

Michigan League for Public Policy

2019 BUDGET PRIORITIES

Make Michigan a Welcoming State by Funding ESL/Citizenship Preparation Courses

— LEAGUE RECOMMENDATION —

Create a \$5 million immigrant integration fund to ensure the social and civic integration of immigrant residents through community-based English as a Second Language (ESL) programs and citizenship classes.

BACKGROUND: An immigrant integration fund is an innovative approach to boosting the social, civic and economic participation of Michigan's foreign-born residents through ESL training and citizenship preparation courses. Funding for these programs via a \$5 million per year immigrant integration fund would enable immigrants and refugees from communities across the state to get high-quality language training and preparation for the naturalization process, and provide competitive salaries to attract and retain committed instructors.

- **For immigrants and refugees, English language proficiency is a key to economic mobility and access to opportunities and resources within communities.** Whether it's communication with a potential employer, attending a parent-teacher conference or conversing with neighbors, English is an important part of English-language learners' (ELL) everyday lives and a big step in integration in communities.
- **Naturalization presents an abundance of opportunities for new Americans and has a positive ripple effect on our economy.** Naturalized immigrants often see an increase in their individual earnings by as much as 15%, which in turn generates greater economic growth and higher tax revenues. U.S. citizens can ensure that their voices are heard through the ballot. By voting for elected officials and the policies of the future, new Americans play an important role in strengthening our democracy and our state. Community-based citizenship classes funded via the immigrant integration fund would greatly increase the number of immigrants completing the naturalization process and becoming U.S. citizens.

WHY IT MATTERS:

- **Barriers to naturalization can keep immigrants from accessing better jobs, achieving economic security for their families, and participating civically.** The largest factor tying citizenship to greater wage and economic benefits is the greater certainty that comes with permanent U.S. residence. This certainty leads to more investment in education and training by immigrant families, as well as greater entrepreneurial activity. Furthermore, the need for citizenship preparation training is clear. As of 2015, almost half (48.9%) of immigrants in Michigan were not yet naturalized citizens. In total, as of 2015 there were approximately 300,000 immigrants potentially eligible for U.S. citizenship in Michigan. Without access to training, thousands of immigrants will be held back from fully participating in our communities and our economy.
- **A lack of English language proficiency holds immigrant adults back from obtaining good-paying jobs, puts them at risk of wage theft and exploitation, discourages adults from naturalizing, and can keep families isolated from wider communities.** The need for ESL training is clear. Approximately 40% of immigrants 5 years of age and older residing in Michigan speak English "less than 'very well'" compared to just 3.3% of the native-born population. Additionally, among immigrants in Michigan who are not yet naturalized citizens, almost half (49.4%) speak English "less than 'very well.'" Funding for English language instruction would therefore be of great value to this group of immigrants who wish to become Americans in every sense of the word.

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