

Michigan governor wants to encourage immigration

By **Kathy Barks Hoffman**
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Michigan has seen the results of what immigrants can do to help the economy through companies such as Meijer Inc., Masco Corp. and Dow Chemical Co., and should be attracting more immigrants who can repeat those successes, Gov. Rick Snyder said Monday.

Speaking at a conference on immigration and Michigan's economy at Wayne State University, the governor pointed out that the Meijer retail chain was founded by a Dutch immigrant, the building products maker Masco (MAS - news - people) by an Armenian immigrant and Dow by a Canadian.

"One of the keys that made us successful in the past is going to again be the key to our future, and that's . . . immigration," Snyder told hundreds of people attending the New Michigan Media conference. He noted that the venture capital companies he headed before he became governor invested in several businesses headed by foreign graduates who created Michigan jobs.

Wayne State University President Allan Gilmour said many foreign students earn degrees from Michigan universities but then must leave the country because of unfriendly U.S. immigration policies. He mentioned one student who received a doctoral degree but couldn't get the needed documents to work in the United States, and instead took a job in Canada.

"I'm glad Canada thinks it has room for more talent. It's too bad we don't have space here," Gilmour said.

New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg participated in a video conference call during the opening panel titled "Can Immigrants Save Detroit?" He'd suggested in May on NBC's "Meet the Press" that letting anyone immigrate to the United States "as long as they agreed to go to Detroit and live there for five or ten years" could help the city regain population and new businesses.

"You would populate Detroit overnight because half the world wants to come here," Bloomberg said then. Michigan's largest city has seen its population fall from 1.8 million in the 1950 U.S. Census to 714,000 in 2010, dropping 26 percent in the last decade alone.

Bloomberg is co-chairman of the Partnership for a New American Economy, a national bipartisan coalition of over 300 mayors and business leaders who believe immigration reform can boost the U.S. economy and create American jobs.

"I don't think there's any question but that immigrants create jobs on balance" even in communities with high unemployment rates such as Detroit," he said during Monday's

videoconference. "They are the people who, first generation, have the enthusiasm to go out, have the knowledge, have the experience of how things are done elsewhere, to try new things."

The Michigan Department of Civil Rights and the Michigan Economic Development Corp. are working together through the Snyder administration's Global Michigan Initiative to find ways to team graduating immigrants with companies that might be able to help them gain a work visa by saying they'll hire them.

"To translate that (student visa) into a work visa or another situation, they really need to be matched with some commercial opportunity," Snyder said. "'How do we find students that have those great innovative ideas and match them up with existing businesses or other startup people in Michigan to say, 'Hey, create a company together'?"

The Republican governor declined to discuss federal immigration policy or the sweeps that have led to illegal immigrants being deported, sometimes tearing them away from their U.S.-born children. He wants the federal government to deal with the issue and opposes Arizona-style laws that allow police enforcing other laws to question the immigration status of those they suspect are in the country illegally.

"That's a divisive situation," he said, noting he opposes bills already introduced that would bring similar laws to Michigan. "Such negative issues . . . actually cause more trouble than anything."