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Skills for New Americans

How the Biden Administration Can Ensure that Immigrant and Refugee Workers Achieve their Highest Potential

- **The Biden administration has an opportunity to fill a vacuum in federal leadership on immigrant inclusion by establishing a White House Office of New Americans and an accompanying Skills for New Americans initiative**
- **This issue has wide, bipartisan appeal to the public and provides a win-win solution that benefits immigrant adult students and workers as well as their US-born employers and colleagues**

An opportunity for White House leadership on the lesser-known side of immigration policy

Immigrants represent one in six American workers – yet federal immigration policy has barely acknowledged their interest in accessing the same opportunities for skill-building and talent development that other workers receive. Instead, policy has focused almost entirely on the high-profile, thorny issues of who is allowed a visa or work permit to stay in this country. As important as those issues are, **the true measure of long-term immigration success is the degree to which New Americans are fully engaged as students, workers, and members of our broader civic community.** This issue has wide, bipartisan appeal to US-born and immigrant constituents alike, who share common values about the importance of connecting newcomers to longtime residents and helping them apply their skills in local economies.

Regretfully, the federal government has traditionally practiced a hands-off approach to the work of helping new immigrants integrate into American society and ensuring that they can contribute their skills and talents to our economy. In the absence of federal leadership, over the last decade, numerous states and localities have implemented innovative and evidence-informed strategies that demonstrate the value of a more active public policy approach. Their success proves that intentional, well-crafted immigrant inclusion policies can help American communities to thrive economically and socially. In particular, effective and well-resourced adult education and workforce development policies can catapult immigrants into skill-appropriate roles that allow them to contribute to their best and highest abilities while providing American businesses with skilled workers.

What the White House should do now

The Biden administration has a singular opportunity to seize a leadership role on immigrant inclusion and advance a powerful vision for incorporating immigrant workers at all levels

of our workforce and across every industry. By taking decisive action to establish a federal Office of New Americans and an accompanying Skills for New Americans initiative in the early days of the administration, the President-Elect and his team can ensure that immigrant workers are fully incorporated in every aspect of adult education and workforce development policy – from entry-level to white-collar jobs, across all industries.

A federal Office of New Americans is needed to play a vital “air traffic control” role in coordinating policy among federal agencies and supporting the replication of effective immigrant inclusion approaches developed at the state and local levels. The Office of New Americans can be established by executive order and housed within the Executive Office of the President. It should have responsibility for coordinating immigration-related policy across the federal government.

A primary mission of this Office should be a “Skills for New Americans” initiative that ensures that immigrants and refugees have equitable access to the education and workforce opportunities they need to thrive. This initiative can begin work immediately through existing pathways within the federal government, such as:

- **Working with the Department of Labor to issue Training and Employment Guidance Letters** or similar policy guidance to advise state and local workforce boards about program models and strategies for serving immigrants and English learners in the public workforce system.
- **Working with the Department of Education to expand technical assistance** to federally funded adult education programs to improve on-ramps to apprenticeship, workforce development, and postsecondary programs.
- **Ensuring that relevant upcoming federal discretionary Solicitations for Grant Applications include immigrants** as a target population or priority focus. These can include DOL H1-B-funded workforce development grants, American Apprenticeship Grants, Institute of Museum and Library Services grants, etc.

In addition, the Office for New Americans should be charged with developing and implementing an *overall* federal strategy on immigrant inclusion that incorporates the best recommendations of state and local leaders and practitioners as well as federal agency staff. Congress also has a role to play in advancing federal immigrant inclusion policy. To date, unlike *immigration* policy, very little legislation has been introduced on *immigrant inclusion*. However, in October 2019, House Democrats introduced the first major bill of this kind, HR 4928.1 Known as the New Deal for New Americans Act, it would have established a National Office of New Americans within the Executive Office of the President (EOP) and made substantial investments in adult English language learning and workforce development. Whether the 117th Congress decides to take up this bill or another effort, legislation could support and amplify the White House’s efforts.

How we got here: History of previous administrative actions

While the Trump administration has focused primarily on immigration enforcement and related priorities, the Obama White House did take some initial steps toward interagency coordination on immigrant inclusion efforts. In particular, the White House Task Force on New Americans brought together federal agencies to address cross-departmental policy issues. However, the Task Force had such a broad range of responsibilities that it was difficult to focus sustained attention on the important areas of adult education and workforce development.

Near the end of the administration, in June 2016, the Task Force did convene a National Skills and Credential Institute that brought together leading state and local practitioners to discuss one aspect of immigrant workforce development. However, the short time remaining did not allow for additional federal follow-up after the convening. Also, during the Obama years, the Department of Education's Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (which oversees the primary federal investment in adult English language programs) implemented a multi-year technical assistance initiative known as Networks for Integrating New Americans. This effort provided technical advising (but *no* additional funding) for five small local immigrant inclusion efforts centered on adult education.

Additional benefits to launching this work

Advancing a Skills for New Americans initiative within a broader Office for New Americans would have other positive spillover effects. For example, this effort could help to close the disproportionate gaps faced by immigrants and English learners in the area of *digital* literacy.² As the Covid-19 pandemic has made painfully clear, lack of digital skills has heavy costs for workers, their families, and broader communities. Ensuring that immigrants can acquire in-demand technological skills – as well as the broadband access and digital devices they need to participate in upskilling – would be a vital component of federal immigrant inclusion work.

Similarly, an Office of New Americans would be an important stakeholder in reducing the racial inequities faced by many immigrants, particularly Black immigrants and Latin American immigrants with indigenous heritage. The field's understanding of how public policy can close these gaps has grown substantially in recent years, but to date, there has been little overlap between federal work on racial equity and the particular challenges faced by immigrants of color. The time is ripe for meaningful action.

The American public supports these ideas

A wide array of constituent groups has supported immigrant inclusion efforts at the state and local level and would be primed to support a new federal effort. These include:

- Higher education institutions, particularly those that serve substantial numbers of immigrant learners and have been at the forefront of inclusion efforts
- Labor unions and labor-management training partnerships, especially those with sizeable immigrant memberships
- Immigrant advocacy organizations, including national organizations, state-level nonprofit immigrant rights' coalitions
- Immigrant service providers, including adult education organizations, refugee resettlement agencies, ethnic-specific associations, and others
- State Offices of New Americans (approximately seven offices to date nationwide) and mayoral Offices of Immigrant Affairs (roughly thirty offices), who play this role at lower levels of government

Advocates for marginalized job seekers of all backgrounds (e.g., formerly incarcerated people, former foster care youth, people with disabilities, etc.) could also be allies for this work *if* this initiative is an intentional part of a larger strategy to ensure that all individuals who face barriers to employment have meaningful access to education and workforce development.

In addition, voter polling conducted by ALG Group for National Skills Coalition in Spring 2020 showed overwhelming support (84 percent) for public policies that expand access to digital learning and increase digital literacy to make it easier for people to retrain.

For further information regarding these recommendations, please contact Katie Spiker, National Skills Coalition's Director of Government Affairs, at katies@nationalskillscoalition.org.