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Immigrants Are Vital to Shenandoah Valley Economy

But lack of health care, language skills present challenges

RICHMOND, VA – One out of every 11 entrepreneurs in the Shenandoah Valley are immigrants, according to new analysis released today by the Commonwealth Institute, an economic research and policy organization based in Richmond. That means there are almost 2,000 foreign-born residents of the region who are operating their own businesses. In addition, 4 out of 5 immigrants in the Valley are in their prime working years between the ages of 18 and 65, while among native-born Virginians, the rate is just 3 out of 5.

“All too often the economic contributions of immigrants are overlooked in the public discussion about policies that affect foreign-born residents,” says Institute President Michael Cassidy. “But this finding is important because it shows immigrants are making significant contributions to the region’s economy, and they’re doing so right now.”

The new analysis was released this morning at a public gathering of immigrant leaders, businesses, and advocates at the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Chamber of Commerce. The event was co-sponsored by the chamber; the Spencer Center for Civic and Global Engagement at Mary Baldwin College; the Virginia Hispanic Chamber of Commerce; New Bridges Immigrant Resource Center; and The Commonwealth Institute.

Among the report’s key findings:

- Immigrants living in the Shenandoah Valley are diverse, coming from a large number of different countries, and most have been in the United States for many years.
- The most common country of origin for immigrants living in the Valley is Mexico, but no country accounts for more than one quarter of the region’s foreign-born residents.
- Half of foreign-born residents of the region have been in the United States for more than 15 years.
- One in three immigrants living in the Shenandoah Valley are U.S. citizens.
But the state’s immigrants also face a number of challenges.

- Almost half of the region’s foreign-born residents do not speak English at least “very well,” according to the analysis.
- While many immigrants in the region are well educated, three out of every 10 immigrant adults in the Valley have less than a high school education.
- What’s more, while almost 90 percent of non-immigrant residents of the region have health insurance, only 62 percent of foreign-born residents have coverage. This problem is particularly acute for non-citizen immigrants in the Valley, who have limited access to public coverage.

“We need to make sure these workers and families are not falling through the cracks,” says Cassidy. “We need to make sure our adult education and workforce development programs are structured in ways that can reach all workers so that everyone has the chance to up their skills and have the opportunity to succeed.”

The full report, *Vital for Prosperity: The facts about immigrants and their contributions to the economy of The Shenandoah Valley*, can be found online at [www.thecommonwealthinstitute.org](http://www.thecommonwealthinstitute.org).

**NOTE:** This is the second of a series of three reports analyzing the economic contributions of immigrants in key regions of the state. The first was released Tuesday, June 2, in Richmond. On June 15, we will release analysis on immigrants in Hampton Roads at a forum at the Oberndorf Central Library in Virginia Beach (info/register here: [http://bit.ly/1HgT4X0](http://bit.ly/1HgT4X0)).

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