

The Institute on Immigrant Integration Research and Policy seeks to advance the economic, social, and political integration of foreign-born New Yorkers and to promote responsive policies and practices.

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A Little-Known Success Story

— Scott Fein

As the national debate on immigration reform intensifies and is a key issue facing our federal government leaders, there is a need to dispel some myths and stereotypes which can be done by asking: Do refugees contribute to a community's vitality or are they a drain to communities' safety net and resources? These questions have been raised for years, but their relevance has increased significantly with the recent wave of immigration. Perhaps the answers can best be found by examining the interaction over decades between local communities and their newcomers. For purposes of this brief essay, I have chosen a region familiar to many of us: upstate New York.

The federal government, which determines where resettlement occurs, directed that more than 6 percent of the number of refugees admitted to the US since 2002 be resettled in New York and of that number 95 percent be resettled upstate, more than 50,000 people since 2000.

New York is a cultural and political mosaic: downstate, culturally left of center; upstate, less populated, more conservative, and culturally right of center. Cynics said that introducing thousands of refugees into upstate communities would be a combustible combination. Indeed, they were correct,

combustion followed, but in a form that appeared to release an energy that buoyed these localities.

How did small cities and communities in upstate NY and elsewhere absorb and benefit from the Bhutanese, Bosnians, Guyanese, Jamaicans, Syrians, Iraqis, Somalians, Asians, South and Central Americans? Three New York nonpartisan think tanks collaborated in tackling the question. The Rockefeller Institute of Government, the New York State Bar Association, and the Government Law Center at Albany Law School invited 30 authorities to assemble data and provide perspectives. Drawn from academia, the business community, service organizations, and statisticians, and largely using economic and statistical analysis, their findings were consistent.

Helping offset the demographic and economic decline in New York's up-state communities, refugees pay taxes, rebuild housing stock, open stores, take unfilled jobs. Their contributions are so important, that an increasing number of localities and states are seeking to lure refugees who have settled in other parts of the country. As the contributors to this policy discussion noted, it takes time, support, and patience, but in relatively short order, refugees are helping to rejuvenate upstate communities. The contributors' research embodied in the

book, *Immigration: Key to the Future — The Benefits of Resettlement to Upstate New York* demolishes old myths and replaces them with an array of facts that are compelling, persuasive, and positive, and with suggestions for enhancing resettlement efforts.

But also, the contributors pondered a paradox, the disconnect of refugees as a troubling

national public policy issue and how they are perceived in the communities in which they live. Their collective view is that we take every opportunity to share our local experience with resettlement with federal and state elected officials. Ideally this may serve to help eclipse the harsh rhetoric.

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