

Cuyahoga Falls sees opportunity to grow workforce with influx of international residents

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After the Vietnam War, Cuyahoga Falls-based Kyocera SGS Precision Tools hired many workers from places such as Laos and Cambodia. Now, it's again looking to hire newly immigrated people in the area and it's getting assistance from the Welcoming Workforce Coalition.

As a second-generation business owner, Tom Haag, president of Cuyahoga Falls-based Kyocera SGS Precision Tools, knows the importance of casting a wide net when looking for people to work on the factory floor.

In the 1970s, as part of the fallout of the Vietnam War, Cuyahoga Falls saw an influx of Hmong refugees from Laos and Cambodia. The company, then known as SGS Tool, hired many of those "newcomers" — a term that encompasses refugees, immigrants, asylum seekers and international students — to help the company fill roughly 300 jobs.

"We hired a number of Laotian and Cambodian associates who are just now retiring from the company," Haag said. "Now we see their children are coming here, which I think is a testament to their parent's experience working here."

Bringing on these new employees and keeping them working there for decades meant successfully dealing with multiple different languages, different holidays, and Hmong cultural norms and expectations, Haag said. It's something he plans to do again as a different influx of newcomers relocate into Cuyahoga Falls and Akron's North Hill community, and as the city is part of a program called Welcoming Workforce to help facilitate transitions.

"Recently we are certainly seeing a new wave of immigration coming into North Akron and Cuyahoga Falls, mostly from Bhutan and Nepal," Haag said.

According to a survey of local employers conducted on behalf of the Cuyahoga Falls Community Development Department, about 4% of the city's employed population is made up of international newcomers, though Diana Colavecchio, the city's community development director, believes a portion of that figure comes from people living in neighboring Akron.

Cuyahoga Falls is one of the few communities in Summit County with population growth as demonstrated by the last census, when the city went from 49,652 residents in 2010 to 51,114 in 2020.

Colavecchio said she had been unaware that a portion of that increase came directly from the relocation of newcomer families until she met [Tanya Budler of Rise Together](#), the founder of a consulting firm focused on workforce and immigration advocacy.

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"This was not on my radar when I took this job (in 2019) and it could have completely fallen through the cracks had we not hired her and brought all this to the forefront," Colavecchio said.

Some of Cuyahoga Falls' newest Nepali and Bhutanese residents were resettled through the United Nations Refugee Agency to the city of Akron. Once they realized how affordable the area is, word of mouth through the community meant other family members and acquaintances left their initial resettlement cities to come here, Budler said.

Over time, some families moved from Akron to Cuyahoga Falls, citing better safety and school quality, she added.

Budler came with a plan to help Cuyahoga Falls and the city's employers be more welcoming to their new residents to help continue to grow the population and remedy talent shortages.

In May, the Cuyahoga Falls City Council passed a resolution dedicating \$40,000 to Budler's Welcoming Workforce program, which aims to develop a plan to address systematic changes needed to attract and retain international newcomers to the community and workforce. The city has hired Budler officially as a consultant.

Cuyahoga Falls is the first city in Northeast Ohio to have a Welcoming Workforce Coalition — made up of business leaders (including Haag), elected officials and nonprofit organizations — that's helping to create a strategy around the resources needed to attract and retain an international newcomer workforce.

At the end of the year, Cuyahoga Falls will have a strategic plan created by the 20-member coalition that will help the city's employers find and support workers while also assisting newcomers in identifying jobs with local industrial, manufacturing and service companies.

According to Haag, it is important to delve into the cultural differences of the newcomers without making assumptions.

"We found that some of these cultures were so hard working, they didn't even understand the concept of taking a break or taking a lunch period," he said. "Of course, we're obligated by law to make sure people take a 10-minute break over an eight-hour period."

Along with enforcement the culture of taking work breaks, the company provides English-as-a-second-language courses for those new to the country. He also has made accommodations for longer leaves of absence when workers want to go back to Asia to visit family and need more than a week's vacation time. And at social work events, there is always Hmong music and food, Haag said.

The coalition meetings, 14 in all, are part of an effort to get the right resources to the table for companies, Budler said.

As the consultant of the Welcoming Workforce program, Budler is providing other Cuyahoga Falls employers with [a series of external support](#) partners to help with both employment and social services, including World Education Services, an organization that helps with accurate translations for foreign languages.

"It's a conscious acknowledgment by the Cuyahoga Falls community that there's a cultural shift that's going to have to happen, and that the city has to try something different, because it has not always been known as being welcoming," Budler said.

Haag, who is part of the coalition as a bit of an elder statesman, is looking to fill anywhere from 10 to 15 positions. He also is looking out for the community.

"As a kid growing up here, I know it was called Caucasian Falls and I knew it had that reputation, but I have to give the city a lot of credit for changing that over the last few decades," Haag said. "And for Kyocera, we are not considering this work just to help with a short-term fix. I know everybody's looking for workers, but we have done this well before, and in 20 years from now we are hoping that these workers will recommend that their kids work here. We are thinking long term."