

## Global Great Lakes Proposal

2013 represents an historic moment for immigration in the United States. After three decades of robust immigration growth that has raised the number of immigrants from 14.1 million in 1980 to nearly 40 million in 2010, the U.S. Congress appears poised to pass some form of immigration reform. While the factors that have influenced Washington's apparent willingness to tackle this issue are complex, the nature of recent immigration to the Midwest and the Midwest's reaction to the economic recession may represent a significant part of the equation—both in building momentum for reform and in the nature of the reform that might be adopted.

Over the past few decades, the robust growth in U.S. immigration has shaped new gateways for immigrants and touched communities that have traditionally been a layer removed from immigration, including metropolitan and rural areas of the Midwest. Growth in immigration in the last decade was spread out through dozens of metro areas, as opposed to being as concentrated in just a handful of traditional gateway cities.<sup>1</sup> More immigrants in metropolitan areas now live in suburbs rather in cities.<sup>2</sup> Coupled with the parallel phenomena of continued population loss, "brain drain," and economic slowdown in the Midwest's major cities, the impact of these new migration patterns has made immigration a fact of life and a policy topic for communities that have not experienced significant international immigration in over a century.

### **Midwestern Cities and the Need to Become Global**

Although the cities around the Great Lakes vary along a broad spectrum of economic redevelopment, they all share a legacy of heavy industry and a similar set of problems resulting from industry's decline. The cities of this region have lost up to 50 percent of their population; their educational attainment rates are dismal; their unemployment rates are dangerously high. If these cities take advantage of the region's unique opportunities and creatively transition from sole reliance on heavy industry, the shared future of this region can be prosperous—its revitalization can be emblematic of the very entrepreneurship that catapulted this constellation of cities to become a global economic superpower at the peak of the industrial revolution.

Right now, one of the region's unique opportunities is its population of immigrants and its capacity to attract more immigrants to contribute to the revitalization of its cities. This reality has been increasingly understood and acknowledged by an exciting and organic reaction among Midwest metropolitan leaders, who have begun to embrace immigration as an economic opportunity, rather than a threat. Over the past four years, new initiatives to promote immigration as an economic development opportunity have produced Global Detroit, Vibrant Pittsburgh, Global Cleveland, Welcome Dayton, Global Michigan, and Global Lansing. Similar

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<sup>1</sup> Audrey Singer and Jill Wilson, "Immigrants in 2010 Metropolitan America: A Decade of Change," *The Brookings Institution: Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy*, October 13, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Audrey Singer, "The Rise of New Immigrant Gateways," *The Brookings Institution: Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy*, February 2004.

programs or consortia are emerging in Cincinnati, Indianapolis, and St. Louis. *None of these efforts existed before 2009.*

These Global metropolitan initiatives (or in one case, a statewide effort) couple Midwestern sensibility and pragmatism with the need to address the region's unique problems to create an unlikely approach to the controversial issue of immigration—one that differs significantly from the discourse around the rest of the U.S. The initiatives recognize that the Midwest is a rapidly aging region with stagnant population growth but incredible historical assets. The region's strong agriculture, struggling manufacturing sector, world-leading research universities, and economic transition into the new economy are all benefitted by robust immigration.<sup>3</sup>

Specifically, research over the last half decade has documented the important contributions American immigrants have made to the growth of the economy and the United States' leadership in the new economy. Immigrants are responsible for approximately one-quarter of all of the high-tech startups, and nearly half of the high-tech startups in Silicon Valley.<sup>4</sup> More than 40 percent of the 2010 Fortune 500 companies were founded by immigrants or their children and seven of the ten most valuable brands in the world come from American companies founded by immigrants or their children.<sup>5</sup> These contributions extend beyond the high-tech, new economy and Fortune 500 firms. Immigrants start small businesses at more than twice the rate of native born Americans<sup>6</sup>—a critical fact for many struggling cities with significant retail needs in disinvested, low-income communities.

While each effort builds on the unique assets and challenges of its particular locality, they all share a refreshing notion that immigration is a powerful economic driver and would greatly strengthen their particular regional economy. Many focus on skilled and highly-educated immigrants, but several explicitly target and support working-class immigrants. Most build upon their Midwestern cultural roots and include an element of welcoming. Some enjoy support from elected officials (even one Republican governor). Some seek to change the regional culture of native-born Americans; others seek to connect with, attract, and retain immigrants. Some stress traditional immigrant integration services (e.g., ESL, citizenship, legal services, etc.). And all have a desire to grow and learn from each other.

