

A VIBRANT AND VITAL ECONOMY.

OVERVIEW

New Americans are business owners and asset holders. New Americans are also the fastest growing sector of the workforce and propel key industries that are vital to our economic future. Labor is also a key source of collective power for immigrant and refugee communities and the foundation for economic and social mobility. Barriers facing New Americans can include limited education, limited/low English proficiency; lack of professional networks, computer skills, and targeted supports; predatory lending practices; and, the overwhelming challenge of accessing education, job-training, and advancement opportunities while working multiple “survival” jobs with insufficient pay and unstable schedules. Workers at every level and of any immigration status should be afforded opportunities to advance, treated with dignity, paid fairly, and protected against abuses in the workplace.

We must focus on growing a vibrant and vital economy for all by:

- Ensuring access to a living wage and protecting workers’ right to organize
- Increasing New Americans’ access to workforce development programs
- Supporting New American asset building
- Developing a streamlined program for professional immigrant integration
- Addressing temporary and skilled worker needs

BACKGROUND

Immigrants comprise 13 percent of the U.S. population but 17 percent of the labor force. Between 2002 and 2012, more than half of the growth in the entire U.S. labor force was due to immigrants. Access to labor markets and opportunities for economic advancement remain among the strongest tools for immigrant integration and benefit to the national economy as a whole. Yet, immigrants are disproportionately employed in lower wage and dangerous jobs. They face particular challenges based on language, their lack of networks, unfamiliarity with the U.S. labor market and opportunities, and much more.

Immigrants, many who arrive with tremendous skills and credentials, are often frozen out of our workforce or unable to work at a level that corresponds to their education. They have to cope with unclear information on career pathways that vary by state and profession. 25 percent of college-educated immigrants are affected by “brain waste,” or underemployment relative to their skill level.¹

New Americans contribute to the economy through innovation and entrepreneurship, adding jobs and paying more in taxes than they use in services.² Reducing the barriers to their economic integration would strengthen our labor force, increase our tax base, reduce claims on public assistance, and spur innovation and economic growth.

¹ McHugh, Margie, et al. *Brain Waste in the U.S. Workforce: Select Labor Force Characteristics of College-Educated Native-Born and Foreign-Born Adults*. Migration Policy Institute. May 2014.

² Kaushal, Neeraj and Michael Fix. *The Contributions of High-Skilled Immigrants*. Migration Policy Institute. 2006. See also: Vivek Wadhwa, Annalee Saxenian, Ben Rissing, and Gary Gereffi. *Skilled Immigration and Economic Growth*. Applied Research in Economic Development. 2008.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Ensure access to a living wage and protect workers' right to organize

- All workers have the right to a living wage and full employment protections. Strengthening career opportunities and expanding access to a living wage through workforce development and support for immigrant business development and professional integration must play a crucial part in any immigrant integration policy
- Employers must respect workers' right to organize and bargain collectively to improve their working conditions. This is especially critical to protect workers' health and safety. Workers have the right to a safe and healthy work environment, and must be able to raise health and safety concerns to their employers and public agencies without fear of retaliation; these rights are particularly important for New Americans, a particularly vulnerable group relative to employers

Increase New Americans' access to workforce development programs

- We must increase access New American workers' access to educational and career pathways that lead to stable, better-paying jobs in high demand occupations with opportunities for economic advancement
- We should expand funding for existing federal and state workforce training and higher education programs that successfully serve immigrants with limited English proficiency and/or education, and we should support public/private workforce training partnerships that seek to align educational and training opportunities with the needs of regional employers
- The Secretaries of Labor and Education need to hold states accountable for demonstrating that their Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act (WIOA) plans provide equal access for New Americans with limited English proficiency and/or education, a population they have a poor record of serving in such programs

Support New American asset building

- Current federal investments favor businesses well beyond the size and scope of those that New Americans typically own. The federal government should invest in New American owned small business, recognizing their critical role in building family and community assets
- There is no data on the creation of new businesses by New Americans even though they are overrepresented as business owners. Federal agencies should track this to identify gaps and inform future policy and investments
- Financial education is critical for New Americans' managing family income to connecting to mainstream resources such as bank accounts to understanding the fundamentals of small business and entrepreneurship. Additionally, New Americans are particularly vulnerable to predatory products and practices, from high risk loans to cash advances. The federal government must invest in a cross-sector strategy to support New American financial education and protect against asset stripping

Develop a streamlined program for immigrant and refugee professional integration

- Create designated federal funding to expand education, training and career navigation services to support the relicensing of highly skilled immigrants and refugees in a variety of professions

Address temporary and skilled worker visa needs

- We need a coordinated set of policies addressing temporary and skilled worker visas, one that meets the shifting needs of U.S. businesses and protects the rights of native and foreign born workers alike