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Immigrant-Friendly Cities Want What Arizona Doesn't

In contrast to some states' anti-immigration policies, a few cities are actively trying to attract immigrants to boost their own economies.

BY: DYLAN SCOTT | SEPTEMBER 2012



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Sarvar Ispahi, his son Uzeir and their family moved to the United States from Russia in 2005 after Ahiska Turks were granted refugee status by the federal government. They chose Dayton because a refugee community was already forming there. (Photos by Jim Witmer)



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In the heart of Dayton, Ohio, three rivers come together to form the Great Miami River. That's the image that 62-year-old Sarvar Ispahi, an Ahiska Turk who moved here with his family in 2005, conjures to illustrate the sense of community that has developed in Dayton, this unexpected home for immigrants in the middle of the country. "If you're neighbors, you come to know all people. You can make one culture," says Ispahi, his broken English aided by his son Fergano. "If you are together, this is good. If you are separate, this is not good. But this is a good community."

Ispahi, his wife and their children are among the several thousand Ahiska Turks who have settled in Dayton after escaping persecution in Russia. The Ahiskans have a long history of oppression, which Ispahi vividly recounts on a blistering summer day in the cool comfort of his New York Pizzeria on East Fifth Street, wearing a shirt that reads: "Dayton, Ohio: My Kind of Town." In 1944, more than 90,000 Ahiska Turks were deported from Georgia into the Soviet satellites of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, where Ispahi was born. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, his family moved to Russia, where they were granted safe harbor but no citizenship.

"Those were terrible years," Ispahi recalls. "We couldn't do anything." A new governor of the Russian state where they resided had launched a public relations campaign that painted Ahiska Turks as criminals and drug dealers. Given their lack of official status, the situation became untenable for Ispahi and his people. In 2004, the United States granted refugee status to Ahiska Turks. When Ispahi and

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his family decided to come to America in June 2005, they chose Dayton because an uncle had settled there and found the transition to be easy. Today, Ispahi owns his own business and employs four people, two of whom are his sons.

City officials estimate that 10 percent of the Ahiska Turks in the United States have established themselves here in Dayton. But they aren't alone. There are also immigrants from Mexico, Vietnam, Samoa and elsewhere.

Watching some of these residents' difficulty in adjusting to their new surroundings -- some encountering language barriers and others struggling to secure housing -- convinced city officials they needed to do more to help. Dayton's Human

Relations Council, a city department that investigates discrimination complaints,

started in 2010 by initiating a study into allegations from Hispanic residents regarding housing discrimination. Around the same time, City Manager Tim Riordan and City Commissioner Matt Joseph resolved to make public services more accessible for those who spoke English as a second language.

It didn't take long for Dayton's leaders to figure out that incremental steps wouldn't do, that the immigration issue needed a comprehensive solution and the involvement of the entire community. "It requires a huge partnership. There are only so many things we can do as the city," Joseph says. "And the big thing is an attitude change. We have to make sure we're encouraging people to be more welcoming and that the incentives are running the right way. That's our role."

For every government that's taking a tough line against immigrants, there are others that are embracing immigration-friendly policies. Though much attention has been paid to states like Alabama and Arizona, where laws viewed as anti-immigrant have sparked a political firestorm, a quieter undercurrent of immigrant-friendly policies is in motion. Major cities like New York, Chicago, Detroit and Houston -- longstanding immigrant destinations -- have begun to revisit their policies in an effort to become more welcoming. But the idea is also taking hold in Middle America, in places like Dayton and Boise, Idaho. It's not simply out of a sense of goodwill; many leaders see these policy changes as economic development tools. Dayton's approach has been hailed by pro-immigration groups as an important example of redefining public policy for those seeking better opportunities in this country.

To forge the partnership imagined by Dayton's leaders, a workgroup of more than 125 stakeholders convened regularly for five months and developed what became the Welcome Dayton Plan. The city commission approved it in October 2011 as its framework for making the city immigrant-friendly.

