

# Welcoming Fort Wayne Plan

Release Date: January 23, 2024





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*In Fort Wayne and Allen County, we are passionately crafting an economy that's not only innovative and high growth but also deeply inclusive. We proudly acknowledge the vital contributions of immigrants and refugees. They are central to our community's economic success and cultural richness.*

*Our engagement in the 2023 Gateways for Growth (G4G) Challenge is a key step towards empowering our leaders with enhanced resources and insights. This is crucial in shaping an equitable approach to economic development, one that truly embodies the spirit of Hoosier Hospitality. We aim to create a welcoming environment where every member, regardless of their background, is integral to our collective growth and prosperity.*

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**Ellen Cutter**

*Chief Economic Development Officer  
Greater Fort Wayne Inc.*

# Our Community

Fort Wayne / Allen County is one of the fastest-growing metro areas in the Greater Lakes region. According to the U.S. Census Bureau data released in 2022, Fort Wayne / Allen County's growth rate was more than twice the national rate. While our community has netted positive domestic migration numbers for the past six years, there is still much to be learned about the growing foreign-born population resettling in Fort Wayne / Allen County.

Through the data gathered since 2019, we now know 24% of the total population growth is attributable to immigrants who made the decision to make Fort Wayne / Allen County home. More than 80% of immigrants in the county have resided in the U.S. for more than five years. Immigrants play a critical role in Fort Wayne / Allen County's economic growth contributing considerable amounts of support to the manufacturing, construction and hospitality industries. They are generating millions of dollars as entrepreneurs, and they are contributing \$99.1 million to federal taxes and \$61.8 million in state and local taxes.

Foreign-born residents choose to raise children in Fort Wayne / Allen County. In 2019, 14.3% of K-12 students were immigrants or the children of immigrants. Fort Wayne Community Schools reported 3,600 English Language Learning Students were enrolled during the 2022-2023 school year.

Immigrants and refugees and the generations to follow make a choice every day to invest into our community. Through the review of data and working with community leaders, it is evident that more must be done to ensure New Americans in Fort Wayne / Allen County have equitable access and opportunities in all sectors of life. After many months of research and conversations, this Welcoming Plan is a direct response to what we can do as a community to create a more welcoming city for all residents. Our goal is to work with stakeholders to implement and execute the recommendations and strategies in this plan.

## Gateways for Growth (G4G) Core Committee Members



**Ewelina Connolly**  
*CEO*  
Amani Family Services



**Keiara Carr**  
*Director of  
Mission Advancement*  
Amani Family Services



**Michael Galbraith**  
*President & CEO*  
Downtown Fort Wayne



**Frank Howard**  
*Director of Operations  
& COO*  
Downtown Fort Wayne



**Ellen Cutter**  
*Chief Economic  
Development Officer*  
Greater Fort Wayne Inc.

## Steering Committee

The dedicated partners of the Gateways for Growth Steering Committee provided perspective and guidance through the development of the Greater Fort Wayne Welcoming Plan. We are deeply grateful to the following organizations and individuals for their participation in the process and contributions to the plan

- JoAnne Alvarez**, Ivy Tech Community College
- Flora Barron**, Restaurateur
- Farah Combs**, Purdue Fort Wayne
- Stephanie Crandall**, City of Fort Wayne
- Meg Distler**, St. Joseph Community Health Foundation
- Tabitha Ervin**, YMCA of Greater Fort Wayne
- Nikeshia Fomby**, Summit City Entrepreneur & Enterprise District
- Stéphane Frijia**, Northeast Indiana
- Megan Grable**, City of Fort Wayne
- Alison Gerardot**, Community Foundation of Greater Fort Wayne
- Dr. Sarah GiaQuinta**, Parkview Health
- Patti Hays**, AWS Foundation
- Herb Hernandez**, Hispanic Chamber of Commerce
- Cpt. Kevin Hunter**, City of Fort Wayne
- Emily Keirns**, Fort Wayne Community Schools
- Jennifer Mabee**, East Allen Community Schools
- Ermina Mustedanagic**, Wellspring Interfaith Social Services
- So Min Oo**, Kroger
- Rosalina Perez**, Northeast Indiana Innovation Collective
- Nelson Peters**, Allen County Commissioners
- Nikki Quintana**, Fort Wayne Metro Human Relations Commission
- Schvalla Rivera**, United Front Fort Wayne
- Rena Shown**, Turnstone
- Sarah Strimmenos**, Foellinger Foundation
- Evan Wood**, Fort Wayne Metals

