



The Office of Immigrant  
and Refugee Affairs

# Regional Partnerships

for Immigrant Integration  
and Workforce Development  
in the City of Seattle  
and King County

**Executive Summary  
and Recommendations**



**Prepared for the City of Seattle,  
Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs (OIRA)**

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# MESSAGE FROM OIRA

In 2012, following advocacy from leaders of various community organizations representing Seattle's diverse immigrant communities, the Seattle City Council established the Mayor's Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs (OIRA). Over the past decade, OIRA has been instrumental in supporting key city policy development and public investments. This includes providing essential programs and services such as pathways to citizenship, English language acquisition, education access, legal services, workforce development programs, social capital, and cash assistance distribution for Seattle-based immigrant and refugee residents.

Aligned with the City of Seattle's commitment to racial and social justice, OIRA collaborates closely with the Mayor's Office, City Council, other city departments, and key stakeholders. Together, we engage in immigration policy development, community outreach, resource coordination, research and analysis, and public awareness and outreach efforts.

OIRA is steadfast in its commitment to recognizing and leveraging the substantial contributions of our diverse populations. These contributions extend beyond cultural and economic realms, playing a pivotal role in driving innovation and fostering growth. The recent New American Economy report underscored this significance, revealing that immigrants in the Seattle Metropolitan Area contributed \$12.7 billion in taxes in 2019, with 51,452 immigrant entrepreneurs thriving during the same period.

Despite global transitions into a post-pandemic landscape, challenges persist, particularly for immigrants, refugees, and migrants. These communities, integral to the fabric of our city, encounter unique barriers in accessing the labor market, ranging from language obstacles to credential recognition and legal complexities. Discrimination based on ethnicity, race, or immigration status further compounds their employment prospects.

In response to these realities, OIRA initiated the *Regional Partnerships for Immigrant Integration and Workforce Development in the City of Seattle and King County* report. This comprehensive initiative aims to pinpoint and address these challenges head-on, crafting tailored strategies to enhance our support programs, policies, and engagement efforts specifically for immigrants, refugees, and migrants.

This initiative aims to deepen our collective understanding of immigration in our region and offer actionable ways for Seattle, employers, neighboring cities, King County, workforce agencies, education stakeholders, labor unions, and community organizations to collaborate in partnership. The goal is to improve workforce conditions and enhance economic stability for all residents, regardless of their immigrant or U.S.-born status. Immigrants and refugees bring unique skills, experiences, and perspectives that drive innovation, fill essential roles, and contribute to economic growth.

We trust this report will serve as a valuable educational and practical resource, supporting your crucial work. Together, we can ensure that all immigrant and refugee communities not only survive but thrive. I eagerly anticipate ongoing dialogue with you in the coming weeks and months.

**Hamdi Mohamed, Director**

City of Seattle Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The City of Seattle Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs (“OIRA”) commissioned this report to deepen our collective understanding of immigration in our region and offer ways that the City of Seattle and neighboring cities, King County, workforce agencies and education stakeholders, labor unions, employers, and community organizations can work together in solidarity to improve the workforce conditions and economic stability of all our residents – immigrant and native born alike.

## What is Immigrant Integration?

The process of “immigrant integration” in our nation is a permanent feature of American life and an ongoing driver of economic development and social progress. The ongoing movement of immigrants and refugees into our region continues to accelerate population and economic growth; enrich our neighborhoods, culture, and civic institutions in new ways; and create and regenerate greater ethnic, racial, and religious diversification. King County’s immigrants and refugees are both newcomers and long-time residents and live in every community in King County. Answering the call of persistent labor market demand, immigrant workers and professionals work in and earn income at all levels of wages and salaries in a range of essential occupations in every industry and sector in our regional economy. Immigrant small businesses owners play a vital role in cities and towns across King County boosting our regional economy as entrepreneurs, innovators, and job creators.

Immigrant integration unfolds as an ongoing cross-generational process in which immigrant individuals and groups become engaged in the social, political, and economic life of their new communities while maintaining and expressing their varied and multi-faceted identities. Outmoded notions of integration as assimilation in a “melting pot” are giving way to a more modern, nuanced understanding that accounts for the expression of both individual and group identities while recognizing the diversity and differences within and across immigrant groups and various groups of US-born residents.