### **Overview of Midwest Initiatives**

Below is a description of nine Midwest initiatives, each of which is less than four years old. These initiatives represent an innovative approach to immigration. They are focused on economic development—creating jobs and economic activity—and do not engage in civil rights or social justice advocacy. They look at the immigrant communities in their region as assets to

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<sup>3</sup> Austin, John and Brittany Affolter-Caine. "The Vital Center : A Federal-State Compact to Renew the Great Lakes Region". *The Brookings Institution: Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy*, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Wadhwa, Vivek, AnnaLee Saxenian, Ben Rissing, and Gary Gereffi "America's New Immigrant Entrepreneurs" Duke University and University of California-Berkeley, January 4, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Partnership for a New American Economy, "The 'New American' Fortune 500," June 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Kroll, Luisa, "Immigrant Entrepreneurship Has Stagnated For First Time In Decades, Says New Study," *Forbes*, October 2, 2012.

be nurtured and grown as a means of producing economic opportunity for the entire region. The initiatives seek to make their regions more appealing to immigrants by improving the quality of life and economic opportunities that exist in the region for immigrants. But they also seek to ensure that immigrant talent, foreign investment and trade, and immigrant communities benefit the regional economy and the non-immigrant communities.

Each initiative has a unique story to its creation, its core activities, and its focus. Yet, the nine initiatives share many commonalities that speak to a newly developing approach:

- **Many were created by a local chamber of commerce, business group, economic development organization, or group of business leaders that historically has had no or little engagement with the immigration issue.** Some were developed by or with cultural organizations or immigrant social service providers who have a long engagement with immigrants, but who were looking for a new approach to serving them or improving the region's diversity.
- **Most of these initiatives began with a study of immigrants' economic impact on the region and/or a formal planning process.** The studies document that in these Rust Belt metropolitan areas, immigrants provide enormous net positive benefits. Immigrants are often more highly-educated and more likely to have the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) skills that employers need. Immigrants have higher entrepreneurship rates, which is important in Midwestern economies that tend to lag in this area. Finally, immigrants tend to be younger and offer the possibility of population growth to a region of the country that is rapidly aging and experiencing population stagnation—or loss, in the case of many of the cities.
- **The initiatives embrace a wide range of partners.** As noted, many work with the local chamber of commerce, local economic development organization (or new economy tech incubator), and/or key local business leaders. Some enjoy strong civic support. Others have strong university partnerships. Some work with the traditional nonprofit immigration and integration services network. Most enjoy some support in the local philanthropic community. In general, the broader the networks of supporters for the initiative, the stronger, more creative, and more robust the local initiative is.

The activities of each local initiative differ enough that comparisons among them and their outcomes should be instructive.

- **They approach talent attraction and welcoming differently.** Several have a component of “talent attraction” work—seeking to engage or recruit international talent to a region's employment base. Activities can range from monthly cocktail events in the downtown area, to recruitment events targeting international students at local universities, to simply having a welcoming center for them to visit. Three of the initiatives have an affiliation with Welcoming America, a national effort focusing on making communities more welcoming by bringing together immigrants and longer-term

community members to develop greater understanding and work towards shared prosperity.

- **Four of the programs include an element of traditional immigrant and refugee integration services, though each seeks to bring new efficiencies to this work.** Some serve as a referral agency to direct immigrants and refugees to existing providers. Others have developed a first-ever searchable online database (so-called “welcome mat”) of local providers for immigrants and refugees and those servicing them to access. Some seek to identify and resolve gaps in the integration service offerings of the region, as well as build capacity of the service provider organizations. Finally, some seek to offer targeted services that either assist immigrants and refugee entrepreneurs or seek to address the challenges faced by skilled and professional immigrants and refugees.

There are other unique program offerings among the initiatives, but each shares the vision of growing the local economy through a more robust immigrant community and more integrated and welcoming reception by that community. Each initiative contains at least some element of communicating to the general public on the benefits that immigrants and refugees bring to the region. More specifically, the nine initiatives include:

**Global Detroit** – Initiated by the Global Detroit report released in May 2010, Global Detroit is an effort to revitalize southeast Michigan’s economy by pursuing strategies that make Detroit and the surrounding region more attractive to immigrants, internationals, foreign trade, and investment as a means to produce jobs and regional economic growth. As of April 2012, nearly \$5 million in philanthropic funding has been raised to launch and sustain the innovative initiatives identified in the Global Detroit study. These initiatives include international student retention, the Welcoming Michigan campaign, the ProsperUS microenterprise training and lending program, and the Welcome Mat network of traditional immigration and social service providers.

