

Keep Washington Working



2021 annual report from the Keep Washington Working work group pursuant to RCW 43.330.510

OFFICE OF ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT AND
COMPETITVENESS

January 2022

Report to the Legislature

Director Lisa Brown

Acknowledgments

This report is a product of the Keep Washington Working Work Group, established by the Legislature and supported by the Department of Commerce. Recommendations made in this report reflect research and discussions conducted by work group members and partially facilitated by Commerce staff. These recommendations are directed, as appropriate, to the Legislature, state agencies (including Commerce) and other entities involved in advancing workforce development in immigrant and refugee communities in Washington.

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Table of Contents

Executive summary 2

Keep Washington Working recommendations 4

Appendix A: Promising developments..... 8

Executive summary

Report contents

The Keep Washington Working work group members are the authors of this report. All content and recommendations were developed by the work group. Commerce staff provided editorial assistance.

Background

In 2019, the Washington Legislature recognized the important contributions immigrants make to the state's economic vitality. It passed [SB 5497](#) to establish a policy supporting the role of immigrants in the state economy and "ensuring the state of Washington remains a place where the rights and dignity of all residents are maintained and protected in order to Keep Washington Working."

The bill also established the Keep Washington Working work group. Housed at the Department of Commerce, the work group includes representatives from community-based immigrant-serving organizations, labor organizations and businesses in sectors with relatively large immigrant participation.

The Legislature directed the work group to prepare an annual report as follows from RCW [43.330.510](#):

- (a) Develop strategies with private sector businesses, labor, and immigrant advocacy organizations to support current and future industries across the state;
- (b) Conduct research on methods to strengthen career pathways for immigrants and create and enhance partnerships with projected growth industries;
- (c) Support business and agriculture leadership, civic groups, government, and immigrant advocacy organizations in a statewide effort to provide predictability and stability to the workforce in the agriculture industry; and
- (d) Recommend approaches to improve Washington's ability to attract and retain immigrant business owners that provide new business and trade opportunities.

The work group identified critical overarching challenges facing the immigrant and refugee workforce in Washington in its [first report](#) to the Legislature:

Lack of data

Washington lacks accessible data on how its workforce programs and strategies support job seekers, workers, independent contractors and small businesses. Although additional workforce data is essential for designing future proposals, there are obstacles to its collection and disbursement (described below).

Fear of government

Federal policies have created an environment of fear in many immigrant and refugee communities. This discourages immigrants from seeking public supports, including training programs.

Changes in federal immigration policy

The outgoing presidential administration enacted more than 400 separate policies through executive or regulatory action. The vast majority of these policy changes restrict immigration.

Language access

Although Washington has taken important steps toward improving language access, immigrant communities and organizations serving people with limited English proficiency are often unaware of publicly available opportunities due to the lack of accurate and professional interpretation and translated materials.

Fragmented services

Stakeholders have raised concerns over fragmentation across systems. For example, publicly-funded job training programs operate with little to no knowledge of community-based or community college-based adult English learning programs. Fragmentation creates additional challenges for immigrant and refugee job seekers navigating these systems, especially in rural and under-served communities.

Overview

The Keep Washington Working work group focused on three themes in its second year:

1. Further exploring workforce development, small business development and non-traditional work in Washington's immigrant and refugee communities. These were among the key themes that emerged in the first report.
2. Considering potential implications of federal legislation on Washington's immigrants, their employers and the state.
3. Reviewing recent best practices, accomplishments and developments with respect to the goals of the work group.

Recommendations

This report makes six recommendations to the Legislature:

- Establish an interagency work group to serve as a hub for immigrant integration and workforce strategies
- Expand the [Welcome Back Washington Initiative](#), which is currently focused on the Puget Sound region
- Require workforce development agencies to develop immigrant workforce strategies
- Disaggregate workforce and economic data by race, ethnicity and immigration status
- Ensure language access to workforce development and small business services
- Establish new [Business Innovation Partnership Zones](#) in Eastern Washington

These recommendations reflect the experience and recommendations of work group members, presentations to the work group by key thought leaders in immigrant integration and workforce development, and data on recently enacted laws gathered by work group members and Department of Commerce staff. In addition, they build on findings from the first report.