## Role of Workforce Development in Improving Workforce Conditions of Immigrants and Refugees

While the City of Seattle, King County, Washington State, and their workforce stakeholders have made significant progress in recent years in supporting immigrant integration, our findings indicate that much more can be done in our region to increase the positive impact of these efforts in the arena of workforce and economic development.

We conducted interviews and discussions with over forty workforce development leaders from labor unions, community organizations, government and workforce agencies, educational institutions, research entities, immigrant organizations, and workforce training and apprenticeship providers. These interviews and discussions helped us to better understand, document, and identify gaps in programs and services in our workforce and education systems and to highlight the best practices within our workforce systems that are expanding access and pathways to quality jobs and improving the quality of existing jobs. The report proposes a regional strategy and recommendations for how OIRA can partner with policy makers, other City of Seattle departments, King County government, neighboring cities, and community, labor, and workforce



stakeholders to leverage public investments, programs, and services to measurably improve workforce conditions of immigrant and refugee job seekers, workers, and professionals. OIRA can play a unique role in partnership with the key institutional players profiled in this report to support workforce development, employment, education, and training program and service models that work in advancing the process of immigrant integration.

This scope of this report extends beyond the boundaries of the City of Seattle (the ‘county seat’) to include all of King County’s immigrants and refugees. Nearly 75% of the 541,000 immigrants and refugees residing in King County live outside of the City of Seattle.<sup>1</sup> We live and work in a highly integrated regional economy and workforce and the problems highlighted throughout this report require regional strategies, approaches, and leadership. We assessed the economic, social, and workforce conditions of immigrants and refugees in the City of Seattle, King County, and Washington State utilizing economic and social measures such as cost of living, wages, income, educational attainment, unemployment and under-employment, poverty and income insufficiency, and language proficiency. Our findings indicate that overall Washington’s residents who were born in another country are doing better in our state and county – across a range of measures compared to their counterparts in most other states. This positive outcome is a result of several political and economic factors including city, regional, and state-level public policies including:

- A vibrant and integrated regional economy with strong international inter-connections and thriving high-wage, high-skill sectors, and employers.
- The large-scale integration and representation of immigrants and refugees in the regional workforce in a range of occupations and in political and civic life.
- Progressive city, regional, and state-wide public policies supporting immigrants and refugees in the process of integration.
- Strong networks of public agencies, labor unions, and community organizations providing essential human and workforce services and advocacy for immigrant job seekers, workers, and professionals.
- High levels of unionization, worker advocacy, and enforced labor standards that protect worker rights and benefits under state, county, and municipal law.
- Legal protections in municipal and state laws protecting the constitutional rights of immigrant residents.

*Despite these progressive measures in Washington state, in the continuing absence of comprehensive federal immigration reform ongoing efforts at the municipal and state-level to advance integration will be hampered by Congress's failure to create safe and legal pathways to citizenship and expand capacity for refugee resettlement, and other related reforms. Conflicting political visions of which groups should be granted pathways to U.S. citizenship leaves unresolved the plight of deserving asylum seekers and millions of unauthorized low wage workers in sectors such as personal services, construction, agriculture, food services and processing, hospitality, and building and maintenance services.*

## **Advancing Workforce Equity, Economic Stability and Job Quality for All**

Immigrants and refugees have increased their representation in a range of occupations in our regional workforce and play a vital role in the production and distribution of goods and services and wealth creation in our economy and communities. Our region remains one of the wealthiest and most immigrant-friendly in the United States. But such comparisons to other states have their limitations and only tell part of the immigrant integration story in the City of Seattle and King County. When we looked closer into the actual workforce and social conditions of specific immigrant, racial, and gender groups, including native born residents, a different story emerges – one of persistent structural inequities.

We focused on the representation of various groups of immigrants and refugees in occupations across industry sectors in proportion to their representation in the general population. Our research then identified the occupations in which immigrant workers are either under-represented or over-represented as well as those in which they have achieved relative occupational parity. While making gains into middle-wage and high-wage jobs, specific groups of immigrants, people of color, women, and residents of all backgrounds living in economically distressed communities, disproportionately remain congregated in clusters of low-wage, low-quality jobs.

