The Case for Local Action on Welcoming Immigrants

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Immigrants are a boon to San Diego's culture and economy. Comprising one-fourth of the city's population, immigrants play a critical role in keeping jobs local, stabilizing population growth, and supplying key industries with entrepreneurial leadership. In the absence of coordinated national integration policy, it is the responsibility of local government to adopt policies that ensure the continued success of immigrants and their families. When done successfully, welcoming policies can help to promote social and economic cohesion for all city residents.

Cities in the United States and around the world are at the forefront of immigrant integration. For local government officials, immigrants are neighbors, schoolmates, and coworkers. Immigrants attend schools, pay local taxes, use local government services, and work in the city. As such, the lived experience of integration is inherently local. Cities have the capacity to tailor policies and programs that suit their communities' needs, whether in education, health, employment, or law enforcement. And given the central role of local government in integration policy, cities are well positioned to coordinate non-state actors, such as businesses and nonprofits, to achieve a streamlined process for immigrant integration.

Cities that adopt welcoming policies characteristically have left-leaning governments, are accustomed to contact with non-native populations, and tend to have large immigrant populations who are part of the electorate and broader decision-making structures, such as city councils. This context then shapes the policy choices made by cities. Localities can enact immigrant integration legislation that spans a wide array of policy domains, including licensing, education, healthcare, and translational resources. These policies can be split into two types: categorical and cultural policies.

Categorical policies are those that determine whether, and to what degree, non-citizens (across legal categories) have access to social, economic, and/or political rights. Cultural policies acknowledge and celebrate ethnic communities consisting of both citizens and non-citizens, such as national heritage days. While categorical policies (e.g. language access policies) are more likely to have stronger material effects on immigrant communities, both cultural and categorical policies send strong signals of inclusion or exclusion to immigrant communities. These policies can carry symbolic effects that translate into other facets of integration.

Given the many ways integration policies can improve the city and its residents, local officials must consider a range of policies and approaches to help immigrants thrive. The following is a synopsis of successful ways in which cities frame and adopt policies to welcome immigrants into their communities.

Cities can help immigrants reach their full economic potential. To do so, cities can provide training, assistance in transferring credentials from their home country, and opportunities to connect with employers. In partnership with the Welcome Center for New Pennsylvanians, the City of Philadelphia's Office of Workforce Development organizes the Immigrant Fellowship Program, which connects employers with foreign-trained professionals for short-term, paid experiences in a range of industries and professions. The City of Philadelphia also works to advertise micro-lending programs, mentorship initiatives, and business incubation programs, available to all members of the community, particularly immigrant entrepreneurs. Such an initiative would be especially pertinent in San Diego, where entrepreneurs are 23% more likely to be foreign-born than native-born.

Cities' municipal offices can serve as one-stop-shops for immigrant communities. City offices, or staff, can coordinate welcoming initiatives, cultivate conversations, and build networks. Successful examples include offices in San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and Houston, all of which implemented language access policies that require city departments and agencies to provide government information and services in several foreign

languages. Beyond formal offices, many cities have developed committees, commissions, initiatives, and task forces that aim to support immigrants. For instance, Dayton – in collaboration with the city's Human Relations Commission – created the Welcome Dayton Plan that outlined, among other objectives, initiatives for increasing English-language classes and creating a community-wide campaign on immigrant entrepreneurship. Program organizers also structured the program as a grassroots effort that brought Dayton natives together with members of the immigrant community to support immigrants via partnerships between the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation has recognized Welcome Dayton's efforts as key in reversing population decline and the rejuvenation of dormant business districts.

Cities are embodying principles of diversity and inclusion. Successful cities recognize that immigrant needs vary greatly depending on legal status, skill level, and family composition. To acknowledge the diversity of their immigrant communities, cities carefully tailor policies that address the unique needs of all their immigrant communities. Boston, Nashville, San Francisco, and Seattle have coordinated initiatives to increase access to the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program and naturalization process, particularly for limited English proficient immigrants and those who are not able to afford the cost of naturalization fees. Cities are also working to eliminate the barriers that prevent immigrants from interacting with local government. In Burlington, the We All Belong program provides cultural competency training in city agencies to ensure cultural responsiveness and awareness among city staff.

Cities are tied into a network of welcoming communities. While immigrant integration occurs locally, successful cities often develop relationships with other cities interested in integration, and within broader networks organized by non-profits. These networks enable city to share experiences, identify potential partners, and learn best practices. Partnerships often develop to support particular initiatives, such as the Cities for Citizenship, which aims to mobilize public, private, and nonprofit entities to support immigrants through the naturalization process. Broader networks, such as Welcoming America, bring together community-based organizations, city and county governments, and state organizations. Successful cities recognize that integration efforts are more effective when those involved have the opportunity and resources to learn from and share with others.

San Diego's immigrant community of 700,000 individuals is diverse in every sense of the word. As such, there is no one single policy solution that will help all immigrants succeed. It is only in coordination with immigrant communities, local and national nonprofits, and across city agencies that sound and effective policy solutions will emerge to help immigrants achieve their American dream.