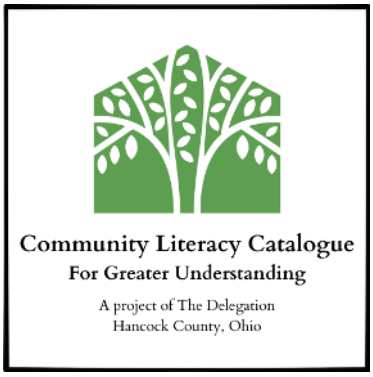

Migrant Employment, Spending, Service Needs Impacting Economy

By Joy Brown

A job posting in September 2024 provided a glimpse of how migrants have come to represent an increasing proportion of Hancock County, Ohio's workforce.

"We are seeking a dedicated and compassionate Community Liaison to support our McComb, Ohio plant location with significant Haitian Creole immigrant populations transitioning to the United States," Hearthside Food Services posted on Indeed.com. "This role is crucial in helping these individuals navigate their new environment by connecting them with essential resources and services."

The creation of this position also indicates a willingness on behalf of this particular company to formally address some of the challenges faced when hiring individuals from other countries who may not speak English, let alone know anything about benefits such as health insurance or paid time off. Hearthside's job post stated the new liaison would report directly to its human resources department.

The lack of employment-related translation and education for migrants coming to this area for jobs has been a longstanding concern among regional services providers, who have voiced their frustrations about migrant hiring practices that have generally lacked workplace and cultural interpretation. Many U.S.-born citizens, they've pointed out, even have difficulty deciphering terms like "co-pay," and "deductible."

But, with regional jobs available—especially physically demanding positions that companies have typically struggled to fill—immigrants from myriad countries have kept arriving in Findlay to work them. Simultaneously, they're also paying taxes, buying goods and services, and paying for housing and utilities.

Regional economic development officials say they have no solid estimates for how many immigrants work at local businesses but know there are many, and that their countries of origin are diverse.

“ROKI has 59 (migrants) from Haiti…” said Dan Sheaffer in November 2024, who until recently had served as president and executive director of the Findlay-Hancock County Economic Development. ROKI America Co., Ltd., is a manufacturing company with a facility in Tall Timbers Industrial Park on the northeast side of Findlay, Ohio, that produces parts for the automotive, marine, and industrial industries. According to a Dec. 1, 2024, story in *The Courier* newspaper, the company now “employs about 134 migrant workers” from various countries.

Some of ROKI’s international workers “have been here for many years,” said Sheaffer, coming not just from Haiti, but from countries such as Taiwan, Laos, and Japan. Other companies, such as appliance manufacturer Whirlpool Corporation and auto parts supplier SumiRico Ohio, Inc. in Bluffton, Ohio, also employ migrants, he said,

Sheaffer said this area began to experience an immigrant influx pre- and post-Covid-19 pandemic when jobs were plentiful. “In the case of ROKI, Hearthside and others, there were simply too many open positions going unfilled locally/regionally,” he explained. “In the case of one company, the open positions were immediately filled, turnover went to zero, and, more importantly, the company saved their business with a very large automotive OEM (original equipment manufacturer).”

In Northwest Ohio, a significant portion of migrants also work in agriculture, cultivating and harvesting crops and raising and processing livestock. Greenhouses in particular employ migrants, said Vibha Bhalla, Ph.D., an associate professor in Bowling Green State University’s Department of Ethnic Studies whose research focuses on immigration-related topics and policies. “Ohio is one of the top five states with nursery businesses,” she said.

“In addition, the emergence of Ohio as a meat production area (in eastern and southern Ohio) is also leading to an increase in migrant workers,” said Bhalla.

While many migrants occupy entry-level jobs, some employers are providing them with advancement opportunities. ROKI is also training several for supervisory positions, Sheaffer added. “A strong work ethic is in place,” he said, a perception that is also held by several others who are working with international newcomers to provide various services and assistance.

By filling jobs, migrants are helping to support the region’s already sound economic growth. Findlay has been named by Site Selection Magazine as the Top Micropolitan in the U.S. for the past 10 years. The publication has characterized the city as “a manufacturing mecca in the Midwest” that has landed “more industrial facility deals than any other small town.”

