

Welcoming Michigan kicks off campaign to boost immigration

- By Josh Katzenstein
- The Detroit News

Detroit— Leaders of a new statewide initiative are hoping to change the conversation about immigrants and highlight their contributions to the community.

Welcoming Michigan, a branch of the grassroots campaign Welcoming America, launched Monday morning at Rivard Plaza on the Detroit River with supporters taking a pledge and extending a hand to welcome immigrants to the state.

Michigan joins 19 other states involved with the initiative. Residents in Detroit, Sterling Heights, Hamtramck and Van Buren County already have formed committees to begin local programming.

"Many times it takes an immigrant to really see the possibilities and extraordinary privileges that this country has to offer because they didn't have that same opportunity," said U.S. Rep. Hansen Clarke, D-Detroit, whose father immigrated from Bangladesh. "And the same way that Welcoming Michigan is now welcoming immigrants, you're also welcoming jobs and investments, and then, more importantly, you're welcoming hope and opportunity to this country — what this city has stood for for many decades and now can stand again."

The program came to Michigan after state Rep. Rashida Tlaib, D-Detroit, had a conversation with someone from the Ford Foundation, she said. The legislator found someone to take a leadership role in the campaign, and with a grant from the foundation and a partnership with the Michigan Immigrant Rights Center (MIRC), the program kicked off Monday.

"We're going to bring back the conversation about, really, the fact that immigrants are human beings," said Tlaib, the daughter of Palestinian immigrants. "(We want to) humanize the fact that we all have some sort of story that goes back to a generation that we all were somehow immigrants at some point or our ancestors were immigrants."

Susan Reed, one of the campaign's organizers and a supervising attorney for MIRC, said the campaign is bi-partisan and has no plans to push legislation reform. The group hopes to change the conversation from legality of immigrants to their potential economic impact.

"Being welcoming is not only the right thing to do, it's really in all of our interest," Reed said. "I think our goal will be met if immigrants continue to come to Michigan, make Michigan their home, start businesses here, feel welcome and feel comfortable"

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