The plan's goals are expansive, covering everything from health care to public safety. To encourage economic development, Dayton is setting aside one section of its downtown as an international marketplace for immigrant entrepreneurs. City officials plan to authorize new grants to help business owners set up shop and to coordinate with local realtors to market the area so that companies will see the advantage of locating there.

The city itself has pledged to improve government services in particular ways that will make them more accessible for newly migrated residents, such as revamping public notices and adding staff members who speak foreign languages.

Welcome Dayton is also about changing the city's culture. One of the plan's first successes was the sale in April of a former city building to the Ahiska Turk community, which is turning it into its own community center. Events like a Global Dayton Soccer Day are intended to bring disparate groups within the community together. The city is organizing a "cultural brokers" training program to assist volunteer groups outside the government's purview in working with different ethnicities. The initiative urges private businesses and citizens to embrace the city's goals and find their own ways to advance them. "If you don't assist them to gain a foothold or to have a positive and constructive experience, you marginalize them and it could stay that way for generations," says Tom Wahlrab of the Human Relations Council. "So you've got to quickly get them in the stream of things and help these folks get into play."

Dayton officials seized on a growing academic consensus that embracing immigrants is beneficial to the country as a whole and specifically the economy. A June 2011 Brookings Institution report concluded: "U.S. global competitiveness rests on the ability of immigrants and their children to thrive economically and to contribute to the nation's productivity." The U.S. Chamber of Commerce wrote last year that research shows "immigrants significantly benefit the U.S. economy." The Obama administration estimated in May 2011 that immigrant business owners generate more than 10 percent of business income.

And they continue to come. Some 13.1 million immigrants (legal and illegal) arrived in the United States between 2000 and 2010, according to the Census Bureau, trumping the record migration levels seen during the 1990s. While migration has slowed during the financial downturn, many analysts expect it will rebound as the national economy improves. That's one reason more localities are looking at the Welcome Dayton model and beginning to think about how they can become welcoming communities.

"We talk about how Alabama was trying out 'unwelcome Arizona,' whereas we're interested in a dynamic where cities are actually competing to be seen as the most welcoming," says David Lubell, founder and executive director of Welcoming America, a grassroots organization on immigration. "Dayton is a model that's held up, and the fact that they came out and said it's in their best interest to be welcoming is a huge step in a different direction."

But there are skeptics. Welcome Dayton was opposed by various groups who warned of a detrimental effect on the city's job market and social services. Some drove across the state to speak out against an initiative that they viewed as placing outsiders ahead of those who already live here. Generally, though, city officials say the public has embraced the plan. While the political discourse about immigration sometimes descends into posturing and hyperbole, cities like Dayton have resolved to welcome newcomers and integrate them into their new communities.

The Welcome Dayton Plan has given the city a long-term vision for what it means to be accommodating to immigrants. While it's too soon to gauge what the ultimate impact of the initiative will be on migration patterns or population, early signs suggest it's been effective. Since January 2011, more than 1,000 individuals from 113 countries took an oath to become U.S. citizens. City Manager Riordan says he's received emails from individuals in China and South Africa who have heard of the plan and are interested in what it would take to come to Dayton.

The plan could also provide population gains for a city that lost nearly 15 percent of its residents from 2000 to 2010. In that respect, Dayton shares many similarities with Detroit. Both are former manufacturing centers that have been hit hard by the shifting economic landscape, and both have been losing population (Detroit's dropped by 25 percent over the last decade). A group of business and government leaders in 2010 began developing what would become the Global Detroit plan; after they heard about the work being done in Dayton, they asked Wahlrab to come and share his city's experience. The Global

Beyond Traditional Eligibility Verification

February 14, 2013

These days, newspaper headlines regularly describe how fraudsters are diverting hundreds of millions of dollars from public assistance programs. In fact, an April 2012 study by a RAND Corporation analyst and former Centers for Medicaid and Medicare administrator estimated that fraud and abuse cost Medicare and Medicaid as much as \$98 billion in 2011. A recent GOVERNING Institute survey of 150 state and local government leaders also highlights the prevalence of fraud across government agencies.

