

Executive Summary

Maine has recorded a Hispanic population since 1860, when the U.S. Census reported that 25 Hispanics from Mexico, Cuba, and South America had made Maine their home. Since that time, the number of Hispanics living in the state has grown to 15,656 in 2007, representing approximately 1.2% of the population.

As one of the whitest states in the U.S., Maine will likely see continued significant increases in the number of foreign-born residents. To remain globally competitive, the state must identify ways to maximize the potential contributions of people, native and non-native alike, who locate here, and to appreciate the competitive gains that can be achieved through increased diversity and cultural competency.

This report is a starting point. By depicting the experiences and contributions of the state's largest minority population, the Maine Center for Economic Policy hopes to foster understanding and establish a baseline for future policy action. Following is a summary of key findings and recommendations.

Key Findings:

- ***Hispanics represent the largest minority group in Maine.*** 15,656 Hispanics lived in Maine in 2007 and accounted for approximately 1.2% of the state's population.
- ***Latinos in Maine are a heterogeneous group that came to the state for a variety of reasons.*** While Hispanics of Puerto Rican and Mexican ancestry account for almost half of the Hispanics in Maine, there is broad representation of other Latin American countries in the state. Similarly, the stories of how and why individuals of the Hispanic community came to live in Maine reveal diverse experiences and backgrounds.
- ***Hispanic settlement in Maine reflects a growing regional pattern of geographic dispersion by secondary migrants.*** Historically, Hispanics settled in more urban areas and added to their numbers as a result of new international migration, family reunification, and births. Secondary migrants to more suburban and rural areas are becoming the norm in northern New England and are driving Hispanic population growth in Maine. Hispanics reside in every county in the state and are more geographically dispersed than other minority groups.
- ***Latinos, along with other immigrant groups, are playing an increasingly important role in Maine's labor force.*** Faced with slow population growth, an increasingly aged population and continued 'brain drain' of educated young people leaving the state, the adequacy of Maine's future labor force is at risk. Immigrants are helping to offset some of these trends. From 2000 to 2007, the state's Hispanic population grew by 67% compared to 3.3% growth for the total population. The median age of the state's Hispanic population is 26.9 years, compared to 42.1 years for whites.
- ***Hispanic contributions to Maine's economy and community-life are many and varied.*** In 2002 there were 731 Hispanic-owned businesses in the state generating \$113 million in revenue. This represents a 117% increase in revenue from 1997. Approximately 10,000 to 12,000 migrant and seasonal farm workers work in the state each year. Some choose to stay and make Maine their home. In the town of Milbridge, for example, Mexican agricultural workers and their families (approximately 200 people) have settled in and are bringing new life to a rural community.

Recommendations:

- ***Expand English language programs for immigrants.*** The discrepancy in educational attainment and income between foreign born immigrants and second generation immigrants is most often associated with language acquisition. It is in the state's interest to insure that students and adults with limited proficiency in English have access to appropriate language courses and, where appropriate, that these courses are offered in conjunction with particular employment opportunities.
- ***Guarantee a certain number of temporary or seasonal visas for Maine employers.*** 66,000 H2B visas are issued in the U.S. each year. These visas cannot be applied for until an employer is within 120 days of the issue date (i.e. the point at which the employee will commence work). This puts seasonal employers in states like Maine at a disadvantage since employers in states with longer production cycles, earlier growing seasons, or longer tourist seasons are better positioned to obtain such visas. Such a policy has an adverse impact on employers in Maine and may limit the potential for economic growth in certain areas of the state's economy.
- ***Develop better ways to recognize and capitalize on the skills that immigrants may already possess.*** Many Hispanic immigrants who come to Maine were skilled professionals including nurses, doctors, teachers and engineers, in their home countries. Unfortunately, many lack the certification needed to practice in the U.S. The state should work with universities and businesses to identify these experienced professionals and fast track them through programs that match existing skills with Maine specific demand.
- ***Invest in programs that promote and support entrepreneurship within the Hispanic community.*** Business ownership may be one of the best ways for skilled immigrants to pursue a livelihood. While many programs are in place, more can be done to support outreach and make resources available to Latino and immigrant business owners in Maine.
- ***Strengthen and improve state-level efforts to promote awareness and shared prosperity within minority and immigrant communities.*** The Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA) within the Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) holds great promise but lacks adequate funding and staffing to take a leadership position in addressing issues effecting immigrants in Maine and in building awareness of their contributions. The Governor, DHHS, OMA and its advisory council should play a stronger role in identifying and providing feedback on policies related to integrating Maine's immigrant communities. ■