

Testimony of Peter Gonzales, President and CEO Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians

Urban Affairs and Housing Committee

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Good morning, Senator Argall, Senator Brewster, and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak here today.

My name is Peter Gonzales, and I am the President and CEO of the Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians. We are a nonprofit economic development organization, founded by an Irish immigrant in 2003.

Our focus is helping municipalities and regions to strengthen their economies through small business development and workforce services. The ultimate goal is to achieve economic vitality that draws on the full talents of the community.

Grounding Our Work in Data

The Welcoming Center is a data-driven organization. Our founder, Anne O’Callaghan, was a physical therapist by training. She drew on her professional expertise to establish the process we still use today:

- Evaluate the situation
- Develop a plan
- Know that improvement will be incremental
- Use benchmarks to gauge progress

We begin by gathering empirical data about the community and business landscape where we are working, including on-the-ground information about existing businesses, municipal requirements, and barriers that entrepreneurs or jobseekers may face. We also draw on external research and studies that identify promising practices.

My testimony today will outline three of the many tools we use to carry out our work. These practical, straightforward resources can be used by municipal governments, chambers of commerce, and business associations in any community.

Economic and Workforce Development Tools That Work: Select Examples

Untangling Municipal Red Tape

Our “**How to Start a Business**” guides provide a roadmap to help aspiring entrepreneurs meet municipal requirements for business licensing, health department inspections, zoning, and more.

These publications are issued in English -- so they are freely available to immigrant and American-born business owners alike.

Reaching Business Owners Where They Are

The Welcoming Center uses inexpensive automated software to send a monthly 2-minute phone announcement to small business owners who have subscribed to our free service.

These "Opportunity Calls" contain short listings of 4-5 upcoming events and resources offered by government and nonprofit agencies. The calls are made in six languages, including English.

Career Guides for Skilled Immigrants

The Welcoming Center also works with legally present, work-authorized immigrant jobseekers. Many of the people we work with were doctors, engineers, or accountants in their home countries, but today are driving taxis or washing dishes, hoping to return to their professional careers.

They need practical information about how they can transfer their international credentials here and become licensed to practice in the United States. Our Career Guides and in-person consultations help these ambitious newcomers to chart realistic career paths.

How We Work: Building on Existing Investments

It's easy to list challenges such as vacant storefronts, litter, crime, and declining population. But we actually look at things differently. We look at the *investments* people are already making in those communities, and ask how we can help them build those investments to the next level.

I realize that this can sound a little abstract, so I'd like to share two stories with you.

Along one commercial corridor where we work is a business called Butcher Block Meats. The owner, Mike Toppi, is a longtime member of the community who was born and raised in our city.

His family business is an enduring landmark. Indeed, stores like Butcher Block help to anchor and stabilize neighborhoods by maintaining strong connections with their customers and fellow merchants over many years.

Like most businesses, Butcher Block runs on a tight margin. When they needed to upgrade their refrigerated display cases last year, we helped Mike to obtain a grant from a small foundation called The Merchants Fund. Without that crucial funding information, his store would have been on the hook for thousands of dollars in additional costs.

Here's another example, located in the same neighborhood. This business owner comes from halfway around the world, in Liberia, West Africa.

His name is Ben Hassan Bakayoko. His small retail store sells everything from food products to phone cards to beauty supplies.

Hassan's store had strong customer demand for specialized food items from West Africa, but he did not have the capital and technical knowledge he needed to import those items.

We connected him with our partner nonprofit FINANTA. They gave him a loan to finance his first shipment of frozen cassava from West Africa.¹

But Hassan didn't just need money. He needed technical advice about importing: Which port should he use? What kind of vessel should he contract with? What insurance coverage did he need?

Our experienced Small Business Development Coordinator helped him weigh his options. With our help, he successfully brought in his first shipment earlier this year.

By themselves, Ben Hassan and Mike Toppi can't revitalize a whole city, or even one neighborhood. But collectively, they can make a real impact.

How Do We Know What this Impact Is?

We know because of data. On one of the corridors the Welcoming Center has mapped, there are 221 businesses employing 900 people. Taken individually, they are a collection of small stores, most of which employ three to five people. But as a whole, they are a powerful economic engine for our city and Commonwealth.

Growing National Recognition

In the last 18 months, we've had the opportunity to share our work with colleagues in Pittsburgh, Reading, and the city of Lynn, Massachusetts.

Most recently, last week I had the honor of being invited to make a keynote presentation at the Global Great Lakes gathering in Michigan. More than 150 people from St. Louis, Indianapolis, Dayton, and other Midwestern cities were gathered to hear how the Welcoming Center has succeeded in fostering immigrant entrepreneurship and workforce success.

¹ *Cassava root is best known in the US as the basis for tapioca.*

Over and over, I heard the same comment: **“You are what we are aspiring to be.”** It was an honor, but it was also eye-opening to see how other states have been mobilizing to tap into immigrant talent and energy.

Michigan Governor Rick Snyder also addressed the Global Great Lakes gathering. His administration has made a bold investment, putting \$5 million into global talent attraction and retention initiative. His message was clear: **“Immigration and economic development go hand-in-hand.”**

In other words, what’s good for immigrants is good for the whole community. I couldn’t agree more strongly.

Thank you for your time. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.