



All in for a Thriving Connecticut

Opportunities to Support Upward Mobility for the State's Immigrant Families

Margie McHugh
Julia Gelatt

with Colleen Putzel-Kavanaugh
Katherine Habben
Jacob Hofstetter
Julie Sugarman

Executive Summary

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Immigrants and their children are a vital part of Connecticut's present and its future. The 549,000 immigrants living in Connecticut in 2019–23 made up 15 percent of the state population, and immigrants were responsible for all of the state's population and workforce growth over the last decade and a half. In addition, nearly half of Connecticut's immigrant residents had lived in the United States for more than 20 years, and 30 percent of the state's children were part of immigrant families, with the vast majority of these children U.S. citizens.

Most immigrants in Connecticut, as in the country overall, are successful and self-sufficient. In 2019–23, roughly two in five immigrants in the state had a bachelor's or higher degree, more than 60 percent reported speaking English very well or as their

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primary language, and immigrants were working at higher rates than U.S.-born residents. Immigrants across the country are estimated to contribute billions to state and local government budgets. However, many also face periodic economic challenges, and most immigrants can benefit from integration support in their first several years in the United States.

With an eye to the state's future vitality, this report focuses on key state policies and service systems that aim to support upward mobility for all Connecticut families, examining ways in which they meet needs of low-income immigrants and their children and how they might more effectively do so. It explores eight policy domains: adult education and workforce development, housing, issues affecting low-wage workers, health care and social assistance, small businesses, immigration legal services, K-12 education, and early childhood services. The study also considers opportunities to improve statewide coordination on immigrant integration and immigration policy issues. The analysis draws in part on interviews with dozens of experts, service providers, state employees, and other stakeholders who shared insights on how state agencies, community organizations, and others are working to meet the needs of immigrant families and where there are opportunities to improve policies, practices, and funding structures.

Some of the key findings and recommendations that emerged from this analysis include:

Adult Education and Workforce Development

Adult skills programs, delivered primarily via Connecticut's adult education and workforce development systems, provide services that can play an important role in supporting the linguistic, economic, and civic integration of the state's immigrants. Through adult education programs, which are delivered by local school districts, nonprofit organizations, and libraries, immigrants can access English acquisition, high school equivalency, and civics (or citizenship) courses. Such programming can support the success of the almost 40 percent of the state's immigrants who have limited proficiency in English, and the almost 20 percent of adult immigrants who have less than a high school diploma or equivalent.

Through the workforce development system, immigrants can access general workforce center services such as job search information. Those with work authorization may also be able to participate in workforce preparation programs, including apprenticeships (and pre-apprenticeships) and job training programs. These services can be particularly relevant to immigrants' economic integration, given that roughly half of the state's immigrant adults are employed in low-skilled jobs and many seek to earn higher wages and lift their career trajectories.

Despite the potential for these systems to support immigrants' integration and economic mobility, persistent challenges have kept Connecticut from realizing this promise. Compared to some other states, the adult education system receives significant state support, though these resources are still not sufficient to meet state residents' needs for services. Programs report significant capacity challenges, often lacking

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teachers and other resources needed to meet demand for English and civics courses. And within the state workforce system, some local workforce boards' programs are responsive and accessible to immigrants, but the system overall lacks high-level efforts to leverage the potential of the state's immigrant workers to meet employer and industry needs. This system is also in flux, adjusting to contractions in services following the spend-down of federal COVID-19 recovery dollars. Finally,

insufficient coordination between the two systems, at both the state and local levels, has resulted in missed opportunities to tap into potential synergies between these systems.

