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Reducing Brain Waste Among Refugees in Upstate New York

— Rey Koslowski

Physicians, engineers, computer programmers and teachers arrive in upstate New York cities every year as refugees resettled through the United States Refugee Admissions Program, but all too many refugees who came with at least a four-year college degree remain unemployed or underemployed. A 2016 Migration Policy Institute (MPI) [report](#) on such “brain waste” among immigrants in New York State explains that 234,000 (or 27 percent) of New York’s 878,000 recent immigrants with at least a bachelor’s degree were either unemployed or working in jobs that did not require a college degree. The report authors estimated that this brain waste reduced total annual earnings by approximately \$5 billion, with a corresponding loss of \$594 million in unrealized New York state and local tax revenue.

Five upstate New York counties—Erie (Buffalo), Onondaga (Syracuse), Monroe (Rochester), Albany, and Oneida (Utica) received between 80-95 percent annually of the almost 35,000 refugees resettled in New York State from 2010 to 2020. While the population of the 52 counties of upstate New York [decreased by 5,205](#) from 2010 to 2020, the populations of the four upstate counties that received the most resettled refugees (Erie, Onondaga, Monroe, and Albany) increased. If, on average, 87

percent of the [34,965 refugees resettled in New York State](#) from 2010 to 2020 were resettled in Buffalo, Syracuse, Rochester, Albany, and Utica, that 30,420 total exceeds these five cities’ total 2010-2020 [population growth of 25,668](#). Without refugee resettlement, the populations of these upstate cities would not have grown and may have even shrunk.

Brain waste among refugees hobbles efforts to leverage such population growth for upstate New York’s economic development. Brain waste occurs when refugees cannot access English as a Second Language (ESL) courses, especially advanced courses for professionals that emphasize occupation-specific vocabulary in medicine, engineering, computer science, and business management. It happens when a refugee cannot get job search help and career coaching or afford the professional credential evaluations needed to get a first job in his or her field. Brain waste occurs when refugees cannot access additional US professional education and credentials necessary for them to assume professional positions comparable to what they did before fleeing their countries and, thereby, maximize their contributions to economic growth.

As the Business Council of New York State's [Ken Pokalsky](#) put it, "Given the population and job creation challenges facing Upstate New York, the resettlement of refugees in the region could increase the available workforce, providing benefits to employers, refugees, and the overall region" but Pokalsky noted that employers are unaware of refugee hiring opportunities and there are no NYS economic development incentives aimed specifically at refugee workforce development. For example, New York State's Fiscal Year (FY) 2019 budget included a \$175 million [Workforce Development Initiative \(WDI\)](#), subsequently increased to \$350 million, but a keyword search for the word "refugee" of a [WDI database](#) listing of "10,537 projects available" produced two awards for projects totaling \$176,875, which is 0.1 percent of the initial \$175 million for job training projects.

New York state, county, and local policymakers can take several steps to reduce brain waste among refugee professionals, including:

1. Expand the NYS Office for New Americans' [Professional Pathways for High-Skilled Immigrants Program](#) with funding for more job coaches.
2. Provide funding to SUNY and CUNY ESL programs to offer "English for Medical Professionals," "English for Engineers," "English for Business Professionals," etc.
3. Subsidize diploma translation and credential evaluations for refugee professionals.
4. Encourage [Regional Economic Development Councils](#) to raise awareness of refugee hiring opportunities among employers.
5. Help refugee serving organizations apply for existing WDI grants and consider dedicating a separate pool of workforce development funding to assist refugees get the jobs that match their skill sets.

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