Welcoming Cedar Rapids: Action Plan

Prepared by:
INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2018, the City of Cedar Rapids and key partners including the Cedar Rapids Metro Economic Alliance, the Greater Cedar Rapids Community Foundation, the Catherine McCauley Center, the Intercultural Center of Iowa, and YPN applied to participate in the Gateways for Growth program.

The purpose of this effort is to ensure that foreign-born residents have the education, preparation, and connections necessary to reach their ultimate potential. Immigrants have played a key role in developing the economy of Cedar Rapids, founding and supporting some of the most important local businesses. Making sure that our economy continues to work for all residents will maintain a high quality of life for all members of our community.

Making Cedar Rapids more attractive to international talent expands economic opportunity for all. **Immigrants in Linn County are 45.2% more likely to be entrepreneurs than their U.S. -born counterparts.** More than 10% of immigrants work for their own businesses. Additionally, immigrants make up a key part of the workforce in some of Cedar Rapids’ most impactful industries. Although the foreign-born make up only 4.4% of the population, they **represent more that 15% of workers in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math fields.** Because of the role immigrants play in the workforce, research from New American Economy estimates that **immigrants helped create or preserve 440 local manufacturing jobs.** The full research report “New Americans in Cedar Rapids, Iowa,” prepared by New American Economy is available as an appendix to this action plan.

In addition to this research the Greater Cedar Rapids Community Foundation and Gateways for Growth provided funding to support this action planning effort. The action steps outlined in this plan are not exhaustive. There are many organizations doing important work with immigrants. Instead these are short term catalytic actions we have identified that will ensure that Cedar Rapids remains welcoming and competitive into the future.

Nearly fifty individuals took part in the creation of this plan serving on the steering committee or on one of three working groups. This plan is the outcome of cross sector collaboration including representatives from local government, business, education, faith-based and non-profit entities, as well as other community leaders.
The three primary focus areas of this plan are:

- **Creating a Welcoming Community** – Cedar Rapids will become a destination of choice for international talent. Immigrants will feel welcomed, and immigration will be understood as a source of cultural and economic strength.

- **Strengthening Workforce and Education** – Education will continue to be responsive to the needs of immigrants and the business sector to address workforce challenges and ensure long-term solutions for the supply of qualified workers.

- **Supporting Business Development and Entrepreneurship** – A comprehensive continuum of support will exist to support immigrant entrepreneurs.

Three working groups refined these goals and developed action steps in each of these areas. Each working group spent four months researching, meeting with community stakeholders, and drawing from the experience of other cities across the country with similar efforts to develop recommendations specific to their area of focus.

Their work was supported by the data provided by New American Economy and interviews and focus groups conducted by Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. These focus groups engaged with immigrants living and working in Cedar Rapids, business owners, human resource professionals, and service providers.

Overall, we heard many common themes:

- **There are excellent opportunities** in Cedar Rapids for immigrants.
  1. Many immigrants moved to Cedar Rapids from other communities in the United States for its **high quality education, low cost of living, and a strong local economy**.
  2. Many immigrants emphasized that Cedar Rapids is a **safe and welcoming community**.

- **However, there are barriers to career advancement and entrepreneurship. These include:**
  1. **Cultural difference in workplace expectations.** Many immigrants shared difficulties navigating American workplace culture.
  2. Immigrants and human resource managers alike expressed an interest in resources to help with **cross-cultural competency** for new and existing workers.
  3. The majority of immigrant business owners expressed feeling **isolated from existing business networks**.
  4. Immigrant entrepreneurs also expressed a need for **greater access to capital and connections** to start new businesses.
• Immigrants also expressed some difficulties integrating into the local community.
  1. For some, it took years to make connections outside of their ethnic community.
  2. Beyond language skills many immigrants and service providers shared the need for life-skills training for living in Cedar Rapids.
  3. Additionally, to support immigrant participation in the workforce greater access to childcare, housing, and transportation were common needs.

While not all of these challenges can be fully addressed within the scope of this plan, the working groups focused on targeted, high-value actions to make the most of limited resources for long-term change. Through this collaborative planning framework the three working groups developed concrete action steps to take advantage of the talents, skills, and resources around the table.

This action plan is focused on immediate actions to spark long term change. We have identified partners and next steps for all of the action items listed below. Although some adjustment will certainly be necessary, for every action step we have a realistic plan to complete or make significant progress within the first year. The items listed under “Future Focus” are other actions we identified, which will make a significant impact, but will take longer to complete.
WELCOMING COMMUNITY

Cedar Rapids will become a destination of choice for international talent. Immigrants will feel welcomed, and immigration will be understood as a source of cultural and economic strength.

Make resources and services highly accessible through a webpage

There are a wide range of local resources available, but it can be difficult for new arrivals to find what they need. Through this planning process we compiled a comprehensive list of local resources. Over the first year, we will work to create a central website available in multiple languages listing resources available to immigrants living in Cedar Rapids. Additionally, a printed version of the resource list will be made available to employers, service providers, and realtors.