Not all migrants who work in this region live here; some commute from larger Ohio cities with more available housing, such as Lima and Toledo. But those working locally, regardless of where they live, pay income tax and sales tax and buy food and other items. Within the past few years, international newcomers have had a significant presence on the west side of town, particularly at restaurants, grocery stores, and hotels near Trenton Avenue where some are living. In

McComb, the village police department said Hearthside's migrant workers have been known to cause traffic jams during shift changes.

These employment and spending factors have the attention of government officials and business representatives, but no one has calculated exactly what net effect immigration is having on the local economy.

Even nationally, the reported statistics don't align. Although economists generally concur that migrants contribute net economic gains, some other researchers have claimed that's not the case. The Migration Policy Institute (MPI) refers to this numbers game as "a major source of contention."

Migrants have historically contributed greatly to the U.S. economy. "Immigrants boost overall economic growth by expanding the labor force and increasing consumer spending," MPI reported in October 2024. "The foreign-born also start new businesses at higher rates than U.S.-born individuals. Immigrants were involved in the development of 30 percent of patents in strategic industries in recent years, and more than 40 percent of Fortunate 500 companies were founded by immigrants," it maintained.

"Even unauthorized immigrants who lack work authorization" pay into Medicare and Social Security, the institute states. "On top of sales and property taxes, many work on the books using a fake Social Security number or one belonging to another worker, and as a result pay payroll taxes," says MPI.

Moreover, MPI emphasizes that "immigration has been the major driving force behind U.S. labor force growth over the past 20 years, according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau. Between 2000 and 2022, the foreign-born accounted for nearly three-quarters of all growth in the civilian, prime-age (age 25 to 54) labor force."

"In 2023, the foreign-born accounted for 18.6% of the U.S. labor force," the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics reported.

In a July 2024 report, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) maintained the federal government stands to benefit from the migrant influx. It is estimated that immigration will increase the U.S. GDP by $8.9 trillion within the next decade thanks to a surge in working migrants that started in 2021.

After analyzing government data, the New York Times reported this month that "the immigration surge of the past few years has been the largest in U.S. history, surpassing the great immigration boom of the late 1800s and early 1900s. Annual net migration — the number of people coming to the country minus the number leaving — averaged 2.4 million people from 2021 to 2023, according to the Congressional Budget Office," the article continued. "Total net migration during the Biden administration is likely to exceed eight million people."

“The increase in immigration boosts federal revenues as well as mandatory spending and interest on the debt in CBO’s baseline projections, lowering deficits, on net, by $0.9 trillion over the 2024–2034 period,” the report continued. “Some of the effects on the budget result from the increase in the number of people paying taxes and collecting federal benefits.” Concurrently, $1.2 trillion in federal revenues through 2034 is estimated.

But there may be a catch at the local and state levels. The CBO determined the costs involved with serving this population—including individuals such as children and dependents who don’t work—are more likely to outweigh the revenue that working migrants are generating.

“The effects of the surge in immigration on the budgets of state and local governments differ from those on the federal budget,” the CBO reported. “The research literature has generally found that increases in immigration raise state and local governments’ spending— particularly on education, health care, and housing—more than their revenues. The impact, which depends on the size of the immigrant population and local policy choices about spending and taxation, varies greatly across jurisdictions.”

One way that some immigrants to Hancock County are paying local taxes is through the hotel/motel tax that has been collected for years. Given that several immigrants have been living in Findlay hotels, primarily due to a lack of available and affordable housing, they have been paying this tax.

According to the Hancock County Auditor’s Office, the local hotel/motel tax has seen an increase in collections since the pandemic. It dipped to $1.13 million in 2020, when the early days of the pandemic resulted in lockdowns, and drastically decreased travel and lifestyle recommendations such as social distancing. In 2023, the total reached nearly $1.8 million, a 59% increase since the height of the pandemic. This year through November, collections totaled $1.7 million.

But, while international newcomer hotel stays have been influencing hotel/motel tax collections, so have other factors. “Most of the growth that I have seen has been in the improved properties and their daily rates,” said Auditor Charity Rauschenberg. “In 2023, several hotels were finally reaching their 2019 revenues.”

The CBO added that fluctuations in government representation at all levels will also impact the economy in terms of how much migrants are influencing it. People will change and policies will change, particularly at the federal level in 2025 when a single-party Republican congress and executive branch, featuring elected and appointed officials in favor of mass deportations, take office.