losses.

Some, like Michigan, have created government offices to aid immigrants and refugees and help integrate them into local economies. Michigan, whose state government is controlled by Republicans, accepted more Syrian refugees last year than any other state except California.

Troy, Mich., accepted the most Syrian refugees in the state last year. Martin Howrylak, a Republican state representative from Troy, worries that the president's ban will harm what he describes as a thriving community, where 30% the population is foreign-born.

"We're trying to put our residents at ease," Mr. Howrylak said. "The morale is getting very low, and the fear is getting high, and that's very detrimental to our economy. You can't have this and have a prosperous economy."

Some recent studies back up the economic importance of refugees and immigrants, particularly those from Syria.

A study released last month by two left-leaning groups—the Fiscal Policy Institute and the Center for American Progress—found that of the estimated 90,000 Syrian immigrants in the U.S., 11% are business owners, compared with 3% of U.S.-born citizens. The study also found that the median annual wage for Syrian immigrants is \$52,000, compared with \$45,000 for U.S.-born workers.

A 2015 study commissioned by the city of Columbus found there were 873 refugee-owned businesses in the Columbus metro area that employed 3,960 workers, and that those businesses contributed \$605.7 million a year to the local economy.

"The thing that has gotten lost in this discussion is the critical importance of immigrants and new Americans to the economic growth" of cities like Columbus, said Andrew Ginther, the city's Democratic mayor. Columbus has the lowest unemployment rate in 25 years, Mr. Ginther said, and new Americans have had "a great role to play" in that.

In fiscal 2016, the U.S. admitted about 85,000 refugees, including some 12,500 Syrians. Mr. Trump said the nation will admit 50,000 in fiscal 2017, with a permanent freeze on Syrians. The entire program will be suspended for four months.

Mr. Trump said the ban was implemented to “protect the American people from terrorist attacks by foreign nationals admitted to the United States.”

Since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, of 180 people charged with jihadist terrorism-related crimes in the U.S. or who died before being charged, 11 were identified as being from Syria, Iraq, Iran, Libya, Yemen, Sudan or Somalia, the countries specified in Mr. Trump’s order, according to an analysis of data on the attacks by The Wall Street Journal.

None of the 11 were involved in any major U.S. plot resulting in the deaths of Americans, including the 2001 attacks.

Syrian refugees go through an intensive, in some cases multiyear, vetting process, according to the U.S. State Department.

In Detroit, which has been battling population decline for decades, several nonprofits and city programs aim to attract immigrants. The nonprofit Global Detroit runs a number of immigrant-directed programs, including job training and working to keep international students in Detroit after they finish their studies.

“We’re not an immigrant-rights group, we’re a group that cares about the economy and wants to create more jobs and develop the region,” said Steve Tobocman, the head of Global Detroit. “We came to the conclusion that more refugees and immigrants was frankly in our own economic self-interest. We still firmly believe that in current conditions today.”

Detroit has joined more than a dozen other Rust Belt cities that have come to the same conclusion, said Mr. Tobocman, a former Democratic member of the Michigan House. Those include Pittsburgh, whose Democratic mayor this week condemned Mr. Trump’s actions, and St. Louis.

“From the point of view of cities like St. Louis, which have struggled to be able to find their way in an economy that’s very different than the way it established its reputation, it makes no sense” to ban refugees, said Anna Crosslin, co-founder of the economic development group St. Louis Mosaic Project, established in 2012 to help boost immigrant growth in the city.

Refugees helped start or expand 600 small businesses in St. Louis since 1999, according to Ms. Crosslin. “Banning refugees from Muslim countries makes no sense from a humanitarian, an economic development or foreign- policy sense.”

Ms. Doll, the city commissioner in Garden City, said her community, which has a significant foreign-born population, is doing well economically but is constantly looking for workers to fill jobs.

“People sometimes ask me, ‘How do these diverse groups get along so well?’” she said. “I tell them, ‘We need each other. We need each to fill the jobs we have here.’”

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