Certain groups of immigrants and refugees in the workforce continue to face a variety of social and institutional barriers that slow and undermine their full integration into our communities and workforce. These obstacles include financial and language barriers; lack of access to immigrant-specific career and employment services; explicit and implicit bias in educational institutions and employer hiring practices; limited access to professional networks and social capital; professional licensure restrictions; and ineffective program models for beginning English Language Learners. The recommendations of this report suggest that OIRA, the City of Seattle, other municipalities, King County, and workforce stakeholders collaborate to design and implement a regional “occupation by occupation” strategy to measurably increase the representation of immigrants in good, quality jobs in targeted occupations in which they are currently underrepresented.



## The Big Picture

While focusing on the workforce and social conditions of immigrants and refugees, our report also calls out the deep racial and gender disparities in our workforce and the income inadequacy among our U.S.-born residents living in economically distressed communities. Decades of political and economic policies and forces have reshaped a global and a regional economy that reproduces great wealth and a permanent class of working families – including U.S.-born and immigrants - who live in conditions of constant economic instability resulting from a long list of problems. These include rising living costs (such as childcare, food, housing, health insurance); deeply regressive state and local taxation; income and wage inadequacy; a lack of quality jobs in the labor market; constricted social mobility; medical, student, and household debt; suburban poverty; and under-funded public education. While policymakers cannot solve many of these persistent problems in our region without a larger transformation of federal economic and labor market policies, there is still much more work to be done at the state and regional level that can improve the workforce and social conditions of all our region's working families as our recommendations suggest.

As we face the many challenges confronting our region including housing affordability and homelessness; policing and crime; public health and safety; and transportation and infrastructure; we should also prioritize our region's commitment to workforce equity and racial and social justice and renew our belief in and commitment to welcoming immigrants and refugees in our communities. Such an outcome will require persistent advocacy and solidarity between community organizations, labor unions, workforce and immigrant stakeholders, and visionary leadership from policymakers.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## **1 OIRA Convene Regional and Statewide Stakeholders to Present Findings of *Regional Partnerships for Immigrant Integration and Workforce Development in the City of Seattle and King County Report***

OIRA disseminate this report and host an Immigrant and Refugee Summit with key stakeholders: public sector agencies, community and labor organizations, joint labor-management and apprenticeship programs, other King County municipalities, and other entities to present the findings of the *Regional Partnerships for Immigrant Integration and Workforce Development in the City of Seattle and King County Report*:

- Facilitate an open discussion about the intersection of immigrant integration and workforce development in our region to cultivate a shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities, foster connections, share knowledge and insight, and identify shared policy goals.
- Partner with Office of Economic Development (OED) to host an internal meeting of all City of Seattle departments that provide workforce development investments and/or programs to present the findings of the *Regional Partnerships for Immigrant Integration and Workforce Development in the City of Seattle and King County Report* and to align the cities' workforce efforts with immigrant and refugee workforce issues.
- Partner with the King County Office of Equity, Racial, and Social Justice (ERSJ) to provide coordination and support to King County departments and other municipal government entities within King County.
- Work with key workforce stakeholders to discuss the research and findings of the *Regional Partnerships for Immigrant Integration and Workforce Development in the City of Seattle and King County Report* through presentations and dialogue, supporting the use of the report as a professional development tool and resource for organizations providing programs and services for immigrant and refugees.



## **2 OIRA Support Efforts to Improve the Management, Coordination, and Alignment of City of Seattle and King County Workforce Investments Including the WDC, Port of Seattle and Sound Transit**

OIRA work with the Mayor's office, the OED, King County, the Port of Seattle, Sound Transit, and the Workforce Development Council (WDC) to improve the management, coordination, and alignment of workforce investments (funders), programs, and services at various levels of our workforce ecosystem:

- Explore with the Mayor's office the feasibility of creating new workforce development positions within the Mayor's Office and King County Executive's office to provide leadership and convening authority in the coordination of City and County workforce efforts, maximizing the return on public investments in this arena.
- Work with the WDC and the State Workforce Board's staff and leadership to complete a useful and comprehensive stakeholder map of organizations engaged in immigrant and refugee services.
- Work with both agencies to revise the State Workforce Board's current annual matrix of programs to include services for immigrant and refugee job seekers.
- Advocate for the expansion of WDC's Economic Security for All Program funded by Washington State Department of Commerce.
- Gather data and development metrics to measure equity outcomes – including disaggregated data and metrics meaningful to immigrant and refugee populations – that can be applied to workforce programs across the region.