# The Process

On November 4, 2022, the American Immigration Council and Welcoming America announced Fort Wayne, Indiana was one of 10 communities who received a Gateways for Growth (G4G) Research, Technical Assistance, and Matching Grant award as part of the fifth cohort of the initiative. Launched in 2016, Gateways for Growth is a competitive opportunity for localities to improve immigrant inclusion in their communities.

In September 2023, The Community Foundation of Greater Fort Wayne granted Amani Family Services over \$200,000 for the next two years to strengthen the Welcoming Fort Wayne initiative. The grant was made possible through Community Foundation Funds and Donor Funds, specifically the Richard D. Waterfield Charitable Fund and the Richard Dallas & Marni McKinney Waterfield Charitable Fund.

Funding received from Gateways for Growth and the St. Joseph Community Health Foundation, allowed the Fort Wayne / Allen County Core Team (Amani Family Services, Downtown Fort Wayne and Greater Fort Wayne) to work with national and local consultants throughout the year.

The Core Team convened a Steering Committee of local leaders to help create a robust plan of action. The Steering Committee engaged in a facilitated discussion over six sessions focused on the identification of the strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and desired results for the Fort Wayne / Allen County community. This Welcoming Plan is the culmination of that collaborative process.

***Together, we can create a more welcoming Fort Wayne / Allen County.***

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*Downtown Fort Wayne is honored to be a part of the 2023 G4G Challenge that is helping to mold the future of not only our thriving Downtown, but all of Fort Wayne, Allen County and Northeast Indiana. As the vibrant, urban core of our region, Downtown has for generations represented an arena of business opportunity, a venue welcoming new ventures, ideas, and residents. As we welcome each wave of immigrants into our community, they form a growing part of the identity of Fort Wayne going forward, shaping our language, politics, business, culture, cuisine, faith and spirit.*

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**Michael Galbraith**  
*President & Chief Executive Officer*  
Downtown Fort Wayne

# Fort Wayne / Allen County: Mission, Tactics and Priority Areas



*Collaborate with civic and community leaders to design an actionable plan to decrease social, cultural, and economic barriers and maximize the potential of all Fort Wayne / Allen County residents.*

## **Objectives**

1. Demonstrate the cultural, social, and economic importance of the immigrant and refugee community to Fort Wayne / Allen County.
2. Inspire the creation of a welcoming, engaging, and equitable community for immigrants and refugees.
3. Align interests of the immigrant and refugee community with civic leadership.

## **Priority Areas**

1. Connected Communities and Public Safety
2. Civic Engagement
3. Economic Development
4. Education

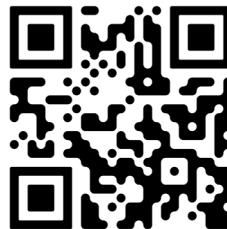
# The Data

Over the past year, the Welcoming Fort Wayne / Allen County Core Team worked with both national and local research experts to gather the latest impact data on immigrants and refugees living and working in Fort Wayne / Allen County.

A team of technical advisors were provided through the American Immigration Council. This team used more than 60 different data points to create the “New Americans in Allen County” report. This research brief illustrates the impact of foreign-born individuals on our economy, population growth, and future workforce development.

To amplify local voices, the Core Team created a Community Input Survey in June 2023. Over a two-month period, nearly 800 respondents from the general public took the survey which was available in English, Burmese and Spanish. The Core Team released both data reports during the annual Welcoming Week celebration in September 2023, which included a public information session on the reports.

