

A salute to New Americans

[Joe Nathanson](#)//June 27, 2024//



Even as participants gathered at Morgan State University on May 31 for the 14th Baltimore Immigration Summit to learn about and celebrate the role of immigrants in our community, there was a cloud over the proceedings.

The tragic collapse of the Francis Scott Key bridge just two months earlier was most keenly felt by Baltimore's immigrant community. The six lives lost were all men who had migrated to Maryland. They were Alejandro and Carlos both from Mexico; Miguel Angel, originally from El Salvador, who had lived here for nearly 20 years; Maynor Yassir, was from Honduras, but also here for almost two decades; Dorlian Ronial and Jose were both from Guatemala, Jose being another long-term resident of Maryland. All were taking on a dangerous task in repairing the bridge deck so that the rest of us could benefit from their work.

The summit offered an opportunity to consider the various roles taken by members of immigrant communities and the challenges they face, particularly new arrivals. One of the first sessions I attended highlighted the contributions made by immigrants to Baltimore County. The New Americans Task Force, commissioned by County Executive Johnny Olszewski, Jr., released its report, "Welcoming and Belonging Strategic Plan" this April. In his opening note, the county executive writes, "We're proud to welcome new residents from around the world who are eager to share their values, build new connections, and use their talents to make our county safer, stronger, and more prosperous."

Baltimore County was reported to have 103,700 immigrants (12.5% of the county population) and has become the new home for those coming from these regions: Mexico, Central America and Caribbean (21.6% of county immigrants); India and Southwest Asia (19.4%); West Africa (12.2%); East Asia (9.3%); and Southeast Asia (7.3%).

And they contributed to the local economy in so many ways. Registered nurses accounted for the largest group of the county's immigrant workforce (5.2%). Other occupations registering at least 2% included cashiers, janitors and building cleaners, physicians, managers, retail salespersons, accountants, teachers, and personal care aides. They are also entrepreneurs, most prominently in the area of professional services.

The task force report also documented the challenges immigrants face, particularly newcomers. They include access to health care, housing, education, transportation, and for the newest arrivals, opportunities to gain English language proficiency is critical. Beyond the availability of these services, there is a need to close the gaps in information that will actually enable people to avail themselves of the services.

After the morning breakouts, all participants gathered for the luncheon program. There were about 250 in attendance, according to Beth Clifford, a sociology professor at Towson University and a key organizer of this event and several of the earlier immigration summits. In the plenary session, both Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott and Maryland Comptroller Brooke Lierman were featured speakers.

The mayor recognized the many individuals responsible for making the event possible, including service workers operating behind the scenes, and he also paid tribute to those lost in the bridge disaster.

In her remarks, Lierman cited the new report released by her office, “State of the Economy Series: Immigration and the Economy, April 2024.” And she emphasized some key points, most notably, “International migration is driving Maryland’s population growth. Put another way, but for international immigration our state would be shrinking.”

These immigrants are coming from all regions of the globe. Based on data compiled by the state’s Department of Legislative Services, they have come from Latin America (39.6% of Maryland’s immigrants), Asia (33%), Africa (15.6%), and Europe (10.3%).

Immigrants buoy our economy. As of 2023 immigrants represented 21% of Maryland’s workforce. In comparing the industries in which the immigrant labor force participated, they tracked very closely with those of the U.S.-born labor force, with two exceptions: construction, where immigrants were twice as likely to be employed, and public service, where immigrants are less likely to be found, probably due to language fluency.

As we consider the role of New Americans in our community, it is worth heeding these words of the comptroller’s report:

“The national discourse on immigration centers on unauthorized border crossings, but the vast majority of immigrants enter the United States legally under visas or another lawful noncitizen status. Immigrants from around the world come to the U.S. in search of more opportunity for themselves and their families – to improve their health, safety, economic state, and overall well-being. They contribute to Maryland’s economy as workers, entrepreneurs, consumers, and taxpayers. They strengthen the workforce and communities as biotech engineers, nurses, teachers, crab pickers, and much more.”

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