**Global Cleveland** – With support from Cleveland Mayor Frank Jackson and the region’s medical and biotechnology communities, Global Cleveland was launched in 2011 to foster regional economic development through actively attracting newcomers to the greater Cleveland area and connecting them to economic and socially opportunities. Global Cleveland aims to ease the immigration process by working as a point of contact with recent immigrants. They offer a pilot program providing credentialing services to immigrants who worked as healthcare professionals in their home country.

**Welcome Dayton** – Forged from community conversations in 2011, the Welcome Dayton Plan has attracted considerable national attention and press. It has been endorsed by the City Manager, City Commission, and corporate community and provides recommendations to engage immigrants in neighborhood revitalization, population growth, and economic strengthening. Welcome Dayton works in four focus areas--business and economic development; government and justice system; social and health services; and community, culture, arts, and education. Examples of achievements to date include creating new affordable

housing units targeted at immigrants and refugees, opening Welcoming Centers within the schools that offer individualized tutoring and outreach to immigrant families, and hosting a global soccer tournament.

**Vibrant Pittsburgh** – In 2011, Vibrant Pittsburgh grew out of earlier efforts for the Welcoming Center for Immigrants and Internationals. Vibrant Pittsburgh strives to revitalize the regional economy by increasing the diversity and expanding the talent pool of its workforce. VP's programs welcome newcomers, cultivate inclusivity, and energize the region by attracting and retaining outside talent. Fostering partnerships with employers, local government, advocacy networks, universities, workforce development organizations, and the general public, Vibrant Pittsburgh broadly tackles the cultural and infrastructural changes necessary for the Pittsburgh region to tap into the potential of an inclusive economy.

**Global Michigan** – As part of Michigan Governor Rick Snyder's effort to make Michigan "the most pro-immigration" state in the country, Global Michigan is a collaboration between the Michigan Department of Civil Rights, the Michigan Economic Development Corporation, and private sector volunteers to develop new ways of attracting and retaining highly educated immigrants to the state. Global Michigan is focused on five key strategies: (1) international student retention; (2) a cultural ambassadors program to welcome international business visitors, students, and investment; (3) assisting in the licensing and credentialing of skilled immigrants and refugees; (4) building a robust EB-5 investor visa environment; (5) welcoming and public policy initiatives that make Michigan the most "pro-immigration" state in the nation.

**Global Lansing** – In partnership with the Lansing Economic Area Partnership, Michigan State University, and the Lansing Visitors and Convention Bureau, Global Lansing is one of the first regionally targeted strategies assisted by Global Michigan to launch. In an effort to tap into Michigan State University's large number of international students, Global Lansing has developed strategies to better leverage their unique assets within the community. These include easing immigrants' transition to their new home by connecting international students to local shopping and transportation, pairing international students to local internships, as well as developing business opportunities by assisting with foreign business investment in local businesses.

**Immigrant Welcome Center of Indianapolis** – The Welcome Center helps immigrants integrate into the economy by connecting them with service providers. Through grassroots and neighborhood-based programming, the Center's work addresses social, cultural and civic issues to allow immigrants to fully participate in their communities and allows their communities to fully benefit from immigrant talent. In recent months, the Immigrant Welcome Center of Indianapolis has begun to strategize about how it could create an economic development initiative modeled upon the work in Detroit, Dayton, and Cleveland that would embrace immigration as a job creation and economic growth opportunity.

**Global St. Louis** – This past spring, researchers at St. Louis University completed a study entitled "How Can We Create Growth in St. Louis? The Economic Impact of Immigration on our

Region.” The study was publicly released at a conference entitled “How New Citizens Spur Economic Growth.” The conference, presented by the St. Louis County Economic Council and the St. Louis Development Corporation, drew corporate and political leaders as well as entrepreneurs, immigrants and concerned citizens interested in the ongoing dialogue about immigration. Shortly after the conference, St. Louis Mayor Francis Slay and County Executive Charlie Dooley used the study results to form a 15-member commission with one task, attracting more immigrants to St. Louis.