## **3 OIRA Provide Immigrant and Refugee Services and Programs Throughout King County**

OIRA work with the City of Seattle and King County to provide expanded workforce programs and services to immigrant and refugee residents throughout King County:

- Create an agreement between the city and county to pool resources, expertise, and infrastructure to provide a more comprehensive regional approach to immigrant and refugee programs and services through extending OIRA's reach beyond Seattle's borders to ensure that immigrants and refugees across the entire region have equitable access to vital resources.
- Develop partnerships with other cities in King County to expand programs and services to immigrant and refugees. Prioritize the cities of Kent, Renton, Tukwila, Burien, Federal Way, and White Center (unincorporated King County).
- Collaborate and partner with the WDC and the Office of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance (ORIA) to set regional strategies to support immigrants and refugees, including investing and scaling workforce development models that create bridges to vocational training and paid work-based learning opportunities.



#### **4 OIRA Support and Serve as a Resource to Other City Departments and County Agencies Engaged In Workforce Development, Programs, and Services**

OIRA serve as a resource to other City departments in their strategic planning, outreach, and partnership building with immigrant and refugee organizations through:

- Prioritize work with the Office of Economic Development (OED); Financial and Administrative Services (FAS) Labor Equity/Priority Hire Program, the Department of Neighborhoods Intergenerational Wealth Initiative, and the Office of Labor Standards (OLS).

OIRA prioritize support in the following areas of work with The Labor Equity Team by:

- Collaborating with the City of Seattle's Priority Hire Program to support their efforts in apprenticeship.
- Exploring with the Labor Equity Team the feasibility of a "Bridge Program into Pre-Apprenticeship" in the construction trades. Such a program would adequately prepare building trades oriented qualified candidates to meet the admissions requirements and enroll in and complete pre-apprenticeship programs successfully.
- Working with the Labor Equity Team to support the efforts and work of the Regional Pre-Apprenticeship Collaborative (RPAC) to grow and strengthen systems and structures to establish a sustainable pathway into and through family-wage construction careers.
- Supporting the development of new, non-construction apprenticeship programs with large concentrations of immigrant and refugee workers such as the emerging Teamsters Local 174 pre-apprenticeship program for union trucking jobs across multiple industries.

#### **5 OIRA Continue and Expand the Ready to Work (RTW) Program and Support the Expansion of Best Practice English Language Acquisition Programs**

OIRA replicate and expand the Ready to Work Program and other English Language Programs (Vocational ESL) with King County, community, labor, and workforce partners to identify opportunities in areas of Seattle and King County that are underserved by these effective models:

- Present findings and recommendations of *Regional Partnerships for Immigrant Integration and Workforce Development in the City of Seattle and King County Report* to the State Board of Community and Technical Board proposing a joint demonstration project to expand the number and locations of Vocational-ESL programs in regional colleges and communities through partnerships with providers such as Literacy Source.
- Continue to fund and operate the existing Ready to Work Program in partnership with the City of Seattle's Human Services Department (HSD) and contracted partners as this model has demonstrated its success in serving English Language Learners and job seekers, through quality job placement, improving English language skills, and offering ongoing career development and continuing education.
- Formally endorse English Language Acquisition programs that include best practices: hybrid, contextual language learning, iterative and engaging pedagogy, and wrap-around work readiness and placement services.



## **6 OIRA Support Expanded Employment Pathways and Licensing Reform for Underemployed Immigrant and Refugee Professionals In Healthcare and STEM Fields**

