

# Ailing Midwestern Cities Extend a Welcoming Hand to Immigrants

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DAYTON, Ohio — Fighting back from the ravages of industrial decline, this city adopted a novel plan two years ago to revive its economy and its spirits: become a magnet for immigrants.

The Dayton City Commission voted to make the city [“immigrant friendly.”](#) with programs to attract newcomers and encourage those already here, as a way to help stem job losses and a drop in population.

In north Dayton — until recently a post-apocalyptic landscape of vacant, gutted houses — 400 Turkish families have moved in, many coming from other American cities. Now white picket fences, new roofs and freshly painted porches are signs of a brisk urban renewal led by the immigrants, one clapboard house at a time.

“We want to invest in the places where we are accepted better,” said Islom Shakhbandarov, a Turkish immigrant leader. “And we are accepted better in Dayton.”

Other struggling cities are trying to restart growth by luring enterprising immigrants, both highly skilled workers and low-wage laborers. In the Midwest, similar initiatives have begun in Chicago, Cleveland, Columbus, Indianapolis, St. Louis and Lansing, Mich., as well as Detroit, as it strives to rise out of bankruptcy. In June, officials from those cities and others met in Detroit to start a common network.

“We want to get back to the entrepreneurial spirit that immigrants bring,” said Richard Herman, a lawyer in Cleveland who advises cities on ideas for development based on immigration.

The new welcome for immigrants reflects a broader shift in public opinion, polls show, as the country leaves behind the worst of the recession. More Americans agree that immigrants, even some in the country illegally, can help the economy, giving impetus to Congressional efforts to overhaul an immigration system that many say is broken.

Concerns about uncontrolled illegal immigration, which produced strict curbs in Arizona and other parts of the country, have not been an issue in Dayton. Officials here say their goal is to invite legal immigrants. But they make no effort to pursue residents without legal status, if they are otherwise law-abiding.

The momentum for change in Dayton came from the immigrants. In 2010, Mr. Shakhbandarov told the newly elected mayor, Gary Leitzell, that he was thinking of asking Turkish immigrants across the United States to settle here. Most of the Turks in Dayton are refugees who fled persecution in Russia and other former Soviet bloc countries.

Mr. Leitzell was intrigued. “I said, the worst thing that could happen is that 4,000 Turkish families could come to Dayton and fix up 4,000 houses,” the mayor recalled. “So how do we facilitate their success?”

With 14,000 empty dwellings in the city, officials were open to trying something different.

Officials quickly realized that this city of 141,000 already had a small but fast-growing foreign-born population: more than 10,000 Muslims from different countries; refugees from Burundi and Somalia; college students from China, India and Saudi Arabia; Filipinos in health care jobs; and laborers from Latin America, many here illegally.

“The hospitals, the police, the libraries, the service agencies, the landlords, they were all dealing with immigrants, but no one was talking about it,” said Tim Riordan, the city manager. “So we brought it out of the shadows.”

The officials hosted many town meetings to test whether Dayton’s residents were ready to be hospitable. But the only vocal resistance came from anti-illegal-immigrant groups from other Ohio cities. In October 2011, the City Commission voted unanimously for the Welcome Dayton plan.

Working with local organizations, the city found interpreters for public offices, added foreign-language books in libraries and arranged for English classes. Teachers went back to school to learn other languages.

Local groups gave courses for immigrants opening small businesses and helped families of refugees and foreign students. City officials worked with Wright State University, a public institution, to find ways for immigrant doctors and engineers to cut through bureaucracy and gain certifications so they could practice in the United States.

The police chief, Richard S. Biehl, ordered officers to no longer check the immigration status of crime witnesses, victims and people stopped for minor traffic violations or other low-level offenses. The police union and sheriffs from nearby counties denounced the policy, saying Dayton had become a “sanctuary city” where immigration law was not enforced.

But Chief Biehl defended his approach, saying it allowed the police to focus dwindling resources on serious crimes. Immigrant leaders, especially Hispanics, embraced it, becoming less wary of the police.

“If we have any group of citizens who are afraid to talk to us or don’t trust us,” Chief Biehl said, “that’s going to compromise our ability to produce public safety.”

City officials said the whole effort cost them one salary for a program coordinator and some snacks for meetings. While it is still too early to say whether the program will jump-start an economic rebound, the early results are promising.

Turks chose Dayton, Mr. Shakhbandarov said, because the cost of living was low and there were universities nearby for their children. The newcomers have started restaurants and shops, as well as trucking companies to ferry equipment for a nearby Air Force base. And they have used their savings to refurbish houses in north Dayton, where Turkish leaders estimated that they had invested \$30 million so far, including real estate, materials purchases and the value of their labor.

Mr. Shakhbandarov stood proudly at the entrance of the Turkish community center that recently opened downtown, gesturing to the lobby's beige floor tiles, imported from Turkey to make visitors "feel warm" when they arrive. Turks bought the center, empty and dilapidated, from the city with a favorable loan. Now it houses a neighborhood preschool and martial arts classes, joined enthusiastically by girls in head scarves.

"It's all about attitude," Mr. Shakhbandarov said. "Americans maybe have seen better days of Dayton, a better life, better economy. But we never seen that. We have learned to appreciate what we have. And what we have here is much beyond what we ever had before."

Other immigrants are busy as well. Organized by Migwe Kimemia, a Kenyan immigrant who works for the American Friends Service Committee, a group of Africans is working to start a roasting company in Dayton for coffee from that continent.

A Muslim organization, the Islamic Center of Peace, bought a blocklong shopping center, not far from downtown, that was so decayed the city had started to demolish it. The center's president, Ismail Gula, envisions a bustling international shopping, recreational and religious center that will serve anyone in the city.

"I want my community to prove we are part of the community at large," said Mr. Gula, a longtime Dayton resident who was born in Libya.

Gabriela Pickett, who is from Mexico, runs an art gallery and haven for Hispanic immigrants and others, providing psychotherapy and social support, including for those without legal status.

"I would be lying if I said there is no rejection in Dayton for people who are different," Ms. Pickett said. "But the city has been very proactive in trying to educate people."

African-Americans, who make up 43 percent of Dayton's population, agree with the goals of the city's program but said they were waiting to see the results. Derrick L. Foward, president of the Dayton Unit N.A.A.C.P., said he was concerned that immigrant businesses were not hiring enough black employees.

"I think Welcome Dayton is a very good initiative," Mr. Foward said. "But I would like to see more diversity hiring as part of their practice from the start."

Recent research suggests that Dayton's experience is not accidental. In a [national study](#) published last month, Jacob L. Vigdor, an economics professor at Duke University, found that over the last four decades, immigrants helped preserve and in some cases add manufacturing jobs in cities where they settled, sustaining employment for Americans. They also added to local

housing values. For every thousand immigrants who moved into a county, 270 Americans moved in after them, Mr. Vigdor found.

Dayton's immigrant experiment is particularly close to home for one lawmaker who will most likely have a major impact on the debate in Washington: the Republican speaker of the House, John A. Boehner. His district wraps around the city on three sides.

But Dayton officials said they were not waiting for Congress. "We've found that we can repopulate our city and we can educate the people and inspire them to employ themselves," Mayor Leitzell said. "In 10 years, when the federal government figures everything out, we'll be thriving."

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/07/us/ailing-cities-extend-hand-to-immigrants.html>