	Global Detroit	Vibrant Pittsburgh	Global Cleveland	Welcome Dayton	Global Michigan	Global Lansing	Welcoming Indianapolis	Global St. Louis
<b>Formation and Organization</b>								
Launched Since 2009	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Study Documenting Economic Contribution of Immigrants and Potential Opportunities	x		x	x				x
Corporate Engagement and/or Relationship with Chamber of Commerce	x	x	x	x				x
Elected Official Support	x (City Council, not Mayor)		x	x	x		x	
<b>Program Offerings</b>								
Connection to Talent Attraction Activities		x	x		x			
Welcoming America Affiliation	x				x			
International Student Retention Program	x	x			x	x		
Traditional Integration Services (ESL, Citizenship, Legal Services, Etc.)	x		x				x	
Entrepreneurial Programs	x							
Program to Assist Skilled Immigrants and Refugees			x					

### **Need and Desire for Collaboration and Construction of a Network**

The initiatives described above are hungry to exchange ideas, research, and best practices. The potential benefits of building such a network include: (1) increased efficacy of the participating existing initiatives; (2) capacity-building support for nascent efforts in other post-industrial cities; (3) potential development of network-wide tools, resources, and/or research to support local, regional, and national change; and (4) amplification of the needs and opportunities of Midwestern cities to inform the policy conversation on a regional and national level.

There is significant need for capacity-building, especially given the fact that many of the initiatives at issue involve some combination of players that are new to this field, unlikely and non-traditional partnerships, and new approaches to what can still be considered an emerging issue. Developing a network among these regional economic development initiatives would go a long way towards ensuring that each regional effort maximizes its impact and success. A Global Great Lakes network would greatly facilitate peer learning as these initiatives tackle the

development and implementation of new programs in the areas of retaining international students, integrating skilled and professional immigrants, building welcoming communities, developing regional collaboration among integration service providers, and other areas of shared work. The network can facilitate peer-to-peer learning, information sharing, and access to national expertise.

And while the existing efforts that have been described above are great initial nodes for this network, the network's growth would include outreach to communities that don't have a publicized effort yet or are in the initial stages of contemplating developing such an initiative. The network's resources and convenings could be available to a broad array of participants and users, including the hypothetical economic development organization in Buffalo interested in developing a Buffalo-specific immigrant entrepreneur support program, or a Milwaukee city council member who wants to better connect immigrant integration and leadership programs. While national efforts include opportunities for these curious individuals to engage around building a global initiative, they lack the detailed focus on Great Lakes city problems and Great Lakes city opportunities that can be so ably addressed by a globalizing effort.

A Global Great Lakes network of immigrant economic development efforts also might develop its own expertise. It might facilitate developing web tools (e.g., the welcome mat searchable database of immigration service providers), marketing campaigns, and other tools that could be used by several individual initiatives. In fact, many of the individual efforts already rely upon some of the same research to illuminate the contributions of immigrants within Midwest metropolitan economies. A network could identify common objectives or challenges and enable several programs to collectively develop shared solutions.

Further, the network could help identify national research to help build the local case for a more welcoming immigrant economic development strategy in these areas. It also could develop a menu of potential program areas to build local capacity, as well as models of potential partnerships by which local programs can be created (e.g., how to bring in corporate, municipal, academic, philanthropic, and nonprofit sectors into a regional effort). The network might provide actual on-the-ground consulting to assist local efforts develop their programs.

While each of the existing regional efforts identified above have revolutionized the conversations in their region about immigration and brought new supporters from the business and economic development communities to advocate for a more robust immigration system, there is much for each of these programs still to do. Many of these efforts are still in development and planning or are busy in the initial stages of implementing the plan they designed. While they may have operated previously within an existing organization, none of the initiatives had a full-time staff person before 2011. They all have expressed an eagerness to learn more about the initiatives and programs offered in other cities.

While none of the initiatives included herein approach their work from the perspective of civil rights or social justice advocacy, they do have the potential to be strong voices for immigration reform and for immigrant-friendly policy change. This advocacy is driven entirely by the goal of

revitalizing American communities in ways that provide as much benefit to native-born Americans as to the immigrants the programs might support. While such a pro-immigration perspective focusing on the economic benefits of a robust immigration system exists within traditional immigrant rights circles, it can benefit greatly when championed by these Midwest metropolitan economic development programs. The view that immigrants take jobs, drain public benefits programs, and cause crime still largely dominates the national conversation and the human rights advocacy of religious and civil rights organizations struggles to offer a strong counterbalance. A network of highly effective global efforts from the Great Lakes region has the power, if working collaboratively, to reframe the debate at the national level. No single metropolitan effort can do that alone.

