

The Business Case for Supporting Immigrants

One in five workers in Massachusetts is foreign-born.¹ While a majority are U.S. citizens or green card holders, undocumented immigrants, “Dreamers” and people with Temporary Protected Status (TPS) also play a vital role in our Commonwealth’s economy. This is why business leaders are rightfully concerned about the impact of the Trump administration’s draconian immigration policies and xenophobic agenda.

Massachusetts’ immigrant residents are overwhelmingly working-age and employed: 71% are ages 25–64, compared with just 51% of the native-born. This is why even though they account for only one-sixth of the population, they’re 56% of the workforce in services to buildings and dwellings, for example, and 39% in hospitality. Immigrants also play crucial roles in construction, health care and elder care, among others.

Many of these workers have only temporary status, such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) or Temporary Protected Status (TPS). With the Trump administration’s decisions to end DACA – which covered about 5,900 people as of September 2017 – and to terminate TPS for Haitians, Salvadorans and Nicaraguans – a total of more than 11,600 people² – businesses in Massachusetts are now at risk of losing valued employees overnight because their work permits are no longer valid.

Just the loss of TPS holders from Haiti and Central America, a recent study found, could cost the Massachusetts economy an estimated \$646 million per year.³ As “Dreamers” begin to lose their work permits, starting in March 2018, their employers will also feel the impact. Though federal court injunctions have provided a temporary reprieve, both DACA and TPS recipients now face a deeply uncertain future. Employers may be reluctant to hire them, which could lead to a significant waste of talent. In addition, the entire economy will suffer as families and individuals with well-paid jobs and benefits are driven underground, losing a large share of their buying power, or are forced to leave the country.

The business community recognizes these risks. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce has advocated for extending TPS for Central Americans and Haitians, for instance, noting that “the loss of employment authorization for these populations would adversely impact several key industries where TPS recipients make up a significant amount of the workforce,” including construction, food processing, hospitality, and home health care services.⁴

The Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce, meanwhile, says TPS holders are “important economic contributors in our state, including many of our small business owners – a major source of employment – which, if expelled in larger numbers, would damage our economy, the job market and the housing market throughout Boston and Massachusetts.” Steady, legal immigration, the Chamber adds, “is key to maintaining and growing our region’s economic strength and competitiveness.”⁵

In this context, it is essential for Massachusetts’ business community to be vocal about the importance of immigrants to our economy and to advocate for pro-immigrant policies and programs that support effective integration. MIRA views integration as a two-way process: immigrants and refugees learn English, adapt to the local culture and norms, and become citizens, when possible. At the same time, the cities and states where they live adopt new ways of provide providing services to immigrant and refugee communities. How well – and how soon – immigrants and refugees can fully contribute to our economy depends, to a great extent, on how well they can get integrated into American society.

MIRA has identified six areas where thoughtfully designed programs and services can improve or accelerate economic integration for immigrant and refugee families: citizenship, access to post-secondary education, foreign credential transfer, workforce training and development, support for entrepreneurship, and personal and family economic stability. Each offers multiple opportunities for outreach, public education, specialized assistance, and policy or regulatory change. Together, these six areas offer a strategic and practical pathway to supporting economic integration at the city and state level.

All six of these areas work in concert with one another and reinforce the integration opportunities of the other. For instance, acquiring citizenship increases access to job training and post-secondary education funding, through federally subsidized loans. The increased earnings which can result contribute to personal and family economic stability, which in turn makes it easier for immigrant and refugee families to send their students to school or start businesses. All six offer concrete, achievable options at the state and local level to deepen the economic integration of immigrant and refugee families into our cities and state.

MIRA's economic integration model and selected program or policy recommendations

Citizenship	Design a public/private partnership to secure ongoing funding for citizenship application assistance and legal representation for our state's most vulnerable green card holders who are eligible to naturalize.
Access to Post-Secondary Education	Expand programs that educate students and parents about the path to college and other post-secondary options; advocate for in-state tuition for all graduates of MA high schools, regardless of immigration status.
Foreign Credential Transfer	Support legislation to lower barriers for foreign-trained health practitioners to transfer their medical credentials and practice in underserved communities; create a task force to identify other sectors with similar barriers to credential transfer for foreign-trained professionals.
Workforce Training and Development	Identify best practices in expanding in-language access to required certification or training programs and develop recommendations for implementation in the public and non-profit sectors; expand funding for contextual ESOL classes targeted towards particular sectors.
Support for Entrepreneurship	Create communities of practice within the immigrant entrepreneur-serving non-profit sector and among municipal business licensing agencies and chambers of commerce to share best practices and contribute to a culture of empowerment and business success.
Personal and Family Economic Stability	Empower immigrant and refugee families economically through initiatives such as lending circles; increase access to financial literacy programs that work specifically with immigrant and refugee families; develop financial planning tools that may mitigate some of the economic hardships that result from detention or deportation.

Bills before the Massachusetts Legislature provide immediate opportunities to make progress. One key bill, “An Act to Increase Access to Health Care in Underserved Areas of Massachusetts” (S.1216, sponsored by Sen. Jason M. Lewis, and H.3248, sponsored by Rep. Jack Lewis), aims to reduce barriers to professional licensure for foreign-trained health professionals. Across Massachusetts, more than one in five such professionals – doctors, nurses, pharmacists, physical therapists, dentists, etc. – is jobless or underemployed, held back by costly licensing requirements, language barriers, lack of targeted career services, and other factors. The bill would create a state commission to identify practical solutions, such as targeted career services or dedicated residency programs. After favorable committee reports, the bill has a good chance of passing this year; the Senate version of a comprehensive health care bill also includes these provisions.

In addition, businesses have compelling reasons to support the Safe Communities Act, which would draw a clear line between state and local law enforcement, and federal immigration matters. The bill would ensure that scarce public resources are not diverted from local needs to federal functions, and enable all state residents – even those whose family includes someone who is undocumented – feel safe speaking to police and accessing public services. A patchwork of local policies has helped provide some peace of mind, but fear is still widespread, and it is affecting businesses, schools, health care providers and many others.

Massachusetts has the opportunity to become a national leader in immigrant integration. Business leaders have a crucial role to play in advancing smart, progressive policies to benefit our entire Commonwealth.

¹ The Partnership for a New American Economy (2017), <http://www.newamericaneconomy.org/locations/massachusetts/>. Source for box: Mass. Technology Leadership Council, <http://www.masstlc.org/immigration>.

² MIRA Coalition (2018). *Temporary Protected Status (TPS): An Overview*. <http://www.miracoalition.org/tps>.

³ CAP Immigration Team (2017). *TPS Holders in Massachusetts*. Center for American Progress.

https://cdn.americanprogress.org/content/uploads/2017/10/19130146/101717_TPSFactsheet-MA.pdf.

⁴ See <https://www.uschamber.com/letter/letter-dhs-urging-the-extension-temporary-protected-status-el-salvador-honduras-and-haiti>.

⁵ See <http://www.seiu32bj.org/press-releases/massachusetts-labor-business-and-immigrant-justice-leaders-decry-tps-cancellation-for-nicaragua/>.