*[Download and view the full reports here.](#)*



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*It will come as no surprise that I learned a lot working with some great local educators who were part of the G4G Steering Committee on the importance of making learning opportunities accessible for everyone.*

*I was encouraged to learn that frequently when families join us from other parts of the world, the importance that we as a community place on education encourages students and their parents/guardians to place increasingly greater value on education and its role in their future. Please help us attain a better tomorrow by investing meaningfully in our shared today.*

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**Frank Howard**

*Director of Operations &  
Chief Operating Officer  
Downtown Fort Wayne*

# Welcoming Plan: Goal, Strategies and Recommendations

## Connected Communities & Public Safety:

Build trust and relationships between newcomers and long-term residents.

### Goal:

Fort Wayne / Allen County is a place that purposefully creates, supports, and promotes opportunities for all residents to build trusted relationships with each other.

**Recommendation:** Fort Wayne / Allen County will provide clear access to inclusive resources.

### Strategy:

- Create Mayor's Advisory Council for immigrants and refugees. This will be a group of cultural minority leaders and community stakeholders who provide the City with recommendations to support the international community.
- Engage with the local social sector ecosystem to develop or level up current initiatives, programs, and communication platforms focused on advocacy, cultural competency, and belonging.
- Create an asset map to identify current organizations, programs, initiatives, and community champions serving immigrants and refugees in Fort Wayne / Allen County with the purpose of knowledge and resource sharing.

**Recommendation:** The Fort Wayne / Allen County governments will provide and support meaningful language access.

### Strategy:

- Access language needs in Fort Wayne / Allen County among government services.
- Implement proposed or existing language access plans.
- Include emergency services and response plans in all language access programs.



Only **35%**  
of U.S.-born survey  
respondents  
find Fort Wayne  
welcoming.

# Welcoming Plan: Goal, Strategies and Recommendations



In 2019, Immigrants are **32.3%** more likely to be of working age than their U.S. counterparts, allowing them to actively participate in the labor force and contribute to the economy as taxpayers and consumers.

## Economic Development & Entrepreneurship:

All residents can participate fully in the economy.

### Goal:

The Fort Wayne / Allen County area will work to ensure all residents are able to participate in the economy and will leverage new and existing talent.

**Recommendation:** Enhance workforce development and legal strategies.

**Strategy:** Ensure the regional workforce development efforts include the needs of the immigrant and refugee workforce.

- Create a job skills assessment for refugees/immigrants in their native language.
- Offer multilingual workshops, both virtually and in person.
- Establish a hub location with a list of organizations that offer interview and resume development services.

**Strategy:** Identify national best practice solutions that help provide legal assistance to workers and businesses.

- Seek philanthropic and grant support for implementation in Fort Wayne / Allen County.

**Strategy:** Provide informational resources for businesses hiring refugees and immigrants.

- Create a pilot training program for employers to offer ELL within job positions.
- Leverage resources from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, American Immigration Council, and partners.

**Recommendation:** Support the high rates of entrepreneurship among Fort Wayne / Allen County's immigrant residents.

**Strategy:** Provide multilingual entrepreneur mentors/coaches for entrepreneurs and small business owners.

- Engage key organizations in strategic discussion about programming.
- Develop a list of immigrant business owners and create a survey for these owners to understand their needs.
- Identify areas/resources to help businesses to grow and develop.



# Welcoming Plan: Goal, Strategies and Recommendations

## Civic Engagement:

Ensure all residents can participate in civic life.

### Goal:

Fort Wayne / Allen County seeks out and supports new and existing community leaders.

**Recommendation:** Increase the presence of immigrant and refugee civic leaders.

**Strategy:** Develop a civic leadership and mentoring program for immigrants and refugees.

- Incentivize participation of immigrants and refugees.
- Create accessible pathways to participation for immigrants and refugees.

**Recommendation:** Ensure that civic and government services are both known and accessible to all residents.

**Strategy:** Equitably engage all City neighborhoods and quadrants.

- Identify individuals who can serve as cultural brokers and interpreters within the community.
- Recognize and empower existing cultural leaders.
- Identify, support, and recognize the power of community third places.

