

Nashville looks to avoid immigration 'cauldron'

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In a talk about helping new American citizens live quality lives in Nashville, it was a self-described "old American" who put voice to challenges facing the city.

Native Nashvillian Francis Guess, a longtime human rights advocate, said Thursday that he knows firsthand how the city has slowly become more welcoming.

"I know what it is like to grow up in this city different," Guess said. "I know what it is like to be denied access to public accommodations, and education, and housing, and employment, and health care."

But Nashville has become a destination for immigrants, he said. And now the [newly established Mayor's Office of New Americans](#) has work to do.

"We have a moral obligation to assure that that integration into our community is going to be conducted in a manner that many of us old Americans had to fight our way through," Guess said.

In a public meeting meant to gather ideas for the city office to tackle, Guess said he wants better demographic statistics, more education for the entire community about who now lives here and — perhaps toughest — a ready response when tensions arise.

Said another way: How Nashville can be a melting pot without "becoming a cauldron which comes to a boil and blows up."

That task falls to Shanna Hughey, a senior adviser to Karl Dean named [director of the new office](#). "No cauldron," she said, laughing, after Guess's challenge.

Dozens of immigrants attended the meeting, offering their own suggestions. They asked for long-time immigrants to be included in discussions and for issues as diverse as disability services, affordable housing and youth sports programs to be considered.

"(Creating the new office) is the city of Nashville saying, 'Let's come to reality with our demographics,' " said Mohamed-Shukri Hassan, a member of the Mayor's New Americans Advisory Council. "How can we not only serve this population, but also better integrate them?"

The need has only grown, as Nashville's foreign-born population has grown from 2 percent to almost 12 percent in the past two decades. About 30 percent of students in Metro schools live in homes in which English isn't the primary language.

While creating the office makes Metro unique in the South, the work of tending to immigrants and new citizens is in some ways just beginning, said Renata Soto, executive director of the nonprofit Conexion Americas.

She wants Metro to examine how government services roll out in diverse communities. For example, she said, a new crosswalk on Nolensville Pike will soon be the first in Nashville with bilingual signage.

"The opportunity for this office is to be thinking — in every infrastructure development that we do in Nashville — that will become the standard," she said. "Those are the little elements of making our community reflect who is here."

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