

★ **opinion**

OUR PURPOSE

To actively influence and impact a better quality of life in Middle Tennessee

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TENNESSEE VOICES

Immigrants key to economic success

MING WANG

Discussions of the state of immigration reform in Tennessee — and across the United States — can often become contentious, especially during election season. We should never forget, however, that America is a nation of immigrants who play an integral part in determining our country's economic success, and



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Tennessee's growing economy is a perfect example of this.

A recently released report by the Partnership for a New American Economy (NAE) shines a spotlight on the many ways immigrants contribute to our state's economy. In 2014, immigrant-led households in Tennessee earned \$7.9 billion in income, contributed more than \$493.9 million to state and local services — such as public schools and police force—and paid more than \$2 billion in

federal, state and local taxes, equaling \$5.9 billion in local spending power to propel our state's economy forward.

Moreover, immigrant-owned businesses in our state generated \$542 million in 2014, with Tennessee firms who have at least one immigrant owner employing about 57,000 of our local citizens.

Today there are more than 300,000 immigrants currently living in Tennessee, and they are serving our state as physicians and carpenters, entrepreneurs and farmers, and everything in between, making them vital participants in our continued economic growth and success.

An immigrant presence is crucial for Tennessee's existing businesses, many of which rely on the talent and skill of immigrant workers to help their businesses succeed. Immigrants are also playing an increasingly important role in Tennessee's manufacturing and agricultural industries.

As entrepreneurs, immigrant-owned companies in our state are also surpassing the average success of new business-

es, currently representing 7.8 percent, despite comprising only 4.9 percent of our state's population.

In Tennessee, immigrants are 28.4 percent more likely to hold graduate degrees and be of a prime working age than our native citizens are. Those facts carry major implications for the future of our state workforce, driven home by the fact that Tennessee's immigrants were also 32.3 percent more actively employed in 2014, since much of our native-born population is reaching the age of retirement.

The fields of science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) represent other areas with great potential for growth and expansion. Immigrants make up 10.7 percent of STEM workers in Tennessee, yet there are thousands of vacant jobs because there are not enough qualified native-born candidates to fill them.

Our outdated immigration system makes it difficult for STEM employers to find the highly-skilled workers they need to fill essential positions that would

allow them to create even more jobs, and generate even more cash flow, income and tax revenues for the state.

Immigration reform could help to alleviate the problem by streamlining the visa process for more foreign-born students earning STEM degrees to stay here, work and contribute to our local economy.

While the debate over reform continues, the future of Tennessee's workforce and economic prosperity hangs in the balance because it is clear that if we want Tennessee's economy to continue to grow and flourish, and to create jobs for more and more Tennesseans, we need immigration reform now!

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