IMMIGRANT EMPLOYMENT IN GREATER DUBUQUE

Workforce Challenges in the Face of COVID-19
May 2020

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Executive Summary

This project, undertaken by four MIT graduate students over the early months of 2020 in partnership with the Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque, studies the experiences of immigrant communities in Northeast Iowa and the employers, service providers, officials, and volunteers who help them live better lives in our country of immigrants.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. Assess the needs of immigrant communities in Northeast Iowa and how COVID-19 impacts them.
2. Understand how local employers are connected to immigrant workers
3. Outline strategies to help the Community Foundation, employers, and other community stakeholders build a more inclusive region for the benefit of all residents.

DEMOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

The Northeast Iowa region remains majority white, yet recent Census data suggests that immigrant communities represent a sizable share of the region’s population, particularly in Allamakee, Dubuque, and Clinton Counties. The Guatemalan, other Hispanic and Marshallese communities in particular have a notable presence in the region. The share of immigrant residents is rising in Dubuque as it is across the state: over the past decade, an estimated 40% of Iowa’s population growth has come from immigration.

METHODOLOGY

To conduct our research, we held 29 semi-structured interviews with immigrants, volunteers, public officials, employers, educators, and service providers in Northeast Iowa. We distributed a short survey to businesses in Northeast Iowa to understand their experience with hiring immigrants, their priorities, and the impacts of COVID-19, collecting 25 responses. We supplemented this research with Census data, existing reports on the region, academic literature, current local news stories, and frequent conversations with Foundation staff.

INTERVIEW FINDINGS

Members of immigrant communities face sizable language barriers
Many Hispanic, Guatemalan, and Marshallese immigrants do not speak English as their first language, and some can speak or read very little English at all.

“We speak Ixil at home, but I want my kids to learn English. My youngest is in school here, but his English is still not good.” - Guatemalan resident
Members of the immigrant community feel disconnected from the broader community
A common theme across many of our interviews was a sense that immigrant communities felt disconnected and sometimes unwelcome in Northeast Iowa.

“Dubuquers tend to be uncomfortable when others speak Spanish. The last election cycle worsened things.” - Hispanic resident

Many immigrants struggle with an onerous and strict legal system
The complex and harsh nature of the US immigration system affects the lives of most immigrants in the Greater Dubuque region. Many immigrants do not qualify for federal benefits like unemployment insurance, and family members often have different legal statuses, which increases social and financial instability.

“Students who are waiting for work authorization are often in situations where they technically cannot work, but need money to pay rent. It’s a catch-22 situation and many end up working anyway.” - Service provider

Still, many immigrants express hope
Despite our focus on challenges in the labor market and the COVID-19 pandemic, we heard inspiring stories from immigrants and others, expressing a sense of hope for a better future.

“I’ve enjoyed living in Dubuque. Our kids are here, attending school, and I’m taking a certificate course at Northeast Iowa Community College.” - Marshallese resident

EMPLOYER SURVEY FINDINGS

Surveyed businesses value “essential” skills more than technical or language skills. Nearly all respondents named attributes like honesty, work ethic, the ability to work well with others, and professional communications skills as of “highest value.” Meanwhile, fewer than one in four listed the ability to communicate in English as a high priority, and only about half stated that technical skills were a high priority.
Surveyed businesses tend to hire immigrants through personal relationships and regular application processes, rather than proactive outreach. 59% of businesses reported that they most commonly hired immigrant workers through personal relationships with existing employees. 42% of businesses reported that immigrant workers were commonly hired through regular application processes. Meanwhile, no businesses reported that they primarily hired immigrant workers through proactive outreach on their part, and just one noted that third-party organizations regularly assist with their hiring process for immigrant workers.

Surveyed businesses report uncertainty about how to hire immigrant workers and stated that help with navigating legal and cultural barriers would make them feel more comfortable doing so. Half of businesses surveyed expressed at least some uncertainty about hiring immigrants. As the leader of one large business in the hospitality industry in Dubuque observed: “[We’d feel more comfortable with] administrative support in hiring visa workers. We pursued this a couple times and got stuck in the red tape.” Another business reported that they would value “assistance from local community leaders with recruiting, interviewing, on-boarding, and training, especially if language barriers exist.”

These findings suggest that when job openings are available, opportunities exist to match immigrant workers with employers through targeted outreach and employer-facing services.

**NEEDS ASSESSMENT**

Drawing on our interviews and research, we identified seven categories of services that immigrants in Northeast Iowa rely on. For each, we highlighted local service providers and persistent challenges. The service categories are:

- Education and Information
- Essential Services (Shelter and Food)
- Transportation
- Childcare
- Healthcare
- Employment
- Immigration and Legal Service
RECOMMENDATIONS

COVID-19 and the current economic downturn threatens all residents in the region, but it also reveals the failures of existing economic and social systems to meet the needs of immigrants and other vulnerable residents. Our recommendations offer strategies the Foundation and its partners could pursue to create a more connected, more resilient, and more inclusive region.

❖ **Serve as an aggregator for immigrant support services.**
  - **Short term goal:** the Foundation publishes a list of existing immigrant service providers in the region and facilitates connections to meet COVID-related needs.
  - **Long term goal:** the Foundation funds a new “immigrant services information center” to connect existing service providers, share information, formalize immigrant volunteer networks, and elevate young immigrant leaders.

❖ **Support digital transitions for immigrant families, volunteers, and service providers.**
  - **Short term goal:** the Foundation identifies gaps in digital access among volunteers and immigrant families, matching families with existing resources.
  - **Long term goal:** the Foundation and partner organizations set a goal of universal broadband subscription for families across the region.

❖ **Develop a proactive immigrant employment strategy** in partnership with businesses, workforce and economic development officials, and community leaders.
  - **Short term goal:** the Foundation arranges peer-to-peer conversations between business leaders and uses case studies to elevate local businesses that successfully employ immigrant workers.
  - **Long term goal:** the Foundation and partners build a network of ‘community connectors’ who are trained to understand existing labor market needs and proactively facilitate employment opportunities.

❖ **Shift mindsets of white Dubuque residents about immigrant communities through inclusive messages and outreach.**
  - **Short term goal:** the Foundation continues to signal to donors, funders, grantees, staff, and the broader community that immigrants are essential to the continued vitality of the Dubuque region.
  - **Longer term goal:** the Foundation elevates immigrant stories and facilitates human connections through events, stories, videos, and more.

We also created stand-alone deliverables, designed to be accessible to external audiences, to support the goal of a more connected, resilient, and inclusive Dubuque. These are:

❖ **Immigrant Archetypes:** fictionalized life stories of Mexican, Guatemalan, Marshallese, and other foreign-born residents that are meant to help Dubuquers understand the region’s diverse immigrant communities.

❖ **Employer “How-to” guide:** a guide to help Dubuque area employers hire and successfully employ immigrant workers.

❖ **Bold Leadership toolkit:** a toolkit to help organizations train their staff and affiliates to become better allies for their immigrant neighbors.