Keep Washington Working recommendations

The potential for billions of dollars in federal funding for workforce programs in Washington, stemming from recently enacted and prospective economic and pandemic recovery and infrastructure legislation, also create new opportunities to resource the efforts described in this report.

The Keep Washington Working work group strongly urges Washington to ensure that federal and state funds are invested in building community capacity, including in immigrant-serving organizations rooted in immigrant communities. For example, if the federal reconciliation package passes with a legalization program, there will be significant demand for access to information on eligibility for conditional work permits and worker access to employment, health and other related programs. Washington has community groups better suited for conducting this outreach than state agencies.

Address fragmentation of immigrant services

Fragmentation of services continues to be a major barrier for immigrants and refugees seeking employment and pursuing educational credentials in Washington. The challenges of fragmentation are further exacerbated by limits in expertise, cultural competence or knowledge among state agencies. Addressing the unique challenges facing immigrant and refugee community members requires a system-wide shift in state strategy to better tailor services to strengthen workforce participation. State agencies can also help communities adapt to often-dynamic and volatile federal policies facing immigrant and refugee communities.

Coordination across agencies and stakeholders is possible, if there is a clear mandate. An excellent example is the developing effort to respond to the resettlement of Afghanistan refugees and allies. This effort is coordinated by the Office of the Governor and the Office of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance in the Department of Social and Health Services. Though the resettlement situation for refugees remains in flux, rapid response by the state has built initial infrastructure, including multi-agency and multi-sector working groups, to address key issues like housing, legal services and employment to prepare for refugee resettlement. As of the end of 2021, more than 1,500 Afghan refugees have arrived in Washington since October, with hundreds more anticipated. This has put significant stress on Washington's refugee resettlement and social service capacity, which were depleted during years of disinvestment by the federal government.

Coordination should be further supported and institutionalized, particularly since there are additional policy shifts anticipated at the federal level that will affect immigrant and refugee communities in Washington. For example, the U.S. House of Representatives passed [a major bill](#) that could grant protection from deportation, work permits and permission to travel to undocumented immigrants who have lived in the United States for more than 10 years. While prospects for enactment in the U.S. Senate have dimmed due to parliamentary procedures and overall disagreement over the total funding level of the reconciliation package, these federal developments underscore the importance for the state to be prepared for multiple scenarios.

The proposal passed by the U.S. House of Representatives would directly affect 150,000 residents and their families in Washington state, according to [recently-released analysis from the Migration Policy Center](#). Based on the significant effort required to prepare for the resettlement of 1,000 to 3,500 Afghan refugees and allies, the state must act now to prepare for an entirely new scale of operation.

Interagency work group for immigrant services

Based on current and prospective federal shifts regarding immigration, we recommend the Legislature create an interagency work group to coordinate services performed for immigrants. This new workgroup is intended to be in addition to the Keep Washington Working work group, and would serve as a complimentary hub for planning and coordinating on immigrant workforce development strategies across state government.

Key activities of the proposed work group include:

- Coordinate with the Keep Washington Working work group to bring recommendations to the governor and Legislature with respect to legalization and related workforce and social service strategies to support undocumented immigrants impacted by federal legislation.
- Conduct a census of immigrant and refugee workforce and support programs in state government, and coordinate immigrant and refugee workforce strategies among key agencies. This should include, but not be limited to, the Economic Security Department, the Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges, and the Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board.
- Coordinate workforce, education, apprenticeship and related wrap-around service strategies to support immigrants and refugees in Washington.
- Expand work-based learning, apprenticeship and subsidized employment opportunities to support immigrants and refugees and allow job seekers and English learners to earn while they learn.
- Establish immigrant and refugee liaisons in key agencies and boards, including the Office of the Governor, the Office of Equity, the Washington State Community and Technical College Board, the Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board, and the departments of Commerce, Social and Health Services, Employment Security, Labor and Industries, and Licensing.
- Contract with national experts in immigrant integration and workforce development. Potential contractors include World Education Service, the National Skills Coalition and the National Fund for Workforce Solutions.
- Coordinate with the Keep Washington Working work group to bring together public and private sector and non-profit partners to advance a shared interagency strategy.

