



Food & Beverage Iowa Business

Quarterly

Welcome!

The Vital Role of Immigrants in Iowa's Restaurant Industry



Inside: Legislative Win = Uniform Minimum Wage in All Iowa Counties

we support immigrants.



The Vital Role of Immigrants in Iowa's Restaurant Industry

In the current climate, the Iowa Restaurant Association Board of Directors felt it was important for our industry to formally express our unwavering support for our immigrant workforce. The following written message is available for restaurant owners and leaders to share with their employees via a video link. English and Spanish Language versions are available on the Iowa Restaurant Association YouTube Channel. Go to www.restaurantiowa.com to access.

Iowa Restaurant Association Statement on Immigration

In an environment where there are few simple solutions, Iowa's restaurant owners have come together to make a simple statement—we support immigrants.

Immigrants are important to every aspect of our industry—as employees, co-workers, fellow business owners, customers, community members, neighbors and friends. Their positive cultural and economic impact on Iowa's hospitality industry cannot be overstated.

In many Iowa restaurants, more than two thirds of the workforce has immigrated to the United States. We actively seek immigrant candidates to work in our businesses because they make our industry better. We take every step possible to ensure that those we employ have entered the country legally and possess the appropriate documentation, but we also understand that even those whose legal status is in order are often impacted by worries over family members and friends who might not have the required documentation.

We daily hear, see, understand, and share the frustration and fear people have with the current dialogue throughout our state and the country. Our hearts go out to those who feel threatened and unappreciated by it. We will continue to work to turn the tide on this negativity and division and to support efforts to bring meaningful reform to a system that is currently not working for many.

The National Restaurant Association has long called for immigration reform at the federal level—promoting a clear path to legalization for America's 11 million undocumented workers, an accurate and reliable national employment verification system, and secure U.S. borders that promote legitimate travel and tourism. But the current political climate and level of discourse demands that as a state association we elevate our own voice and visibility on the issue as well.

We have and will continue to support and celebrate our immigrant employees and co-workers. We boldly add our voice to calls for reform including a path for legal worker status for the undocumented already living in our state. Restaurants are Iowa's second leading private sector employer. We strive to be an industry that rewards performance and promotes dignity for all employees—domestic and foreign born. We stand publicly by our immigrant employees.

Iowa's restaurant industry is one in which a non-English speaking immigrant can find his or her first job, and even with those initial cultural barriers, end their careers as business owners themselves. That entrepreneurial spirit is alive and well in our industry and our immigrant community. That spirit also demands that negative rhetoric be set aside and real solutions be adopted. The Iowa Restaurant Association and its leadership is committed to both.



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Restaurant Industry— *Seeking Common Sense Immigration Reform*

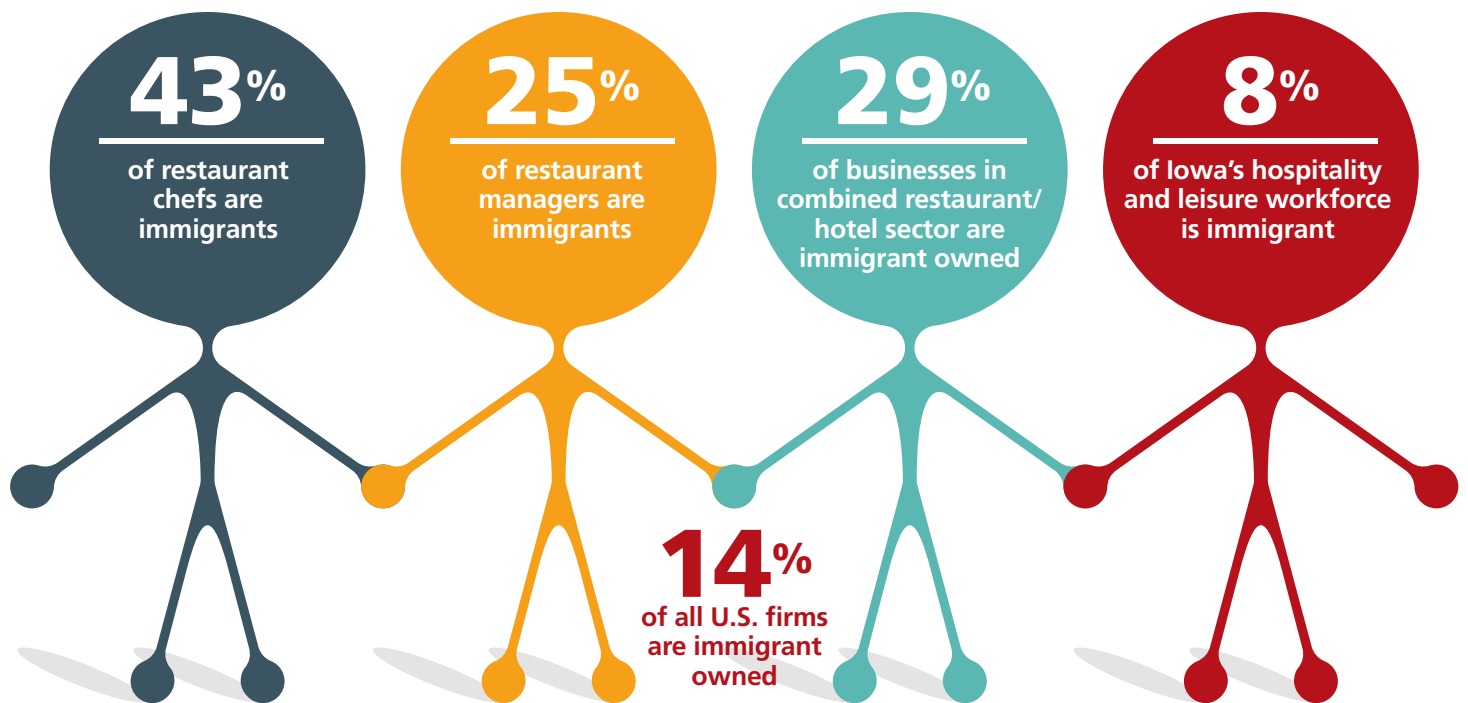
Today's immigration system is broken. It makes economic sense to fix it.

