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Brandon Mendoza's viewpoint: Immigration is critical to the Pittsburgh region's economic future

Brandon Mendoza

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If someone asks you “what’s one of the biggest challenges facing the Pittsburgh region’s future?” you wouldn’t be wrong to say “our workforce.”

A wave of retirements among the baby boom generation and a smaller pipeline of workers in the generations that follow are the key causes of an 80,000 worker shortage projected for the Pittsburgh region over the coming decade. One solution to our worker pipeline issue is in the need to attract more foreign-born workers to our region and retain those who are already here.

While the national conversation on immigration has heated up, in our region, it has been a rejuvenating force, helping to offset population loss and bolster our working age population. While our death rate still exceeds our birth rate, which drives overall drops in population size, immigration has helped the region’s population stabilize.

This was one of the findings of a major report released recently by New American Economy in partnership with the Great Lakes Metro Chambers Coalition – a group of 40 chambers of commerce



Brandon Mendoza is the government affairs manager at the Greater Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce and co-director of the Great Lakes Metro Chambers Coalition.

across the Great Lakes region, which is co-led by the Greater Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce. At a time of heightened and often divisive rhetoric on the issue of immigration, the report – “New Americans and a New Direction” – takes a data-driven, fact-based approach to exploring the impact that immigrants are having on the Great Lakes economy.

Across the Great Lakes — and here in the Pittsburgh region — immigrants are having major positive impacts on population, workforce and economic growth. Between 2000 and 2015, immigrants accounted for half of regional population growth across the 25 metros that compose the Great Lakes region. Furthermore, the Pittsburgh region would have shrunk by more than 100,000 people over the same period of time, if not for immigrants filling the gap.

The impact of immigrants on the workforce of the broader Great Lakes region is equally striking. More than 70 percent of immigrants were working age in 2015, compared with 51 percent of U.S. born residents. Immigrants drove nearly two-thirds of regional growth in the size of the working age population between 2000 and 2015. This is important for workforce competitiveness in regions with aging populations such as Pittsburgh.

Immigrants were also found to make up a significant portion of the workers needed to fuel continued growth in industries critical to our economy, such as advanced manufacturing, health care and life sciences. In the Great Lakes region, one out of every seven engineers in the manufacturing sector was foreign-born, and 27 percent of physicians and surgeons were immigrants in 2015.

Moreover, immigrants play an outsized role in fueling entrepreneurship. The Pittsburgh region saw a 91 percent increase in immigrant entrepreneurs between 2000 and 2015. Several metros in the Great Lakes region, including Minneapolis and Indianapolis, saw the number of immigrant entrepreneurs more than triple during the same period.

The “New Americans and a New Direction” report clearly shows, in unambiguous terms, that immigration is driving growth and improving economic conditions across the Great Lakes region’s economy, including Pittsburgh. We know that there is an abundance of opportunity in our region. However, our ability to attract, retain and upskill talent is essential to realizing our economic potential — a point made clear in the Allegheny Conference’s “Inflection Point” report. Immigration is a big piece of the puzzle in our ability to attract more people to the region to ensure a competitive workforce for years to come.

As a member of the Great Lakes Metro Chambers Coalition, the Greater Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce will continue to advocate for federal immigration reform that benefits the economy and quality of life of the Pittsburgh region. At the same time, our community must fully embrace efforts to become an even more welcoming city and region. Our future depends on it.