**There already has been significant but ad-hoc interaction, collaboration, and learning among these individual efforts.** The architects of Global Detroit and Global Cleveland visited each other, exchanged documents, and held phone calls on numerous occasions. In fact, Global Detroit has visited and hosted each of these programs, with the exception of St. Louis. The initiatives have met each other at the National Immigration Integration Conferences in Boston, Seattle, and Baltimore. In each of these interactions there is an expressed and palpable desire to work more collaboratively, to learn from each other, and to build a region and nation that reaps economic prosperity from robust immigration.

### **Planning an Initial Network Convening**

The first step in building this Midwest network would be to host a convening of 8-10 Midwest initiatives, and potentially other nascent efforts, to all participate in the cogeneration of a plan for a network. By engaging existing efforts in the creation of the network itself, the network can be most responsive to the real needs and vision of the member organizations it will exist to serve. This proposal also allows the network members then to develop roles within the network that best meet their own capacities and goals.

The outcomes of this convening will include:

1. The development of deeper relationships among the participating efforts;
2. Sharing of information and best practices by each participating initiative; and
3. A workplan summarizing the proposed structure and activities of the network, if any, to use for further development and funding.

The initial convening would last between one to three days and be structured so that each initiative could determine how best to invest in attending. The likely agenda would include ample opportunities for initiatives to learn from each other by highlighting different regions' efforts on specific initiatives (welcoming, integration services, international student retention, corporate engagement, political leadership, etc.), an in-depth look at the efforts in the host city



(including guest speakers, neighborhood tours, etc.), and finally, facilitated discussions regarding building a collaborative learning network.<sup>7</sup>

During the portion of the conference focusing on how best to collaborate, build a network, and learn from each other, the group likely would discuss how best to sustain these partnerships into the future:

1. Conferences and Events;
2. Webinars on Specific Topics;
3. Peer-to-Peer Learning Opportunities, including Site Visits;
4. Mini Planning Grants to Assist other Cities Seeking to Develop Initiatives;
5. Metrics to Assist in Measuring Impact;
6. Development of a Listserve, Potential Web Content, and Other Social Media;
7. Local Events; and
8. Other Opportunities to Collaborate and Learn from Each Other

Through this convening, pre-planning work, and follow-up work, a Global Great Lakes network work plan and proposal will be developed. This will set the stages for a more significant investment into such a network.

### **Lead Partners**

Welcoming America and New Solutions Group, LLC have offered to partner to lead this initial convening and development of a Global Great Lakes network work plan.

### **New Solutions Group**

New Solutions Group, LLC is a for-profit consulting firm managed by Steve Tobocman, a former nonprofit director and state legislator. The firm has spearheaded the Global Detroit planning and implementation process since 2009. New Solutions is dedicated to bringing a smart, innovative, and collaborative approach to clients whose missions benefit the public good. It has engaged in a variety of strategic planning, advocacy, and policy research projects for a range of clients in Detroit and across Michigan.

New Solutions has experience with planning numerous events, including a one-day 1,000 person, public conference on immigrants and Michigan's economic future. Under New Solutions' leadership, Global Detroit has helped raise nearly \$5 million of philanthropic investment; developed leading programs in welcoming, international student retention, integration services, and microenterprise development; and has fostered the only statewide initiative supporting immigration as an economic development tool.

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<sup>7</sup> It is proposed that Detroit be the site for the first convening, not only because of its central geographic location, but because of the size and number of initiatives connected to it, as well as its relationship with Global Michigan, the only statewide program.

Based upon its experience designing and building Global Detroit, as well as its work in connecting Global Michigan to regional economic development initiatives across Michigan, New Solutions is aware of how critical learning from other cities and regions is in a field as new and emerging as the field of developing regional economic development plans focused on immigration as a key driver. Moreover, the firm has established relationships with all of the Midwest regional initiatives mentioned in this proposal.

### Welcoming America

Welcoming America is a national, nonprofit organization that provides support, training and capacity building assistance to a growing network of communities and organizations across the country that are working to build mutual respect and cooperation between foreign-born and U.S.-born Americans. The ultimate goal of Welcoming America's work is to promote a welcoming atmosphere – community by community – in which immigrants are more likely to integrate into the social fabric of their adopted hometowns.

Welcoming America has its origins in the award-winning Welcoming Tennessee initiative, an effort that successfully helped to transform a hostile anti-immigrant climate in Tennessee, and was the subject of the 2011 PBS documentary, "*Welcome to Shelbyville.*" The film, viewed by over one million Americans, highlighted the grassroots community engagement work led by the initiative in a rural town grappling with a growing refugee Somali community. The groundbreaking work of Welcoming Tennessee was the first effort of its kind to reach out to everyday Americans and address their fears and concerns in the face of rapid demographic change.

