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Written by: Liliana Bolaños



Voices for Utah Children Co-Hosts Lunch and Learn on Newcomers' Immigration Pathways and Community Resources

On August 8, 2024, Voices for Utah Children joined forces with the Salt Lake City Mayor's Office of Access and Belonging and the Salt Lake County Mayor's Office for New Americans to host our "Newcomers' Immigration Pathways and Community Resources" Lunch and Learn event. Together, we brought key stakeholders from various organizations to discuss the nuances of immigration statuses and pathways, share critical data specific to Utah, and highlight valuable community resources available to support our immigrant communities.

A Gathering of Experts and Community Leaders



The event featured opening remarks by Salt Lake County Mayor Jenny Wilson, setting the stage for a deep dive into the complex landscape of immigration in Utah.



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Natalie El-Deiry, Director of Immigration and New American Integration for the Governor's Office of Economic Opportunity, gave a powerful "State of Play" presentation on the current status of immigrants in Utah, followed by a panel of experts offering insights and answering audience questions on immigration issues. Her presentation highlighted the following:

- **Student Enrollment:** In recent years, there has been a significant increase in enrollment across major school districts (Granite, Canyons, Alpine, Jordan, Provo). The average increase in English Language Learner (ELL) program enrollment by 14%.
- **Geographic Impact:** The following municipalities have seen the largest increase in recent immigrant arrivals including Ogden, Herriman, St. George, Delta, Logan, and Salt Lake County.
- **Inclusive Practices:** It is important to be thoughtful of inclusive policies beyond mere friendliness for immigrant integration.
- **Challenges for Newcomers:** Currently there are several difficulties in the asylum process. Additionally, there are Issues faced in receiving necessary food security, shelter, cultural navigation, and access to legal services.

The recent increase in student enrollment across major Utah school districts, with a 14% rise in English Language Learner (ELL) program participation, has a profound impact on children, particularly those from immigrant families. Currently, 17,900 children in Utah are immigrants, and an additional 180,600 U.S.-born residents live with at least one immigrant parent. Municipalities that have experienced large influxes of immigrant arrivals are seeing an increased demand for resources tailored to these students. Inclusive practices in schools are critical, requiring more than just a welcoming atmosphere but a comprehensive approach that supports immigrant children's full integration. However, challenges such as navigating the asylum process, food insecurity, lack of shelter, and limited access to cultural and legal support can hinder these children's well-being and educational success. Expanding school resources, providing targeted social services, and developing legal support mechanisms are critical steps in ensuring the success and integration of these children into Utah's education system.

Panel Discussion Highlights

The panel, moderated by Natalie El-Deiry, included distinguished speakers such as

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Lorina Tester, Director of Immigration Programs and Senior Attorney at Holy Cross Ministries; Alyssa Williams, Immigration Attorney at Catholic Community Services of Utah; Mayra Molina, Director of the Venezuelan Alliance of Utah; and Kevin Hyer, a community volunteer from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Their insights were invaluable in shedding light on the intricacies of immigration statuses, the challenges newcomers face, and the community's role in supporting them.



Key Topics Discussed:

- **Immigration Pathways and Challenges:** Alyssa Williams differentiated between asylum seekers and refugees, pointing out that safety concerns hinder access to these pathways. Lorina Tester emphasized the importance of Temporary Protected Status and work-based visas and highlighted the contributions of immigrants to essential sectors like healthcare and agriculture.
- **Changing Demographics and Community Support:** Mayra Molina noted a shift in immigrant backgrounds, with newcomers often fleeing unsafe conditions. She stressed the necessity for community support and cultural integration to help these individuals settle in.
- **Community Response and Legal Assistance:** Kevin Hyer pointed out the vital role of volunteer efforts and organizations like "No Más Desconocido" in providing legal aid to immigrants, further emphasizing the collaboration between community members and advocacy groups.
- **Immigration Process Challenges and Resource Needs:** The panel discussed the complexities of the immigration process, which has seen a dramatic increase in cases, highlighting the need for a more streamlined procedure and increased resources for shelters and nonprofit organizations to support newcomers, as advocated by Mayra Molina.
- **Economic Contributions and Language Advocacy:** Kevin Hyer discussed the economic impact of immigrants, noting that a significant percentage of successful companies have immigrant founders. Lorina Tester called for respectful language towards immigrants, arguing against dehumanizing terms to promote understanding and empathy in discussions about immigration.

Essential Resources

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Aden Batar, Migration and Refugee Services Director at Catholic Community Services of Utah highlighted essential resources available to immigrant families while stressing the need for more resources to support their integration. This is especially critical for immigrant children, who often rely on these resources to access education, healthcare, and basic needs.

As Utah continues to welcome families from around the globe, events like this Lunch and Learn are vital in promoting understanding, collaboration, and community support, all of which directly impact the well-being and opportunities of children.

Get Involved

Voices for Utah Children invites you to learn more about immigration in Utah and explore how you can support newcomers in your community. We invite you to stay in touch about future lunch and learn events and updates about the various [interim committee meetings](#) where these [important topics](#) are discussed in our state. Together, we can build a more inclusive and welcoming state for everyone.

Stay Connected

To stay informed about future events and initiatives, follow Voices for Utah Children on social media and subscribe to our [newsletter](#). Your engagement makes a difference!