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Detroit initiative has so far secured more than \$4 million in private money to fund various efforts, including retaining international students and providing resources for immigrant business owners to establish themselves.

"I believe there is a certain elegance and opportunity in the plan that Dayton has put together," Steve Tobocman, a former state legislator and director of Global Detroit, said in an interview with WBEZ Chicago. "They've done certain things so profoundly right that I think we have a lot to learn from it."

Many major cities, including Chicago, Houston, New York and Philadelphia, have been integrating immigrants into their communities for most of their existence. But that hasn't stopped their public officials from taking proactive steps to be more welcoming. Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel and Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter both have pledged to make their cities the most immigrant-friendly in the country.

A recent Rice University study concluded that Houston is the most diverse city in the United States, and city officials have developed a plan to connect with these new residents. Mayor Annise Parker established the Office of International Communities in November 2011 to lead these efforts. "We're trying to brand Houston as a welcoming city," says Terence O'Neill, whom Parker pegged to head the office. "We want the one thing you remember about Houston to be that it's welcoming to all people. Texas friendliness transcends any barriers."

As in Dayton, Houston officials believe a holistic approach is the best way to handle the immigrant issue. O'Neill's office serves as a clearinghouse of information for other agencies, such as health and public safety. The office has conducted needs assessments, consulting immigrants on what would improve their experience in Houston. One of the early successes of the effort is the New Americans Employment Initiative, which offers interview training to incoming immigrants and connects them with jobs. A Citizenship Week provided informational sessions, with up to 30 people in attendance, explaining the process for gaining American citizenship.

Despite being seated in a deeply red state that is often perceived as having a political culture not unlike Arizona and Alabama, O'Neill says Houston has seen great buy-in from its native citizens during his office's early work. Businesses and community groups have become active participants, taking the lead in projects like the employment initiative. The key, he explains, is demonstrating to residents that integrating new people into the city is beneficial to the community as a whole.

"Success is when every single person in Houston says it's great to have all these people from all over the world," O'Neill says. "Success is when the average person will realize that this is a really good thing for us."

Projecting the long-term momentum of immigration-friendly policies is difficult. But recent national events suggest such a shift might be under way. President Obama announced this summer that his administration would cease the deportation of some undocumented immigrants, such as the young and educated. It has been a controversial move but one seen by many as an olive branch to a substantial portion of the U.S. population (estimates place their number at 10 million or more) that has otherwise felt unwelcome. Iterations of the DREAM Act, which would aid children of undocumented immigrants in obtaining a college education, continue to resurface in Congress and statehouses nationwide.

With these forces in motion, cities like Dayton may be well ahead of the curve.

"Those that are the most forward-looking, that have the most pragmatic view on immigrants, are the ones that are reaching out and creating environments that immigrants can not only survive in but thrive in," says Audrey Singer, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution who studies demography and migration. "I think that is definitely the future of this country."

It seems to be the future for Dayton. A drive down East Third Street, slotted as the future international business corridor, already reveals advertisements written in Spanish. A Mexican family that runs one of the city's authentic ethnic restaurants is buying up storefronts along the street, planning to open an organic foods market and clothing store for other members of the community. A Vietnamese woman owns an international foods market up the road, replete with Buddha statues and foreign foods branded in different languages, and converses with her customers in their native tongue. Like the three rivers that Ispahi, the Ahiska Turk, describes, people from across the globe meet and mingle in downtown Dayton.

The welcoming atmosphere that Dayton has tried to foster is already having a trickle-down effect.

Ispahi and his sons have founded a nonprofit organization called International Ahiska Human Rights, which they hope will be instrumental in bringing more of their people to the United States -- and Dayton. "We found a way out of [our oppression], and we want to give this way to other people," Ispahi says. "Now we can try to help them."

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Dylan Scott

Dylan Scott is a GOVERNING staff writer.

