

October 28, 2019

ABOUT

Virginia Immigrants: Our Neighbors and Partners in Building Thriving Communities

As discussion swirls around the role of immigrants in Virginia communities, especially in the closing days of a highly competitive state election cycle, it's worth remembering that immigrants move to Virginia for many of the same reasons as people born in other areas of the United States — job opportunities, good schools, and thriving communities. It's also worth remembering that our immigrant neighbors help create and maintain those strong businesses, schools, and communities.

Virginia immigrants are diverse, are typically highly educated, and are active in the labor market. The role of immigrants in the workforce is particularly important as family sizes shrink and the baby boomer generation ages, which reduces the share of Virginia's native-born population that is working age. Without more working-age migration into Virginia, today's children and young adults may struggle in the coming years to find care for their aging parents, and tomorrow's entrepreneurs may struggle to find enough people to help their businesses reach their full potential. And this problem isn't far in the future: University of Virginia's Weldon Cooper Center estimates that 18% of Virginia's population will be over age 65 by 2030, compared to 15% in 2018. That change is equal to a 20% growth in the share of the population older than 65.

A recent cross-state review provides a sobering reminder of the consequences of the aging U.S. population for the economy as a whole, finding that a 10% increase in the share of the population age 60 or older reduces economic growth (GDP) by 5.5%. In the face of declining birth rates and an aging population, immigration can and does play an important role in maintaining the size of the working-age labor force and reversing this type of sobering trend--72% of foreign-born Virginians age 16 and older are working or looking for work, compared to just 64% of U.S.-born Virginians. Immigration also "serves an important role in supporting population growth in areas that are experiencing domestic migration losses," according to an April 2019 analysis by The Brookings Institution. This includes the Hampton Roads region, where immigration helped offset people moving out of the area. That can help stabilize local housing and employment markets, and can also help revitalize older main street business districts.

Immigrant Virginians are, of course, important members of local communities across the commonwealth, contributing in ways that include and go beyond the purely economic. And public policymakers could do more to make sure every Virginia family can thrive, including removing barriers that prevent many immigrant Virginians from accessing in-state tuition at public universities and the system of driver's license training and testing.

Foreign-born and U.S.-born Virginians live lives that are woven together in our schools, communities, places of worship, and workplaces. And as the U.S.-born



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population ages, the energy and contributions of immigrant Virginians will only become more critical to building and maintaining thriving communities where everyone can reach their full potential. Let's not forget that we're in this together.

– *Laura Goren, Research Director*

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