Create a Welcoming Week committee to ensure its long-term success

Cedar Rapids will continue to participate in Welcoming America’s annual Welcoming Week in mid-September. During this annual series of events, communities bring together immigrants and native-born residents to build strong connections across their communities. The newly established Welcoming Week Committee will coordinate outreach and networking with existing community organizations. For example, the Downtown Cedar Rapids Farmers Market could highlight vendors with international food to coincide with Welcoming Week.

Increase immigrants’ social ties to Cedar Rapids through volunteer opportunities

Social ties are key to increasing quality of life and feeling rooted in the community. Throughout the planning process, immigrants expressed their desire to give back to Cedar Rapids. We will work with the existing volunteer program managed by the United Way of East Central Iowa to help immigrants expand their personal social networks. New volunteers will be recruited through targeted outreach in faith communities and ethnically based organizations.

Future Focus

In addition to these immediate actions, many immigrants and service providers indicated their desire for a physical “welcoming center” with resource navigators. The city and its partners will explore the long term-possibilities. Any new location will likely be co-located with an existing resource.
WORKFORCE AND EDUCATION

Education will continue to be responsive to the needs of immigrants and the business sector to address workforce challenges and ensure long-term solutions for the supply of qualified workers.

Support immigrants in the pursuit of post-secondary education & training

Often immigrants graduating from local high schools lack an understanding of what the next steps or opportunities are for them. As students leave high school their needs vary widely. Some need additional English language instruction or a high school diploma equivalent. Others are ready for workforce training, skilled labor, or a degree/certification program at a college or university. We will create a local resource guide for high school guidance counselors, English language instructors, and service providers, to explain options for secondary and post-secondary education.

Provide access to wide variety of resources to find, secure, and maintain employment

We will ensure that a wide variety of resources to find, secure, and maintain employment are easily accessible. All available career resources will be identified on the resource website. In addition, we will work to expand the Catherine McAuley Center’s American Workplace Orientation and Kirkwood’s Earn and Learn programs, which bring education to the workplace in partnership with employers. We will also partner with the University of Iowa’s Labor Center to promote pre-apprenticeship programs for high-demand trades.

Support employers in implementing legal best practices

Many employers noted the complexity the U.S. immigration system. The diversity of legal statuses and responsibility on employers can make it a difficult process. We will promote nationally available resources to local employers including webinars that describe best practices and legal responsibilities for recruiting and hiring immigrants. We will also develop a local Frequently Asked Questions sheet for employers with contact information for local resources.

Future Focus

In addition to these immediate actions, it has become clear that a major issue is that immigrants are often unable to use their skills, experience, and education in Iowa because of licensing or credentialing issues. This is a complex issue and will require cooperation with partners statewide including state licensing agencies to facilitate recredentialing in various fields. Additionally, we will explore the creation of industry specific internships for immigrants seeking to enter fields of high need.
BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

A comprehensive continuum of support will exist to support immigrant entrepreneurs.

Promote immigrant entrepreneur participation at resource fairs and conferences

The majority of immigrant owned businesses that were interviewed expressed that they were not aware of or had not accessed the wide range of business development services offered in Cedar Rapids. The working group will work with key immigrant advocates and influencers who will help with promotion of these services in their communities. We will work with existing business development conferences to be more inclusive including: creating an immigrant entrepreneur track, holding immigrant-focused panels, and sponsoring immigrant attendees. Additionally, the Cedar Rapids Metro Economic Alliance with work with partners to organize an event promoting resources for local business development and entrepreneurship.

Provide ongoing business support and outreach

Immigrant business owners emphasized the need for ongoing relationship building and support, including entrepreneurship education offered in languages other than English. This will take a community effort to support the wide variety of businesses run by immigrants in Cedar Rapids. Jane Boyd’s Empower program, a community-based business accelerator, will update their curriculum for a new cohort focused on immigrant entrepreneurs. The Catherine McAuley Center will also work to expand their existing childcare business development program and explore new microenterprise opportunities.

Future Focus

In addition to these immediate actions we will work towards the creation of multi-cultural business support groups. We will also work with partners from across the state to bring a state-wide resource fair or conference focused on immigrant entrepreneurship to Cedar Rapids.
MOVING FORWARD

The completion of this plan is just the beginning. Now the real work begins. This initiative’s next steps are to disseminate the findings of New American Economy’s research on the economic impact of immigrants and to begin implementing the steps outlined in this plan.

We will schedule a meeting every six months to check in on the progress of the plan as a whole and adjust action steps as needed. This meeting will be in coordination with the Immigrant Concerns Committee managed by the Catherine McAuley Center. The Immigrant Concerns Committee brings together dozens of immigrants and service providers every month and will serve as a general advisory body going forward. Throughout implementation we will continue our outreach to local governments, non-profits, and businesses in the area.

To learn more or to get involved please contact: welcomingcedarrapids@cedar-rapids.org.

The partners listed below are key participants in at least one of the action steps in this plan:
ACKNOWLEDGMENT

THANK YOU!
Hundreds of community members were involved in building this plan, but a few deserve particular recognition.

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