

Berkshire Immigration Center assists with citizenship and integration processes

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In the Berkshires, one place stands as a symbol of hope to immigrants looking for help in legalizing their statuses in the United States: The Berkshire Immigrant Center (BIC). Located in Pittsfield, the BIC helps people with the immigration process, from completing citizenship paperwork to integrating them into the community. Now, immigrants in the region need it more than ever.

Since President Trump took office a year and a half ago, the climate around immigration has become tense. A rise in hate crimes, many of them against immigrants, has been reported. President Trump has also announced plans to repeal the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy, which permits young immigrants brought illegally into the country to stay and study or work without fear of deportation.

In Berkshire County, the BIC reports, immigrants are mostly welcomed, and immigration stands as an opportunity to revitalize the region. According to a 2016 U.S. Census Bureau estimate, 22.2 percent of Berkshire County's population is over 65-years-old. With an aging population and a declining fertility rate, immigration is the main form of socioeconomic rejuvenation in the region.

On a state level, according to research from the American Immigration Council, one in seven Massachusetts residents is an immigrant, and immigrants represent 12.2 percent of Massachusetts' registered voters and 17.9 percent of its workforce. Most importantly, immigrants play an active part in the community of the Berkshires. In fact, the BIC found that immigrants own 40 percent of the storefront shops on Main St. in Pittsfield.

Sonal Vyas, an immigrant from Gujarat, India, is one of the many residents in the

Berkshire area who has received aid from the BIC. She came to the U.S. to find better work opportunities, and the BIC helped her obtain citizenship status for her whole family. Now, she is the proud co-owner of the Cozy Corner Motel in Williamstown.

"They really helped my entire family," Vyas said of the BIC. Her father came to the United States in 1992. After bouncing from job to job in motels and shops in different states, he finally settled in the Berkshires, where he was immediately drawn to a sense of safety. After first living in North Adams, the family settled in Williamstown to open several local motels and a convenience store, the Quechee Mobile Mart in Vermont.

Like that of many immigrants, Vyas' journey to the United States was not easy. Her father spent all of his savings on a lawyer for her to be able to immigrate legally.

At one point, she felt she would not be able to join her family. "People back home told me to just marry someone and forget about America," she said. Her hardship came from an immigration law stating that children of immigrants can only join their parents in the U.S. if they are less than 21 years of age. Vyas was three months shy of her 21st birthday when she applied for her visa. That was her last chance to be reunited with her family.

When Vyas finally had the opportunity to enter the United States, she enrolled at Berkshire Community College. She graduated in 2014 with a liberal arts degree. She first heard about the BIC at college, and she asked them for help getting her parents citizenship. The BIC not only obtained citizenship for both her parents, but it also arranged for the rest of her family to join them.

The BIC, founded by the Jewish Federation of the Berkshires, was created in

1997. It aimed to help Berkshire County immigrants become American citizens by assisting them with complicated paperwork. Since then, the BIC has increased its size, means and goals. It now also focuses on helping immigrants adjust to their new lives in America by providing economic, psychological and social support.

The BIC integrates newly arrived immigrants into the community and connects them with needed services, such as medical assistance and job placement. "We are a one-stop shop," Hilary Greene, the BIC's former director, said. The BIC does not receive any federal money, relying heavily on grants and private donations.

In 2017, Brooke Mead replaced Greene as the BIC's director. The BIC, which now has two full-time caseworkers, two coordinators and an office manager, is focusing on development and sustainability. "We have come a long way," Mead said, explaining that, even though such progress is encouraging, there is still a lot to be done given the current political climate.

"I do not have time to sit back and be horrified," Mead, who has been working to find more funding for the BIC, said. "This is not who we are as [a] county." Since the election of Donald Trump, private donations from concerned citizens have increased, demonstrating a form of solidarity ingrained in citizens of the Berkshires. Although she is very grateful for this show of support, Mead worries that it might only be a temporary reaction to the current climate. "I wonder," she said, "how long before people start taking it for granted?"

Nevertheless, the BIC will continue to recognize the importance of immigrant contributions to the community and assist people as they work toward citizenship. *l*