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ANALYSIS: Black Immigrants Are Critical Contributors to Virginia's Economy

New report documents the economic role of Virginia's diverse Black immigrant communities and ways that dismantling barriers could help Black immigrants reach their full potential

RICHMOND, VA – Black immigrants work in every major Virginia industry and have high levels of education, according to a new report released today by The Commonwealth Institute, an economic policy research organization based in Richmond.

There are about 113,000 foreign-born Virginians who identify their race as Black or African-American, including over 25,000 who were born in Ethiopia, 12,800 who were born in Ghana, and 9,300 who were born in Jamaica. More than two-thirds of Virginia's Black immigrant workers and their families live in high-cost Northern Virginia, but Black immigrants also make up critical parts of communities in other areas of the state, including the Hampton Roads, Richmond, and Roanoke metro areas.

Black immigrants are particularly important in Virginia's growing health care and social services sector, and nearly three-quarters of all Black immigrant Virginians over age 16 are currently employed.

"More than one-third of Black immigrants over age 24 has a bachelor's degree or higher, a share that is similar to U.S. born Virginians," says Institute Research Director Laura Goren. "However, college-educated Black immigrant Virginians have lower individual incomes than other college-educated Virginians, and as a result few Black immigrant Virginians live in high-income households."

Black immigrants also face barriers around access to health insurance and high housing costs. Almost three in ten Black immigrants live in a household that pays more than 35 percent of their income toward housing costs, which means they are paying a higher share of their income toward housing than most experts consider affordable. And one in five foreign-born Black Virginians has no health insurance, in part because Virginia imposes high barriers to accessing public health coverage, even for legal immigrants.

“Black immigrants living in Virginia are critical to the economic health and vitality of the state,” says Goren. “By looking specifically at the experiences of Black immigrants, we’ve been able to identify some of the key obstacles facing these communities as well as some potential avenues for public policy to help address these barriers. We need to make sure public policy in Virginia is working to help us all succeed, no matter what we look like or where we were born.”

The full report, “A Closer Look: The Contributions of Black Immigrants to Virginia’s Economy”, can be found online at www.thecommonwealthinstitute.org.

NOTE: This analysis builds on prior work by The Commonwealth Institute about all immigrant workers in Virginia. That report can be found at <http://www.thecommonwealthinstitute.org/2017/04/19/virginia-immigrants-in-the-economy/> .

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About The Commonwealth Institute

The Commonwealth Institute for Fiscal Analysis provides credible, independent, and accessible information and analyses of fiscal and economic issues with particular attention to the impacts on low- and moderate income persons. Our products inform fiscal and budget policy debates and contribute to sound decisions that improve the well-being of individuals, communities and Virginia as a whole. Visit www.thecommonwealthinstitute.org for more information.