

DELAWARE VALLEY REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION
REGIONAL COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT FORUM HIGHLIGHTS
October 1, 2013

A meeting of DVRPC's Regional Community and Economic Development Forum (RCEDF) was held on October 1, 2013 beginning at 10 a.m. The purpose of the meeting, titled "*The Role of Immigrants in the Regional Economy*," was to explore the many roles immigrants from around the world have in the region's economy.

Patty Elkis, Deputy Planning Director at DVRPC, welcomed the attendees and provided introductions. DVRPC staff members Mary Bell and Christina Arlt presented the Commission's recent data bulletins and data snapshots analyzing demographic data and highlighting foreign-born communities in Greater Philadelphia and the larger 28-county region. Although the Philadelphia Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) ranks last among the nation's ten largest MSAs in percentage of the population who are foreign-born, Greater Philadelphia is home to a diverse population of over 575,000 immigrants. DVRPC's data snapshots highlight several communities with significant immigrant populations, including the City of Philadelphia; Bensalem Township in Bucks County; Upper Darby Township in Delaware County; Lower Merion Township in Montgomery County; Cherry Hill Township in Camden County; and East Windsor Township and the City of Trenton in Mercer County.

Amanda Bergson-Shilcock from the Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians presented a brief overview of the national discussion on immigration. Ms. Bergson-Shilcock focused most of her presentation on three major issues: 1) immigrant entrepreneurship from mom-and-pop shops to technology startups, 2) talent attracted and retention of international students, and 3) re-credentialing of skilled immigrants who were educated abroad. In January 2014, the Welcoming Center plans to release a report on why immigrants are choosing to locate in the Greater Philadelphia region.

Elisabeth Perez-Luna, a journalist and producer for public radio station WHYY, moderated a panel discussion on immigrants and the economy. Nicholas Montalto, a researcher with Diversity Dynamics, LLC, made several comments about foreign-born students and noted that the metropolitan region, with its educational institutions, is attracting people. There is a national effort to give graduates a pathway to naturalization. Dr. Montalto also spoke about refugee communities. Pennsylvania receives the fifth most refugees of the 50 states. Dr. Montalto attributes this to Pennsylvania's, and Philadelphia's, network of nonprofits that help find housing and provide support services. Domenic Vitiello, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, gave a historical perspective on migration (within the country) and immigration. Philadelphia is a low-immigrant region, and since World War II, many people have migrated to Philadelphia, specifically African Americans traveling from the south and Puerto Ricans. Dr. Vitiello also noted that the conditions under which people leave their home country may stay with them in their new homes. Jennifer Rodriguez, the director of the Philadelphia Mayor's Office of Immigrant and Multicultural Affairs, spoke about the new office that was established to welcome immigrants and remove barriers to accessing city services

The panelists answered many questions and touched on a variety of issues. All three panelists discussed the difference between “integration” and “assimilation.” Dr. Montalto summarized recent academic studies that have quantified the economic benefits of immigration. Many immigrants are entrepreneurs. That may signify three things; first, those who are willing to leave their homeland may be especially adventurous and risk-taking. Second, many immigrants are not generally poor and impoverished; they have enough money to travel across the world and establish a new home. Third, immigrants, and possibly the next generation, may have a “diversity advantage;” they may have high cognitive skills and are resourceful.

Dr. Vitiello touched upon the current immigration reform debate. The current U.S. system, while not perfect, places an emphasis on family reunification. Ms. Rodriguez made the observation that many places are becoming homogenous (same stores, restaurants, large cultural attractions), while neighborhoods remain unique and provide authentic experiences – immigrants add to that mix. Dr. Vitiello answered a question about local jurisdictions passing “illegal immigration relief” laws, some of which have been found to be unconstitutional.

There being no additional business, the meeting was adjourned at approximately 12:00 p.m. The next meeting will be held in late January or early February and focus on regional economic development issues.