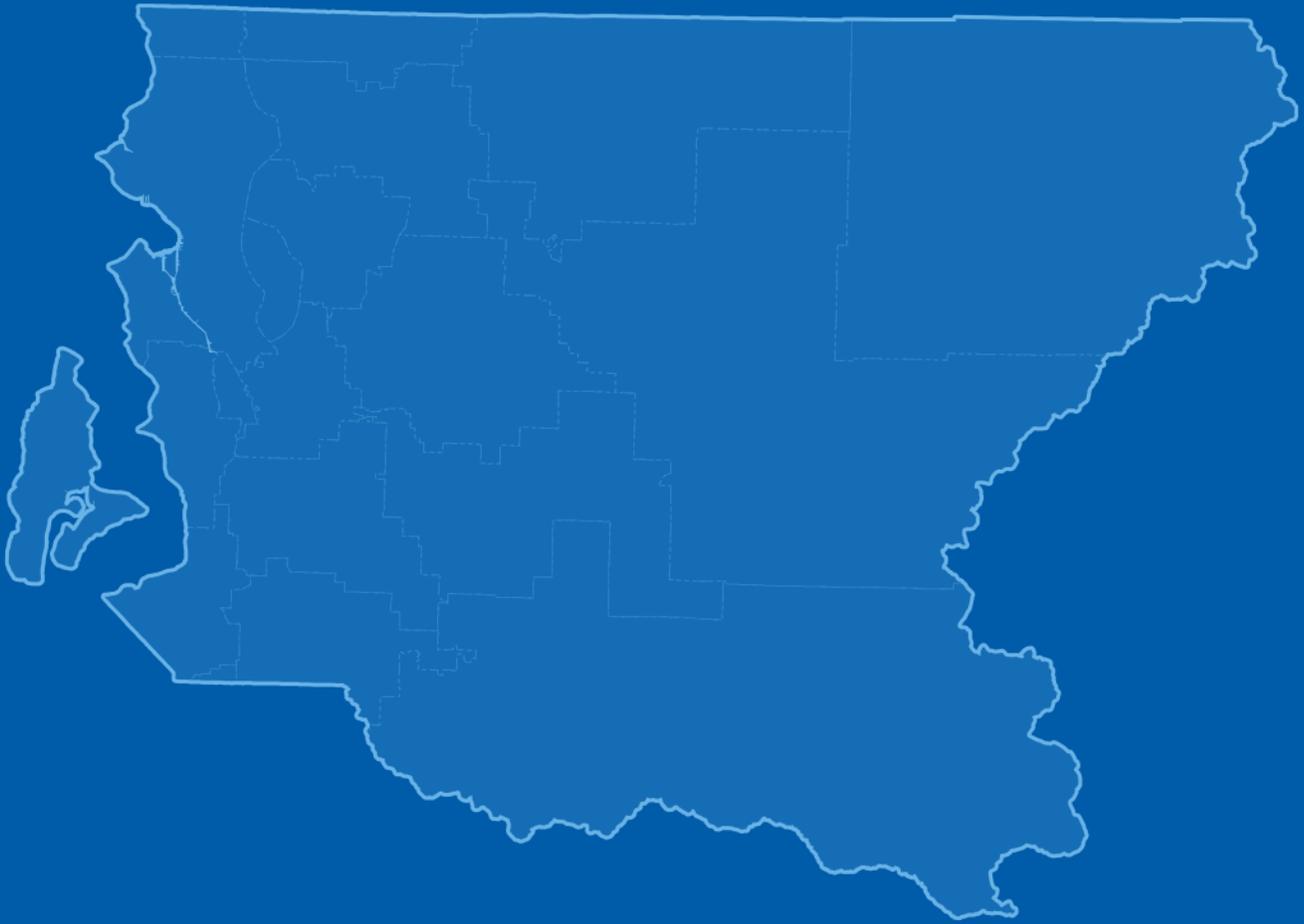
OIRA assist in the expansion of pathways to careers for immigrants and refugees with backgrounds in STEM and healthcare by:

- Reviving previous efforts of OIRA, the Welcome Back Center, and the Seattle Human Resources Department, to create a paid internship program focused on creating pathways into STEM and other professions within the City Departments to measurably increase the proportion of new hires who are multi-lingual, immigrant community members.
- Developing a strategy and plan with key community and employer partners to expand pathways to specific IT occupations in which specific groups living in economically distressed communities are under-represented.
- Utilizing the WDC's extensive experience with work-based learning models, braided funding mechanisms, and its existing partnership with Seattle IT and regional employers to effectively scale up paid internships within City Departments, ensuring a robust and sustainable pathway for immigrant and refugee residents to access meaningful employment opportunities.

## **7 OIRA Establish an Annual Immigrant Workforce Development Policy Agenda In Alignment with Broader Department-Wide Priorities and Goals**

- Coordinate with key stakeholders, such as OneAmerica, the WDC, Tri-County Refugee Planning Committee, and other advocacy entities to develop an annual list of policy priorities at the city, county, and state level that support improvements to workforce conditions for immigrants and refugees in consultation with community stakeholders.





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