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Baltimore puts out welcome mat for immigrants, hoping to stop population decline

By Carol Morello and Luz Lazo, July 24, 2012



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The fate of Baltimore may rest with immigrants like Alexandra Gonzalez.

A native of Puebla, Mexico, Gonzalez feels more at home in Baltimore with every passing year. She attends city-run nutrition and exercise classes in Spanish and takes her two young children to a Spanish-language storytelling hour at her neighborhood library. She plans to earn a GED and become a teacher.

"I like living here," said Gonzalez, 24, as she pushed a stroller holding her sleeping 1-year-old daughter and bags of purchases from a dollar store in the blue-collar Highlandtown neighborhood. "They don't look at you weird

because you don't speak English."

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The degree to which Gonzalez feels welcome is no accident.

After decades of seeing the city's population slide with every census count, Baltimore officials are trying to turn things around. One key strategy is embracing immigrants, in the hope they will encourage friends and family to join them.

Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake (D) has told Latinos, in particular, that she is counting on them to help Baltimore gain 10,000 families within a decade. As a first step, she signed an order in March prohibiting police and social agencies from asking anyone about immigration status — and in the order, she explicitly asked federal immigration authorities to tell anyone they arrest that they are not agents of the city.

Baltimore joins an increasing number of U.S. cities, most of them manufacturing behemoths fallen on hard times, that are courting immigrants to reverse half a century of

population loss.

The Global Detroit effort includes programs that help immigrants start small businesses, get driver's licenses and learn English. As part of the Welcome Dayton Plan adopted last year, the Ohio city sponsors a soccer tournament for immigrant teams. Not to be outdone, Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel (D) says he wants his home town to be known as the most "immigrant-friendly city in the country."

The welcome mats thrown out by struggling cities and states stand in stark contrast to the reception immigrants have faced in places such as Arizona and Alabama. There, laws requiring police to ask a person's immigration status have raised concerns about racial profiling among many immigrants, whether or not they are in the country legally, and many have left because

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of the stricter laws, as well as the recession.

In the Washington region, Prince William County saw a drop in its immigrant population, both legal and illegal, after it mandated that police make immigration checks.

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A new attitude

Baltimore has undergone a shift in attitude. In 2004, then-Maryland Comptroller William Donald Schaefer (D), a former mayor and governor, chastised immigrants who don't speak English well after a Spanish-speaking cashier at a McDonald's had trouble understanding his order.

"I don't want to adjust to another language," Schaefer said. "This is the United States. I think they ought to adjust to us."

Eight years later, Baltimore and many other cities are adjusting.

The 2010 census was a tipping point. Most cities that grew had Hispanics and, to a lesser degree, Asians to thank. Cities with few immigrants lost political power and federal money as district lines and funding formulas changed to reflect new census numbers.

"The census has shown cities definitively what the population trend is," said Margie McHugh, an immigration expert with the nonpartisan Migration Policy Institute. "It got a lot of smart people in city and state governments looking 10 years ahead and thinking hard about what the economic future for cities could be."

In Michigan, former state House majority leader Steve Tobocman (D) heads Global Detroit, built around the idea that immigration can drive an economic rebound. The group plans to provide training in how to start "micro enterprises" and has created a "welcome mat" network of social service agencies that offer English and citizenship classes. It hopes to draw both entrepreneurial engineers who graduate from the state's universities and working-class immigrants who can start small neighborhood businesses.

"Immigrants have a lot to contribute to job creation and economic growth," Tobocman said.

Most of the immigrant-friendly measures around the country are in their infancy, so it is difficult to assess how effective they are. Philadelphia, for example, saw its population grow for the first time in 60 years after the mayor ordered police in 2009 not to ask about immigration status, but the rise in Hispanic and Asian residents that was responsible for the increase might have happened anyway. Hispanics and Asians are the two fastest-growing groups in the country, more because of their higher birth rates than to immigration.

Critics of 'sanctuary cities'

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8/2/2012 11:02 AM CDT

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