

Pittsburgh looking to increase immigrant population

7 percent of people are foreign born

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By Joe Smydo / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Businesses and nonprofit groups are mounting a renewed effort to restore Pittsburgh's luster as a magnet for immigrants, a move intended to increase population and make the region a more vibrant place.

The U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey for 2006 to 2010 estimated Pittsburgh's foreign-born population to be about 7 percent of its total population and Allegheny County's foreign-born population to be about 5 percent of its total.

Those percentages -- much lower than those in many other major American cities -- illustrate how times have changed since waves of European immigrants helped to build Pittsburgh's economy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

If immigration advocates such as Melanie Harrington and Victor Diaz have their way, times will change again. Ms. Harrington is CEO of Vibrant Pittsburgh, a Downtown group established in December 2010 to promote the notion that "people are the next Pittsburgh renaissance." Mr. Diaz is director of special projects for the Pittsburgh Metropolitan Area Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, an Aspinwall group that recently opened an office in Mexico City to encourage business investment in Pittsburgh.

According to American Community Survey data, the city and county already are experiencing an uptick in immigration from Africa, Asia and Latin America. While they haven't established true ethnic enclaves such as Bloomfield's Italian community, foreign-born groups are becoming more visible in some areas. Brookline and Beechview neighborhoods have attracted Latino immigrants; Carrick is home to Bhutanese from refugee camps.

Mr. Diaz said Pittsburgh should work to attract immigrants and first-generation Americans who are living in other parts of the country but might fare better here. Vibrant Pittsburgh has identified "target cities" for marketing purposes.

Pittsburghers "do a really good job of telling ourselves how good we are" but are less adept at broadcasting that message to other cities, he said.

Pittsburgh isn't widely known in the Middle East, but the G-20 summit in 2009 helped to raise the city's profile, said Haya Abdel-Latif, a Jordanian who lived in Saudi Arabia before coming to the United States for college. In May 2013, she will graduate from Chatham University's graduate program in counseling psychology.

"I would like to stay in Pittsburgh, for now at least," she said.

Some cities, such as Baltimore, Detroit and Dayton, Ohio, have received national or international attention for wooing immigrants and making them feel welcome with comprehensive service plans or other initiatives. In March, Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake signed an executive order to protect "new Americans" from city discrimination. The order bars public-safety officials from asking "about the immigration status of crime victims, witnesses or others who call or approach the police or other city employees seeking assistance."

"Attracting immigrants to Baltimore is a very important part of the mayor's goal to grow Baltimore by 10,000 families over the next decade," said Ryan O'Doherty, the mayor's communications director.

In more ways than one, immigration can help cities bounce back from years of population loss. Dayton officials believe that diversity is a magnet for young professionals.

"If you look at some of the larger cities, that's what makes them more attractive," said Catherine Crosby, executive director of Dayton Human Relations Council, which is helping to implement the Welcome Dayton plan.

Like Welcome Dayton, Vibrant Pittsburgh has a website intended to serve as a clearinghouse for immigrants (www.vibrantpittsburgh.org). It touts Pittsburgh's amenities, provides links to the organization's "employer members" and operates a "welcome center" to connect immigrants with services.

BNY Mellon, a global company, is one of the employer members. Efforts to make Pittsburgh more diverse dovetail with the company's own initiatives to foster an inclusive workplace, said Terri Gregos, director of global talent acquisition.

Government partnerships are important, too, Mr. Diaz said, citing the support of city Councilman Bill Peduto and county Executive Rich Fitzgerald. Joanna Doven, spokeswoman for Mayor Luke Ravenstahl, said the city is focused on building a better environment for all newcomers, foreign-born or not.

At the time of the 2000 census, Pittsburgh had a foreign-born population of 18,874 and the county a foreign-born population of 48,266. More recent data come not from the 2010 census but from the 2006-2010 American Community Survey, which estimated Pittsburgh's foreign-born population to be 21,373, or about 7 percent of its total, and the county's foreign-born population to be 56,870, or about 5 percent of its total.

European immigration is down, while the numbers of newcomers from other parts of the world are up, according to the survey. Current immigration is credited to the city's universities and hospitals, refugee resettlement and economic conditions more favorable than those in other parts of the country.

Ms. Harrington said the region's leaders created a springboard for immigration with their work over many years to transition from smokestack industries to a new economy.

The political climate is hospitable, too. As in Baltimore, Pittsburgh and county police have orders not to routinely inquire about a person's immigration status, officials said.

"In Pittsburgh, you don't have an anti-immigrant discourse," said Sheila Velez Martinez, director of the University of Pittsburgh Law School's Immigration Law Clinic. "It's the opposite."

The clinic, which receives financial support from Vibrant Pittsburgh, has interviewed hundreds of prospective clients from 40 countries in two years.

Universities have a healthy population of international students, some of whom stay after graduation. In fall 2011, Carnegie Mellon University had 4,032 international students, representing one-third of total enrollment. Pitt expects a sharp increase in international students this fall.

Since 2008, the city and county have become a home for as many as 3,000 Bhutanese refugees, said Leslie Aizenman, director of refugee services for Jewish Family and Children's Services in Squirrel Hill.

While some were settled here through a partnership with the State Department, others were placed elsewhere and then chose to move to Pittsburgh in the kind of secondary movement envisioned by Mr. Diaz. The Bhutanese have taken a range of jobs from nursing assistant to textile to check processing, Ms. Aizenman said.

The growing Latino population cuts across the economic strata, Mr. Diaz said, with some choosing to locate in the city's southern neighborhoods because of affordable housing and accessible transportation. The American Community Survey estimated the city's Latino community to be 3,081, up from 1,893 in 2000, and the county's to be 6,319, up from 4,184 in 2000.

Read more: <http://www.post-gazette.com/stories/local/neighborhoods-city/pittsburgh-looking-to-increase-immigrant-population-650538/#ixzz24muVySw3>