

# IDEAS & VOICES

## OUR PROMISE TO YOU

- To provide an open forum of community voices.
- To present balanced views.
- To seek solutions to important regional problems.



CADY LANDA



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**O**ur Community Conversation on immigration will take place at noon Wednesday, April 13, where you can learn about these issues and more with a panel of experts. Panelists include: Cady Landa, Dayton Human Relations Council board member and researcher; Ross McGregor, President and CEO of Pentaflex, Inc.; Jean De Dieu Mukunzi, executive director of Ebenezer Healthcare Access; Swapna Purandare, associate professor at Sinclair Community College; Laura Roesch, CEO of Catholic Social Services; and Niels Winther, managing partner and chairman of the board for Think Patented. The Community Conversation can be watched live on the Dayton Daily News Facebook page. Have questions for our panelists? Submit them to [nick.hrkman@coxinc.com](mailto:nick.hrkman@coxinc.com) or ask them in the comments during the live broadcast.

## IMMIGRATION IN THE MIAMI VALLEY

**I**mmigrants make up nearly 5% of Montgomery County's population, work in key industries and contributed nearly \$1.9 billion to the local GDP, according to a recent report from New American Economy. And following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, Afghan refugees are being resettled here and recently displaced Ukrainian refugees are likely to follow. What are the social and economic effects of immigration? What does the future hold for immigrants and refugees in Dayton and Montgomery County? Hear from two perspectives in today's Ideas & Voices.

### Far from being the problem, immigration should be the solution



**Maha Kashani**  
Guest  
Columnist

I am a first-generation immigrant. A proud one. Led by my father, we left Iran during the war in pursuit of higher education and full of hope for what this land of opportunity could have in store for our family. We arrived in Madison, Wisconsin, and my father – now a professor at the University of Dayton – worked his way toward earning his PhD. Almost 36 years later, we are living the American dream thanks to hard work, determination, perseverance and acceptance. I was accepted in every community that we lived – from Wisconsin to Indiana to Michigan to Ohio – and in every job that I worked, from my first job scooping ice cream at Häagen-Dazs in the Dayton mall to where I am today with IGS Energy.

Growing up as an immigrant, I knew I was different, but always felt that being Middle Eastern made me more distinguished. When we celebrated our New Year – Nowruz, marked by the first day of spring – all my friends thought it was fascinating. Anytime I came back from visiting Iran, everyone wanted to see pictures. When my mom made traditional Persian or Arabic food, all my friends swooned! Sadly, the attitude

towards immigrants has shifted over the years, beginning with the horrific events of 9/11 and hitting its peak under the Trump presidency. Instead of being celebrated for our differences and unique contributions, we felt hostility – especially us immigrants with brown skin. Immigration has become politicized, and immigrants who are in search of a legal path to the American dream have become villainized in the worst way. But why? A few bad apples come in every color and from every corner of the world, so why are we hyper-focused on them?

Instead, can't we focus on the spectacular economic impact of immigrants? According to a study by New American Economy, in 2019 Montgomery County households with immigrant heads earned an eye-popping \$782 million in income. That resulted in significant contributions toward critical services needed in our communities and stimulation of our local economy with almost \$145 million paid in federal taxes and over \$75 million in state and local taxes which left \$562 million in spending power. That same year, foreign-born residents in Montgomery County contributed \$1.9 billion to the county's GDP. That's 6.2% of the total!

And what about the cultural contributions we've made? Organizations like the nonpartisan and nonsectarian Dayton Arab American Forum have hosted dozens of events

over the years to highlight our deep, rich and beautiful Arab food, history and culture to help Daytonians see beyond common misperceptions about the countries we are from or the color of our skin.

While the contributions and impact that legal immigration has made on our culture and economy are indisputable, many still believe immigration is a problem. I believe it is the solution.

Let's consider one of our biggest present day economic challenges, the labor shortage. What if a shift in our immigration policy was the answer? Thousands of determined and resilient individuals are willing to work hard for the opportunity to pursue the American dream of building a safe and secure life for their families. What if they moved into struggling communities, filled these jobs that no one seems to want, pay their taxes, and then use their income to buy or rent vacant properties, spend money at struggling restaurants, and patronize small businesses. We could use their help to stimulate and bring these communities back to life.

You might argue immigration is a problem, but all I see are amazing friends, neighbors and co-workers making America the best place to live, work and play.

Maha Kashani is an energy originator, community advocate and Dayton Flyer residing in Washington Twp., with husband Matthew and toddler Lana.

### Immigrants will help Ohio businesses ride out the very real 'Big Quit'



**Stephanie Keinath**  
Guest  
Columnist

merce, I speak with business owners every day who are finding it almost impossible to fill vacant positions. From frontline jobs to highly skilled and technical positions, it simply isn't possible for many of our 2,200 members to hire and retain the people they need.

That's why the Dayton Area Chamber is working with Ohio Business for Immigration Solutions, a coalition of over 75 businesses, trade groups, chambers and economic development groups from around our state. Since late 2020, we've been working together to advocate for common sense immigration reforms, and to make our communities more welcoming places for immigrant workers and foreign-born entrepreneurs.

The "Big Quit" is making life hard for local businesses. By the end of last year, the Dayton region's unemployment rate had fallen to 3.2%, the lowest it's been since at least 1990. Roughly 200,000 workers across the state have opted out of the workforce, either because they're retiring early or rethinking their career options. And with

up to 40% of Ohio college graduates moving out of state to pursue jobs, we urgently need an infusion of new workers to keep our economy going.

Fortunately, foreign-born workers are still eager to come to communities like ours, contribute to the community and local economy and pursue the American Dream. In the Dayton region, immigrants account for nearly 69% of our total population growth. Though they account for 4.6% of our population, they make up nearly 6% of our working age labor force, according to the American Immigration Council. They also make up 12.7% of our STEM workers, an especially important contribution in Dayton, where so many of our major employers are in the tech, defense and aviation sectors.

And because immigrant workers help businesses stay in our area rather than relocating to places with greater labor resources, it's estimated that they have helped preserve well over 3,500 manufacturing jobs that would otherwise have been lost.

Sustaining those benefits requires action on a range of fronts. We need federal visa and green card reform that would create a more direct pipeline between our region's amazing colleges and universities and our local businesses. The White House's new international STEM worker rules make some

headway here but it's still far too difficult for international graduates to secure long-term employment in Ohio.

That's why we can't sit on our hands and wait for Congress or the White House. We need to take action at the state and local level to support our immigrant neighbors who are preserving and creating jobs and make our communities welcoming places.

At the Dayton Area Chamber, we're doing just that. We help our members navigate the red tape that holds back guest worker and skilled worker visa applications. We help immigrant entrepreneurs to get the licenses and support they need to start businesses and create jobs. And we help talented international students to secure internships, connect with employers, and find work after they graduate.

Of course, we can't fix America's immigration system overnight. But we can – and must – support our new neighbors if we want to keep on growing the economy here in southwest Ohio. Immigrants are a crucial part of the solution to our labor shortages, and it's time for us to come together – as a country, as a state, and as a local community – and do all we can to welcome them to America.

Stephanie Keinath is VP for strategic initiatives at the Dayton Area Chamber of Commerce.