

Asylum seekers will aid NYC's economic recovery



Thousands of migrants, assylum seekers are pictured lining up outside The Jacob Javits Federal Building in downtown Manhattan early Tuesday December 05, 2023.

By [RICH BAUM](#)

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Amidst all the hopelessness and fighting about the recent influx of asylum seekers, a crucial piece of good news has been missed: the number of asylum seekers in New York City who can work legally has increased significantly. This is an important opportunity that we would be foolish to miss.

When these immigrants first began arriving, they couldn't work legally, leading to a wave of frustration and inertia. Our collective understanding of immigrants' role in our city started to fall apart.

But now that a mandated 150-day waiting period to apply for work authorization is ending for thousands of asylum seekers, it's time for New York City to regroup and do what we have done remarkably well for a long time: put together a resettlement program that will allow the new immigrants to find jobs and thrive. With some smart, strategic efforts now, we can make the asylum seekers an important part of New York's economic revival.

Last summer, at the height of a political and operational meltdown about the arrival of thousands of people who could not work, New York City government did something really smart: it built a network of centers where lawyers assist asylum seekers in filling out their applications for asylum and temporary protected status, thus starting people on the journey to legal employment.

The 150-day waiting period after applying for asylum is inexplicably long and should be eliminated, but it does eventually pass. At a recent City Council [hearing](#), the city reported that more than 37,000 asylum seekers are either somewhere in this process or have completed it. And, with every passing day, more asylum seekers are able to work legally.

We have a chance to seize the moment and do what's right for our fellow human beings and, at the same time, do what makes economic sense.

Historically, New York turned the initial challenges of past immigration waves into tremendous assets. As is the case now, there was controversy and resistance, but government, philanthropy, and community organizations came together around one core, time-tested idea: resettlement.

The settlement house where I work was founded at the very beginning of the settlement house movement to serve the wave of Jewish immigrants to the Lower East Side around the beginning of the 20th century. The practices that were developed then are just as useful now, most importantly relying on community-based organization to provide hubs where immigrants can have all their issues addressed in one place.

None of the asylum seekers that come into our settlement house have “just” one problem. They typically have several needs that we address all together to stabilize their lives and help them get a job: language instruction, assistance completing work permit applications, guidance navigating the school system and finding child care, support for mental health challenges, access to basic health care, help identifying decent employment and workforce training.

The settlement house movement is more than 130 years old and was the original wrap-around service. It’s a powerful, proven model that can be replicated and scaled up to give asylum seekers a viable path towards resettled lives.

As for the economics: For several years, many of our politicians have bemoaned that the [population](#) and [workforce](#) of the city has dropped since the beginning of COVID, a change that affects [tax revenues](#) and can lead to a dangerous [economic spiral](#). [Multiple industries](#) have serious worker shortages. Well, asylum seekers are here, and many of them are newly permitted to work.

Viewed through this prism, asylum seekers are a resource available and ready to help power New York City’s economic engine. The city’s leaders should see this not as an asylum seeker crisis but rather a workforce development opportunity. And for those who balk at the cost of resettlement — yes, we’re going to spend some money now.

But we can do this the easy way or the hard way: either we’re going to spend some money now on a resettlement program that strengthens our economy while enabling new immigrants to become self-sufficient, or we’re going to spend a lot more over the coming years on various forms of social services.

No one predicted or advocated for the enormous influx of asylum seekers. But a confluence of events — a crisis in Venezuela, a labor shortage, a post-COVID economy that needs more taxpayers — have brought us to a moment of opportunity, both for the asylum seekers and for the economy.

Let’s do what New York City has always done well — welcome immigrants to a city that has thrived because of them for generations.

Baum is the president and CEO of [Educational Alliance](#), a settlement house serving Lower Manhattan since 1889.