Further recommendations for the Department of Commerce:

- Continue the Keep Washington Working work group and provide it with a budget to assist with staffing, research and related needs so it can effectively partner with the other structures recommended in this section.
- Adjust the mandate of the work group and provide resources to further explore how Washington government can better support workers in industry sectors with large and growing immigrant populations. This includes developing, piloting and implementing high-road partnerships to improve job quality such as career pathways, improved wages and benefits, and improved retention, as well as on-the-job training supports such as language access and learning opportunities.
- Expand the scope of the Governor's Industry Sector Leads to include how sectors are addressing the needs of immigrant and refugee entrepreneurs and workers, including business training, financing, recruitment, retention and development of career pathways.
- Create a sector lead for agriculture technology in the Department of Commerce. This sector lead would guide the state's response to the impact of new technologies on the agricultural sector and its workforce, including strategies to retrain agricultural and immigrant workers so they can meet demands for new skills, move into more senior roles and/or become farmers, orchardists and owners themselves.

Expand the Welcome Back Washington Initiative

There is great urgency in addressing the employment, educational and workforce development needs of immigrants and refugees who come to Washington with work experience and educational credentials that are not acknowledged in the United States.

The [Office of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance](#) (ORIA) and the [Welcome Back Center](#) at Highline College in Des Moines are important, though relatively small, structures in Washington for coordinating services for this growing population of residents. However, there are limited, if any, resources available to these populations in communities outside of the south Puget Sound region. Fortunately, ORIA and the Welcome Back Center can serve as a critical hub to build a statewide Welcome Back Initiative in Washington.

The work group recommends that the Legislature increase funding for the Puget Sound Welcome Back Center housed at Highline College. Funding will support new positions in order to:

- Work with the interagency work group proposed in the previous section to support policy development to encourage the employment of immigrants and refugees in their chosen professions and connect immigrants and refugees to employment opportunities in sectors in need of qualified workers. These policy areas include state and regional workforce system development, college credentialing programs, and reforms to expand access to industry licensing for qualified residents.
- Provide technical assistance to community colleges to establish Welcome Back centers across the state.
- Serve as business liaisons to establish collaborations, including but not limited to the development of apprenticeships and employment opportunities for skilled immigrants and refugees with employers, including sectors facing staffing shortages, such as healthcare and state government.

Require workforce development agencies to develop immigrant workforce strategies

Build on a [recent directive of the governor](#) to strengthen workforce supports in immigrant and refugee communities. Specifically, Washington state should clarify that fulfilling the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act requirement to serve English language learners requires reporting on how agencies address barriers facing limited English proficient, immigrant and refugee populations.

The Washington State Training and Education Coordinating Board should compile this information for the proposed interagency work group to better inform statewide and regional strategy on immigrant integration and workforce activities. The summary should include current information on regional workforce strategies, including how they plan to:

- Incorporate language access into existing and planned services
- Serve under-employed residents with professional skills and credentials from their home countries
- Improve English language learning and literacy in immigrant and refugee communities
- Ensure that immigrants and refugees can access pre-apprenticeship, apprenticeship, internship and other training opportunities

Establish new Business Innovation Partnership Zones in Eastern Washington

The Department of Commerce currently manages the Business Innovation Partnership Zone (IPZ) program in Washington. However, of the 10 current IPZs, only two are in Eastern Washington (Wenatchee and the Tri-Cities).