The success of the work in Tennessee has since inspired numerous other initiatives to take shape, with the support of Welcoming America. Today, Welcoming America's National Desk supports grassroots welcoming initiatives in 20 states, and provides training and assistance to other organizations throughout the country through its Receiving Communities Initiative. Welcoming America has developed an innovative, adaptive model for receiving community engagement that is supported through a host of tools and resources. Its methodology includes webinars, learning circles, in-person group training, individual and peer coaching and convenings to help strengthen practice. Welcoming America's innovative approach has been recognized by the White House and with the prestigious Ashoka Fellowship and the Draper Richards Kaplan Social Entrepreneurship Fellowship. Welcoming America is a recognized thought leader in strategies for engaging the receiving community, and currently coordinates the Receiving Communities Track of the National Immigrant Integration Conference.

Most recently, Welcoming America launched the Welcoming Cities effort ([www.welcomingcities.org](http://www.welcomingcities.org)), focusing on helping municipal governments adopt policies and practices that promote a welcoming environment and economic competitiveness. Many of the cities outlined in this proposal connect to Welcoming America nationally in some way, but they would also benefit from a regional focus. Welcoming America is interested in piloting regional collaborations, beyond its current city or statewide foci, and believes this proposal is an ideal opportunity. In addition, having access to the national cohort of welcoming cities members will

greatly benefit the members of the Great Lakes initiative, as they are able to share experiences and successes back and forth.

### **Impact and Value**

The past three decades have witnessed historic immigration to the United States. The world's nations are more connected and interrelated than at any time in human history. Not just technologically and by news and information, but economically and by the exchange and flow of people. America has prospered for the last three centuries because of its ability to attract industrious, skilled, innovative, and diverse people from across the globe and—while far from perfect or ideal—has done well at integrating these newcomers into the economy. American prosperity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century depends, in part, on its ability to continue to lead as a destination for the world's talent seeking economic opportunity.

Rust Belt economies in the Midwest have begun to react to America's latest immigration wave. Organically, regional economic leaders in Detroit, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Dayton, the state of Michigan, Lansing, Indianapolis, and St. Louis have set forth to capitalize on immigration and to develop economic strategies that welcome immigrants to these communities—each of whom have faced challenging economic conditions from global market forces over the last decade. These individual initiatives are just emerging and see themselves, not only as uniquely local, but as part of a larger Midwestern, Rust Belt, or even national movement to embrace immigration as a source of economic strength, rather than as an economic threat. If successful, these efforts will help accelerate the return of prosperity to tens of millions of Americans, including positive impacts in numerous distressed urban neighborhoods.

These initiatives not only focus on how immigration can positively impact the economics of host communities, they represent a unique opportunity for immigrants, refugees, and immigrant rights advocates. They are a new and critical component of shifting public attitudes about immigration from one of fear and opposition, to one of understanding and encouragement. Although these efforts do not directly focus on the immigration policy debates, they make a profound case for federal, state, and local laws that welcome immigrants, not drive them away or make it infeasible for communities to tap into their economic contributions.

These immigration economic development efforts have much to offer immigrants and refugees in terms of tangibly improving their quality of life. In fact, many of the initiatives have embraced enhancing traditional integration services (ESL, citizenship programs, legal services, job training, etc.) as a means of being more welcoming. Each has brought new energy and innovation to traditional integration services, approaching the work from an asset-based perspective—viewing immigrants and refugees as opportunities, rather than as helpless victims. They have developed innovative programs, such as so-called “welcome mats” that guide immigrants and refugees to needed services, as well as focused on building the capacity of the entire integration services field.

As the United States appears more likely to pass some form of federal immigration reform, the impact and importance of these efforts will be magnified. If the struggling Rust Belt and urban economies of the Great Lakes region are able to develop effective economic integration strategies, these communities will be poised to benefit from a more robust federal immigration system. Additionally, the implementation of integration programs to implement any federal reform would have the opportunity to be coordinated with efforts that are focused on the economic and integration opportunities, instead of focused solely on the legal machinations of the program or some other perspective.

The organic emergence of somewhat revolutionary immigration economic development programs in more than a half dozen Midwest metropolitan areas in four short years represents an historic moment. It is our hope that through collaboration, shared learning, and building a network, we can fully capitalize on this opportunity.