Restaurants embody the American Dream like no other industry. They're often the employer of choice for immigrants who come to America in search of new opportunities. This benefits both sides: Immigrants gain valuable job experience and immediate access to opportunities, and restaurateurs can fill positions at every level.

The Iowa Restaurant Association has joined the National Restaurant Association in its support of three principles for immigration reform:

- 1** Improve border security while still facilitating travel and tourism.
- 2** Create an efficient, reliable federal employment-verification system that helps employers hire in a timely manner, such as the "Legal Workforce Act" proposed in past Congresses.
- 3** Create a viable temporary-worker visa program to match legal foreign-born workers with willing employers.

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In Iowa, immigrants are **1.7 times** as likely as U.S. born workers to be employed in the leisure and hospitality sector

we employ immigrants.

Prairie Meadows Recruits Hospitality Employees from Iowa's Many Immigrant Communities

According to Clay Willey, director of Hospitality for Prairie Meadows in Altoona, the sprawling entertainment facility couldn't operate without their immigrant employees. Willey estimates that more than 20 languages are spoken and even more countries are represented by Prairie Meadows' nearly 1,300 employees. "We actively recruit from the local immigrant community," explains Willey. "We find our immigrant workforce to be hard-working and often some of the most loyal team members we hire." Perhaps that's because Prairie Meadows offers highly competitive pay and benefits even for those with limited language skills. What's more, Prairie Meadows has found that working with new immigrants on everything from language learning to maneuvering through a new culture is time well spent. According to Willey, the Prairie Meadows staff often helps new immigrants with English learning, filing important paperwork, setting up bank accounts, obtaining drivers licenses and more. "Our immigrant team members make us better," says Willey. "We are happy to be part of their pursuit of the American Dream."

Faces of Diversity

(Front Row from left) **Nathamon Thompson** immigrated to the U.S. from Thailand in 2011 on a fiancée VISA. She joined the Prairie Meadows team in 2014 as a part-time server assistant. She has since become full-time. She enjoys interacting with customers and laughs about the "turns of phrase and expressions" she's had to learn in her role. **Martha Gatkuoth** has been a line cook at Prairie Meadows for 11 years. The refugee from Sudan became a citizen in 2007. Her native language is Nuer and she credits many of her language skills to her time in the kitchen at Prairie Meadows. "I love to learn," says Martha. **Maria Villanueva** came to the U.S. from El Salvador in 1997 as a high school student. She joined the Prairie Meadows team in 2012 and quickly moved from an assistant server to a banquet server. "There are so many opportunities for promotions here," says Maria who currently has a TPS work permit but is working toward gaining her citizenship. Maria loves working in banquet operations, "We get to meet so many people and be part of their special days," says Maria with a smile.



(Second Row from left) **Executive Sous Chef Aguié Qunitana** is an award-winning chef that has been delighting Prairie Meadows patrons for 16 years. He came to the U.S. from Mexico in 1995 and became a citizen in 2010. "There's no limit to what you can do here," says Aguié. **James Anaal**, a native of Sudan, came to the U.S. as a refugee via Egypt in 2000. He speaks three languages and joined the Prairie Meadows team in 2006. He quickly moved through the ranks from part time server to full time server to banquet captain. He says the growth in the hospitality industry and at Prairie Meadows can't be beat. "There's no limit to what I can do here," says James. **Yuphadee Newbern** came to the U.S. from Thailand in 2009. She currently has a green card but intends to pursue her citizenship. "I love the U.S. but there are some things that are hard to get used to... like wearing shoes in the house," jokes Yuphadee. She joined the Prairie Meadows team 18 months ago and likes her coworkers, customers and the opportunities she has for growth and promotion.

Mentors Matter

Ask nearly any immigrant working in Iowa's hospitality industry about how they got their start and they'll likely tell you how important their "boss" was. Mentors matter greatly to the immigrant population. Take **Musa Lula**, who came to the United States from Ethiopia after fleeing his native Eritrea. Musa followed Vivian's Diner & Drink's Owner Jeff Duncan to his new restaurant after working for Jeff in another restaurant. "He has helped me learn how to respect myself and help others," says Musa of Jeff. "He has taught me so many things." Musa, a high school graduate, works to help his family while he studies the construction trade at DMACC.



Paying It Forward

Since the time of Governor Robert Ray, Iowa has embraced refugees and immigrants, and the hospitality industry has been the first job for many new immigrants. **Imre Torok**, came to the United States from Hungary in 1986 seeking political asylum. He arrived with a great sense of hospitality experience—having worked in European hotels and being trained as a baker—but knowing only two words of English—Thank You. That was enough for Michael LaValle, General Manager of the Des Moines Embassy Club who was then operating his own restaurant, LaValle's. He hired Imre who started as a dishwasher, then became a busser, and then banquet server. He followed Michael to the Embassy Club and became a banquet captain, fine dining server and eventually banquet director. Today he manages the downtown club and annually is charged with overseeing the multi-million dollar operation. He hires and manages a banquet team that includes many immigrants. "If you hire people with good character, attitude and personality, you can train them to become excellent in everything," says Imre. "I love this country and the opportunities its provided me. I want to make sure I return the favor Michael LaValle gave me when I first arrived."



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