Commerce should work with relevant associate development organizations (ADOs) to establish new zones in Washington in counties with high agricultural employment and high immigrant populations. These IPZs should focus on providing equitable access to the agricultural technology manufacturing jobs of the future.

The Department of Commerce should partner with the recommended agricultural technology sector lead and the Workforce Innovation sector lead to ensure that the mandates within SHB 1170 are executed across the state and include special emphasis sectors that employ large numbers of immigrants.

Disaggregate workforce and economic data by race, ethnicity and immigration status

Provide funding to the proposed interagency work group to recommend how to:

- Gather and analyze labor market data disaggregated by race, ethnicity, immigration status, nation of origin and English language proficiency
- Assess the impact of federal and state workforce development funding streams on Washington residents, disaggregated by race, ethnicity, immigration status, nation of origin and English language proficiency
- Better anticipate future demand on state-funded services and resources by forecasting immigration into Washington, disaggregated by language, nation of origin and immigration status¹

Ensure language access to workforce development and small business services

Adopt a budget proviso requiring the State's Office of Financial Management develop recommendations for the codification of the governor's [COVID-19 Language Access Plan](#) in Washington's workforce and social service agencies, including but not limited to the departments of Commerce, Social and Health Services, and Employment Security. This effort should be coordinated with the proposed interagency work group.

¹ The most recent estimate of limited English proficiency provided by OFM dates back to 2016.

Appendix A: Promising developments

The Work Group also encountered a number of promising developments in the field of immigrant workforce development over the past two years, despite the impact of the pandemic. This section highlights some of these promising programs and practices.

The Small Business Resiliency Network

The Department of Commerce Small Business Resiliency Network builds on a trusted messenger model to provide critical small business development support to small businesses, including immigrant, refugee and minority-owned businesses across Washington. As Commerce continues to expand this model, the Keep Washington Working work group encourages Commerce to explore how the program can be tailored to meet the needs of non-traditional workers (such as independent contractors and self-employed people) as addressed in the 2020 report to the Legislature.

The Agricultural Leadership Program

Over half of all agriculture workers are immigrants. Investing in their training and development is essential. The Agricultural Leadership Program (ALP) is a comprehensive training program designed for supervisors in the agricultural industry. The program, now being piloted in Yakima County, was created to enhance the management skills of orchard operators by providing them with the knowledge and tools to effectively manage resources, safety and regulations. The course is specifically designed for the Washington tree fruit industry and is offered in English and Spanish. Participants will graduate after completing a 12 month plan and passing a final exam. They will receive a Tree Fruit Supervisor Certificate from WSU, WSTFA and WSDA.

- Agricultural Leadership Program: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2sZmCCKEB7o>
- Programa de Liderazgo Agrícola: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QGZIIYDu7Lg>

Cultivating Success Washington

[Cultivating Success Washington](#) provides educational programs to create more sustainable small farmers and ranchers in Washington, and to create more success for those who already exist. Additional funding should be allocated to expand outreach into Central Washington immigrant populations, with the goal of assisting agricultural workers to become owners, operators, orchardists and farmers.

Career Connect Tech

Career Connect Tech (CCT) focuses on serving students furthest from opportunity, including historically underrepresented populations. The development of a CCT Academy will leverage the assets of communities including industry partners, higher education and public instruction by rallying those institutions around a common goal and proven model. The program needs additional support to increase outreach and partnership opportunities in rural Eastern Washington school districts.

2021 state legislation

The work group also acknowledges important opportunities created by the state Legislature in 2021, including:

- Enactment of [HB 1168](#), the Wildfire Response, Forest Restoration, and Community Resilience Act, which funds a new workforce strategy to support the development of career pathways in forestry and land management in Washington that may be particularly valuable for immigrant populations in rural areas.
- Enactment of [HB 1129](#) to open up licensing and residency opportunities for internationally trained medical graduates who have been excluded from their chosen professions in the United States. Their inclusion creates new opportunities to better address staff shortages in health care while providing better, culturally competent services in Washington's immigrant and refugee communities.