State Efforts to Help Immigrants Integrate

BY ISHANEE CHANDA

“Every American who has ever lived, with the exception of one group, was either an immigrant himself or a descendant of immigrant.” These words, spoken by a young John F. Kennedy in 1958, refer to America’s founding as a nation of immigrants. Immigrants have historically integrated themselves by helping to strengthen the economic, social and civic backbone of civil society. However, controversy has always surrounded the issue, and policymakers continue to debate the advantages and disadvantages of U.S. immigration policy.

On average, about 1 million immigrants arrive in the U.S. each year, and state legislators have been notable innovators in helping them integrate. They have passed laws to help immigrants learn English through public education systems, remove barriers to professional licenses, navigate the naturalization process, and learn American norms and values.

Did You Know?

• An estimated 40 percent of all Americans have an ancestor who arrived in the United States through Ellis Island.
• The six American 2016 Nobel Prize winners in the areas of chemistry, physics and economics are all immigrants.
• The 41 million immigrants in the United States represent 13.1 percent of the U.S. population. Nearly half have become naturalized citizens.
A study from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine in 2015 found that the level of education, occupation, English ability and income all improved as immigrants and their descendants integrated into American life. While immigrants appear to be learning English at the same rate or faster than earlier immigrants, the U.S. education system may not be equipped to handle the nearly 5 million English language learners (9 percent of all students) in K-12 education.

**State Action**
State laws designed to help immigrants integrate into society include helping them pass naturalization tests and learn English, removing barriers to licensing for certain occupations, and creating integration positions or task forces.

- **Naturalization.** State legislators have crafted laws to support civic education classes to improve eligible immigrants’ chances of passing the naturalization test and earning citizenship. At least fifteen states—Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Idaho, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Dakota, South Carolina, Tennessee, Utah and West Virginia—have added portions of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services naturalization exam to high school civics curricula or testing requirements.

- **English Language Learning and Biliteracy.** At least 27 states have also passed legislation funding immigrant integration programs that teach English or advance biliteracy. Iowa’s Education Funding and Operations law, passed in 2017, includes funds to provide services including English and integration assistance to refugees. Washington state passed bipartisan legislation establishing the K-12 dual language grant program in the state’s public and state-tribal schools. The law is designed to help students whose first language is not English achieve proficiency in both English and their native language. These programs allow immigrants to integrate into their local communities at a quicker pace.

- **Licensing.** A common problem for foreign-born residents in the United States is their inability to practice their profession due to credentialing or licensing barriers. According to the Migration Policy Institute, nearly 2 million college-educated immigrants and refugees are unable to use their professional skills despite having the foreign training and education to do so. Recent research shows that forgone annual earnings among underemployed college-educated immigrants amounted to $39 billion nationally, leading to approximately $10 billion in unrealized tax revenues. In recent years, states have acted to reduce licensing barriers. A Louisiana law authorizes the Physical Therapy Board to license foreign graduates and military-trained applicants to practice physical therapy. Similarly, Wyoming passed a law, Occupation of Nursing, declaring that those who graduated from a foreign institution and have received a certificate from a board-approved national certifying organization may receive a one-time temporary permit to practice.

- **State Task Forces and Offices.** The California Legislature recently passed a law creating the position of director of immigrant integration in the governor’s office to coordinate immigrant services and monitor the implementation of immigration assistance programs. Rhode Island directed a Senate task force to study evaluating and certifying foreign-trained professionals. An Illinois resolution directed the Bilingual Advisory Task Force to investigate professional certification standards for foreign-language educational interpreters and help immigrant parents be more involved in their children’s education.

**Federal Action**
A number of congressional bills related to immigration are pending. They cover a host of categories, ranging from extending protection for unauthorized immigrant children to ending protection for temporary protected status, as well as tightening entry requirements for both legal and temporary immigrants. While immigration policy is primarily a federal responsibility, the lack of congressional direction has left the states to deal with a host of issues related to immigration, including integration.

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**The Requirements**
Legal immigrants must meet these requirements to become a naturalized U.S. citizen:
- Be at least 18 years of age
- Have been a permanent resident for at least five years
- Pay an application fee of $725
- Pass a federal test on U.S. history and government
- Read, write and speak English
- Be a person of good moral character.