The Case for Welcoming as Resilience

How Communities Can Support People Displaced by Climate Change – and Build a More Sustainable, Democratic, and Adaptable Future for All

Last year, a historically high 110 million people were displaced from their homes, forced to migrate because of conflict, persecution, discrimination, and violence.

These statistics are sobering. Yet over the next three decades, the effects of a changing climate will dwarf today's record numbers, uprooting as many as 1 billion people by 2050, according to estimates from the United Nations' International Organization for Migration (IOM).

Now is the moment to plan for this inevitability. Displacement and demographic shifts are already happening, with or without preparation: Over the past two decades, U.S. cities such as Houston, Baton Rouge, and Orlando received hundreds of thousands of newcomers after Hurricanes Katrina and Maria displaced people from their homes in the Gulf Coast and Caribbean.

Other places, like Chico, California, have taken in newcomers following wildfires in neighboring communities. And more recently, climate change and disasters — drought, flooding, and hurricanes — are compounding poverty and political instability in Central and South America, driving record-level migration from the region and straining capacity in Chicago, Denver, New York City, and beyond.

Our collective responses to these growing levels of climate-driven migration have been siloed and reactive at best, fear-based and alarmist at worst.

Yet for millennia, human migration has ensured our survival — and today, humans' continued migration must be recognized as a critical form of resilience. We must meet the moment with proactive planning, intersectional approaches, and multisector, multilateral cooperation.

Our efforts must also recognize that the effects of climate migration will be felt most acutely on a local level, with real potential to either unite or divide "receiving" communities as they navigate population and demographic change.

That's why a local approach — supporting leaders in scaling up their communities to prepare for both the arrival and inclusion of those displaced by climate change — is foundational for the work ahead.

Fortunately, proven blueprints exist for building resilient and responsive local communities. Just as towns, cities, and counties are preparing for a changing environment by adapting their *physical* infrastructure with solutions like seawalls and resilience hubs, localities can also build *social* infrastructure, called *welcoming infrastructure*, that will prepare them for the arrival of people displaced by climate change and disasters.

Welcoming infrastructure, policies, practices, and norms help ensure that all people – newcomers and long-term residents alike – can live, thrive, and contribute fully in local communities. Viewed through this lens, work to advance welcoming in local communities is central and complementary to the need to preserve democratic practices and institutions in both U.S. and global contexts, especially at a time of unprecedented human displacement.

In publishing this white paper — the first in a series of resources that outline opportunities for action at the intersection of climate change and migration — Welcoming America's goal is to elevate experiences, models, and insights from welcoming communities in both planning for and successfully navigating demographic change and population shifts.

Bringing welcoming to scale can build local and global commitments to recognizing that change is inevitable, and that our response to it can be rooted in

values and pragmatism that enable us to meet the moment with adaptability and innovation.

Uniting Siloed Movements

We believe that civic leaders invested in sustainability, planning, and environmental protections have an opportunity to learn from newcomers'[1] experiences, perspectives, and leadership in navigating the realities of both climate change and migration.

However, in years past, environmental protection work has been deeply influenced by intentionally placed xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiments into policies and priorities, siloing what should be united movements – and often pitting groups of people, including newcomers and long-term residents, against each other. The roots of the U.S. conservation movement, including the establishment of the National Park System in the early 1900s, were deeply intertwined with immigration quotas, xenophobia, and nationalism.

Conservation leaders like Madison Grant, William Kent, and Teddy Roosevelt also supported the ideas of racial hierarchies and white supremacy, arguing that protecting the U.S. as a "pure and pristine" country meant also preserving it as a "white man's country."

Such beliefs are also closely tied to the "Great Replacement Theory," which argues that the arrival of newcomers, especially people of color, is part of a larger systematic effort to "replace" the political power and culture of white people living in Western countries. Tenets of the theory are embedded in more than a century of restrictionist immigration policy, including the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which introduced a 10-year ban on immigration from China, and the Immigration Act of 1924, which legislated preference for immigrants from certain Northern and Western European nations.

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[1] In this paper, Welcoming America uses the term *newcomers* to refer to people who have moved from one community (or country) to another, including U.S. citizens, residents, immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and others.