E-mail: dscott@governing.com

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COMMENTS

oldest first

Latif Kassam | Commented September 5, 2012

this is very useful information for people who are ignorant at times or don't understand how America became stronger and stronger by attracting cream of the world and that resulted in innovations/discoveries etc. Dayton is not the only example, Canada as a country is still surviving well (despite the recession in USA) due to it's recent (10 yrs or so) policy of welcoming new immigrants and encouraging/leading as a pluralist society I am a Canadian citizen with US Green card currently residing in NY. I belong to a community that does lot of work for the human welfare <http://www.akdn.org/> <http://www.themaili.org/News-Events>

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whodatperson1 | Commented September 5, 2012

Sorry, the writer is not Kris... it's Dylan Scott.

Legal and Green Public Servant | Commented September 6, 2012

Interesting most "Sanctuary Cities" have severe, unchecked littering, dumping and other public health and environmental crimes. They often appear on a major publication's "U.S. Least Green" and/or "America's Dirtiest" and/or "U.S. Least Healthful Cities" lists. Shame Shame on the mayors, councilmembers of these listed cities!

whodatperson1 | Commented September 5, 2012

"Immigrant-Friendly Cities Want What Arizona Doesn't!" This is a completely disengenious headline to start with. In fact, what I'd say it is is a lie straight up. The people of AZ are not against immigration. They're against ILLEGAL immigration. People crossing over the border without documentation. I know of NOBODY personally (I know a lot of people) who are 'against' immigration, but not against immigration. They're against anyone walking over the border whether they're drug dealers or whatnot without properly doing so. Some people are against immigration because of persecution I'll bet dollars to donuts that you're not going to get any help from the government or part of govt. in a small way, or writing about government. Kobach, who write articles like these! This is purely a smear and a swindle. People who write articles with headlines such as this articles are being states who have allowed what amounts to an almost free flow of illegal immigrants. Please don't say it isn't so. Nobody should come into this country with a distortion of truth. And nobody worth their weight would write a headline such as that. I wonder if I'm reading an article from the MSNBC or DNC or RNC propaganda arms.

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Lisa | Commented September 6, 2012

Thank you whodat - I was planning on writing a similar response myself. What an inflammatory, bigoted, yellow piece of journalism this is! Arizona welcomes LEGAL IMMIGRANTS, versus the lawbreakers and resource sucking ILLEGAL SNEAK THIEFS who come over in the middle of the night, or in broad daylight - the drug smugglers who filter through MY neighborhood early mornings when my children have to walk to the bus stop, where our hard working Border Patrol and Sheriff deputies risk their lives every day to control the flow through our leaky borders and stop the import of deadly poison to our kids, and the anchor baby system. Our hard working legal immigrants follow and obey our laws, work hard and sometimes wait for years for PERMISSION to enter this (once) great country for the PRIVILEGE of becoming a United States citizen. The illegals just want to rape this country for its wealth and then have the gall to demand rights.

Thomas Kohn | Commented September 5, 2012

On one of my rides along the 330 miles of bikeways in the Dayton area, I heard some lively accordion music at a park bench in Eastwood Metropark. I stopped for a moment to hear the full song, and talked a bit with the men enjoying their lunch in the shade. They were all recent immigrants from Turkey, happy to spend a few hours together after their work day. What a nice addition to the city's life and culture!

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Brian | Commented September 6, 2012

Immigration Plan A: Decide how many immigrants we want, what countries we want them from, and what education and skills we want. Let them in under some type of program. Immigration Plan B: Decide how high to build a fence (if any at all). Let in everyone who can get over the fence. Figure out how to pay for them later. I am really amused by this notion that we need uneducated illegals to do the work that welfare recipients wont do.

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Green Public Servant | Commented September 6, 2012

Interesting most "Sanctuary Cities" have severe, unchecked littering, dumping and other public health and environmental crimes. They often appear on a major publication's "U.S. Least Green" and/or "America's Dirtiest" and/or "U.S. Least Healthful Cities" lists.

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David Armstrong | Commented September 12, 2012

Really lousy title for article. It appears by the title that illegal immigration is sought after by some cities.

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