**Recommendation:** Naturalization programs properly resourced and accessible.

**Strategy:** Increase access to citizenship opportunities and promote and celebrate public naturalization ceremonies.

**Recommendation:** Increase access to voting for all citizens.

**Strategy:** Provide education opportunities to immigrants and refugees who are U.S. citizens on eligibility to vote, the voting process, and voter guides.



**33%** of  
**non-U.S. survey  
respondents are  
interested in  
training to become a  
community leader.**

# Welcoming Plan: Goal, Strategies and Recommendations



**The greatest obstacle to learning English as an additional language was time according to 17.86% of respondents who replied they do not have the time in the community survey. Another 31% said classes were at inconvenient times (16.07%) or not available (15.18%). Nearly 11% chose the response that “all of the above” were the greatest obstacle to learning English.**

## Education:

Ensure all students have the support they need to thrive in school and the knowledge they need to succeed in the workforce.

### Goal:

Provide continuity of education, incentivize learning, and assure access for refugee, immigrant, and multilingual learners (Pre-K to Adulthood).

**Recommendation:** Create an asset map of early childhood to post-secondary educational resources.

### Strategies:

- Identify leaders and decision-makers to support the advancement of immigrants and refugees in education.
- Establish a council to create an asset map, advocate for inclusion, and share information with their constituencies.

**Recommendation:** Make early childhood education more accessible.

**Strategy:** Identify and understand the transportation needs of families in accessing early childhood education.

- Connect with other childcare and education providers to create a plan to distribute information about access and transportation.
- Create a process for informal and formal information sharing to educate parents of early learners.

**Recommendation:** Increase access for informal and formal education of immigrant and refugee adult learners.

**Strategy:** Identify and understand education and learning needs for adult learners in the immigrant and refugee community.

- Connect immigrant and refugee adult learners with economic development resources to identify and pursue employment opportunities.

# Additional Considerations – Next Steps

## **Welcoming Fort Wayne / Allen County and Welcoming City Certification**

Through the implementation of the Welcoming Plan, Fort Wayne / Allen County will naturally address many barriers required to satisfy Welcoming America's Welcoming Standard. The certification process provides Fort Wayne/ Allen County with the unique potential to be Indiana's first Certified Welcoming City.

*Certified Welcoming* is a formal designation for cities and counties that have created policies and programs reflecting their values and commitment to immigrant inclusion. This innovative program assesses city and county governments on their efforts to include and welcome immigrants in all areas of civic, social, and economic life in their communities.

Local governments are required to be the lead applicant, but community partners are crucial to accomplishing the process which can take six months to a year to achieve certification. What we value more than being "first" is feeling secure that we have a plan of action to create more equity in our community based on a national standard of excellence.

Welcoming Fort Wayne / Allen County initiative is committed to continue to care for our multicultural community by:

- Identifying issues of common interest and concern for all residents, ensuring racially and culturally diverse residents are included.
- Hosting events to invite residents into spaces they are not familiar with.
- Creating opportunities for organizations to partner with diverse residents.
- Uplifting diverse communities during Welcoming Week and the Welcoming Fort Wayne Awards in September.

*Learn more about the Welcoming Standard and Certified Welcoming here.*



# Acknowledgements



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*“Welcoming” begins as an attitude and an intention to invite newcomers into local communities, but it takes sustainable collective effort to ensure that such attitudes and intentions develop into actions, policies, and networks that make welcoming possible at the community level. To that end, Amani has embarked on a yearlong project to organize a committee of local champions and stakeholders across industries to identify current challenges and barriers our immigrant community faces and develop a welcoming plan based on a nationally recognized blueprint. – The Welcoming Standard*

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**Ewelina Connolly**

*Chief Executive Officer, Amani Family Services*



**For more information, visit**  
**[AmaniFamilyServices.org](http://AmaniFamilyServices.org)**

## Consulting Teams:

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