The Great Replacement Theory continues to shape contemporary rhetoric around voter replacement, antisemitism, Islamophobia, and culture change. And the theory manifests in environmental narratives around controlling population growth, pollution, and the loss of open space.

The ongoing influence of the Great Replacement Theory is especially dangerous in the face of the scale of pending climate-driven displacement. Across the U.S. and the globe, the people most vulnerable to climate disasters are most often people of color, including people from Latin American, African, and Asian regions and nations. These same countries are among the most highly targeted in anti-immigrant policies and narratives.

Similarly, unresolved tensions between newcomers and long-term residents in these places often become fodder for dangerous, antidemocratic narratives and norms. Because of this, there is urgency in efforts that work to connect fields and movements that have traditionally operated in silos: People focused on environmental issues, climate action, and sustainability — and those focused on equity, welcoming, and inclusion.

United networks can build infrastructure that advance communities' efforts on all fronts, building more resilient and prepared local communities.

Fortunately the beginnings of an ecosystem around climate change and migration is taking shape, with funders, nonprofit leaders, refugee resettlement networks, and elected officials increasingly focused on protecting people displaced by climate disasters. This forward momentum holds promise for making a positive impact both nationally and internationally.

Yet, few leaders are preparing at the scale necessary for demographic and population changes in local communities. Here, too, welcoming communities are poised to bridge the gap, offering blueprints for local, national, and international leaders to connect welcoming and inclusion efforts with environmental and climate priorities.

Advancing Welcoming and Resilience

The experiences of welcoming communities offer a [tested framework](#) for places committed to creating a more adaptive future, showing that it is possible to successfully receive new arrivals and navigate demographic change with innovation and capacity.

Welcoming communities are deeply invested in urban planning and sustainability, emergency preparedness and resilience, approaching this work from a lens of access and inclusion. They are forging cross-sector collaborations to advance related programs and policies, while also fostering strong personal connections with and between newcomers and long-term residents. They are constructing welcoming infrastructures that can be built, benchmarked, and measured as part of communities' overall climate preparedness and planning.

And they are cultivating community-wide support for this work, mitigating backlash with values-first narratives that can counter misinformation and foster collaboration.

In sum, welcoming communities are demonstrating that it is possible to both plan for and act on demographic and population changes in ways that are not only inclusive of newcomers' needs, but also ensure the long-term ability for all residents to adapt, thrive, and belong.

To meet the moment, we must scale this promising work. Welcoming America has assembled a playbook that will guide communities in integrating work across sustainability, climate action, and immigrant inclusion.

The playbook highlights innovative work being done in Lancaster, Pennsylvania; Dallas, Texas; and San Mateo County, California — places that demonstrate welcoming communities are also adaptive, resilient communities. It guides civic leaders through key questions to consider as they begin to build plans, and offers tools to create solutions tailored to the realities and needs of local communities.

This guide, and accompanying case studies, will be released in the coming weeks.

The playbook will support local leaders in:

- Determining how their communities may experience impacts and opportunities related to climate migration.
- Anticipating why and from where newcomers may arrive in local communities.
- Formally connecting local sustainability and welcoming programs and activities.
- Considering how immigrant inclusion efforts can also advance local communities' resilience, sustainability, and livability.
- Fostering community-wide support for welcoming, and mitigating backlash toward demographic change.

Our vision is that the playbook becomes a go-to resource for communities across the U.S. and the globe as they plan and prepare to be welcoming places for people displaced by climate change — and to unite both newcomers and long-term residents in shaping their shared future.

As a changing climate threatens lives and livelihoods, we must unite in efforts to elevate migration as a fundamental form of resilience. There's a place for all of us — policymakers, practitioners, advocates, and philanthropy — in the work ahead.

Welcoming America is committed to advancing an intersectional dialogue that de-silos climate and migration conversations. We call on others, grassroots and global leaders alike, to join us in proactively creating the local infrastructure, systems, and policies that will build more welcoming, democratic, and adaptive communities and a shared future.

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WELCOMING AMERICA

BUILDING A NATION OF NEIGHBORS