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MIDLAND VOICES

Welcoming immigrants to Nebraska is both moral and pragmatic

LAURA ALEXANDER AND CRISTIAN DOÑA-REVECO

With hundreds of families coming to Nebraska from Afghanistan in the last few months, local organizations and communities — many of them religious — have sprung into action to ensure that families have housing, basic needs, and education for children.

Nebraska has long welcomed immigrants, including refugees and asylum-seekers, and religious organizations have led the way. Faith-based groups welcome and care for immigrants because of their moral teachings on welcoming neighbors and valuing all human beings.

But as a new report shows, immigrants also contribute substantially to our state's social and economic life — a win-win proposition for groups who view welcoming newcomers as fundamental to their values. Two of the three organizations that resettle refugees in Nebraska are Christian: Catholic Charities and Lutheran Family Services. These organizations also provide legal services to all immigrants, as well as social services to anyone in need.

Meanwhile, churches, synagogues and mosques across the area have contributed supplies and served as sponsoring communities for individual refugee families.

For example, Citylight Church has arranged for its members to “adopt an apartment” to ensure refugee families have basic needs and a safe place to live, stating on its website, “We want to step into radically loving our neighbors because Jesus radically loved us.”

Beth El Synagogue has sponsored refugee families since 2016 and collects donations for current refugees as well. American Muslim Institute has partnered with the Refugee Empowerment Center to greet and assist people coming from Afghanistan over the last several months.

Religious groups often welcome immigrants and refugees based on the teachings of their scriptures and traditions. Both Jewish and Christian communities point to commands in Leviticus and Deuteronomy to welcome foreigners and sojourners, re-emphasized in prophetic books including Ezekiel and Zechariah.

Christian organizations often cite the book of Matthew in the New Testament, in which Jesus says, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” in praise of those who welcome outsiders. For Muslims, the Koran teaches to do good for strangers and wayfarers, and many Muslims highlight the migration of the earliest Muslim community as an example of why migrants should be treated well.

Many religious people therefore view kindness and hospitality to immigrants as a moral calling, no matter what the outcome. But for Nebraskans, there is also a practical reason to welcome immigrants into the community: Immigrants have kept our population growing and our economy thriving.

The latest available data on immigration in Nebraska from the American Community Survey, analyzed by UNO's Office of Latino and Latin American Studies (OLLAS), showed that immigrants represent 7% of the state's population and almost 10% of the population in Omaha.

While immigrants and refugees in the state come from all over the world, more than half of all immigrants in Nebraska were born in a Latin American or Caribbean country. And the immigrant population in Nebraska grew about 28% from 2010 to 2019, which is more than double the percent growth of immigrants in the United States as a whole.

The most recent report on the economic impact of Latin American immigrants in Nebraska from UNO's OLLAS also shows that immigrants have contributed strongly to the economic growth of the state. In 2019, immigrant employment in Nebraska generated \$22 billion in production and 94,409 jobs.

These immigrants work mainly in construction, food services, and animal slaughtering and processing. In the same year, immigrant employment generated \$7.9 billion in production and 37,271 jobs in the Omaha metro.

Like in most states, immigrants contribute more taxes to the state than they receive in public benefits. Almost 6% of the state's tax from income, sales and gasoline came from immigrants, who use about 5% of the state expenditures on public assistance.

There are times when people must make difficult choices between following moral teachings and acting pragmatically. Our community's response to immigration in Nebraska, however, requires no such choice.

Religious groups provide services and hospitality to immigrants based on their moral convictions. As it turns out, those acts of welcome benefit all Nebraskans, and it would benefit all of us to follow their lead.

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