Strategies that could unlock the potential of the state's adult education and workforce development programming to better support immigrants' integration and contributions to the state workforce include:

- ▶ **Increasing the capacity of adult education programs to provide English instruction and support integration of the state's immigrant population.** This should involve emphasizing approaches such as career-contextualized English instruction and digital skills programs, along with strategic investments by the state to ensure there are enough adult educators to meet demand for services.
- ▶ **Expanding initiatives and incentives for the public workforce system to serve individuals with English acquisition and training needs.** Most immigrants come to workforce programs already employed; what they mainly seek is contextualized English combined with training for additional in-demand skills, including those relevant to jobs with local employers. Workforce services providers would benefit from additional state guidance and resources for serving clients with both English acquisition and training needs.
- ▶ **Supporting local providers in navigating federal policy and funding changes, and charting a course to leverage system strengths.** Immigration-status-related restrictions as well as changes to the structure and amount of federal funding are likely to create new and serious challenges for Connecticut's adult skills programs, particularly its adult education providers. State officials should aid programs in navigating these challenges, and engage with system stakeholders to analyze

implications of the shifting policy and funding environment and to chart a course that most effectively leverages system strengths and assets to meet adult skill needs.

Housing

Finding safe, stable, and affordable housing is important for all Connecticut residents, but can pose particular challenges for immigrant families. Escalating rent prices, a significant shortage of affordable units, slow bureaucratic processes, and limited tenant protections leave numerous families cost-burdened and in a precarious situation. Immigrants disproportionately face these and other challenges as a result of language barriers and various forms of discrimination and exploitation.

The confluence of broad structural issues and barriers more specific to immigrant families is evident in reports of landlords imposing unfair rental terms, violating health and safety codes, and neglecting maintenance requests. Language barriers and limited systems knowledge can complicate exercising one's housing rights, finding replacement housing in a tight rental market, and navigating code enforcement processes, which can be time-consuming and result in penalties often too weak to motivate landlord compliance. Intimidation of renters either presumed or known to lack a legal immigration status, including threats to report them to immigration enforcement should they seek to exercise their rights, were also reported to be common.

With the state's interconnected housing affordability and availability crises and related topics regularly on the agenda of community and government leaders, the report notes several actions that could be particularly helpful in improving housing stability and protections for immigrant and low-income renters:

- ▶ **Scale up municipal housing code enforcement systems.** Many municipalities in Connecticut lack the capacities to adequately document and enforce municipal building codes and thereby ensure basic standards of habitability are met in rental units. Local governments should allocate resources sufficient to allow code enforcement bodies to conduct regular inspections, particularly in high-risk areas, and to promptly respond to tenant complaints regarding unsafe or subpar living conditions. Full implementation of the state's new law allowing municipalities to automatically place liens on properties for unpaid fines as well as raising fines for subpar conditions or code violations can further deter landlords from neglecting their responsibilities.
- ▶ **Expand tenant protections and provide robust support for legal advice and other initiatives helping tenants exercise their housing rights.** Maintaining and expanding efforts that help tenants understand and exercise their housing rights are essential, as is ensuring these supports reach and are accessible to immigrant communities. Key programs include those offering legal advice on tenant-landlord matters, direct representation in eviction proceedings under the state's Right to Counsel program, tenant organizing initiatives, and local government efforts such as municipal ombudsman offices. Adopting state measures such as expansion of just-cause eviction protections could also help protect more tenants from retaliatory evictions.
- ▶ **Bring affordability initiatives to scale, including by building the capacities of nonprofit organizations to take a leading role in developing affordable housing.** Near-term actions that

can help ameliorate impacts of the state's housing affordability crisis include expanded and effective use of fair rent commissions and continued expansions in funding for the state's Rental Assistance Program to better meet needs. Scaling housing creation over the longer term faces many challenges, particularly barriers posed by restrictive local zoning laws and the high costs of creating new homes. Yet the 2025 omnibus housing bill passed by the legislature advanced numerous consequential measures, providing hope that state initiatives of meaningful scale could be possible in the near future. Interviewees noted that significant scaling of affordable housing will require similar scaling of skilled and trusted partners to assist state efforts. Building on its prior initiatives, the state should create vehicles to leverage and scale the expertise of existing nonprofit partners while helping others build similar capacities. Scaling up partners that can assist in expanding alternative housing models (such as land trusts and renter-owned communities) should also be a goal of such capacity-building efforts.

Issues Affecting Low-Wage Workers

Immigrants are overrepresented in Connecticut's low-wage workforce, and they have driven all growth in this workforce since 2006–10. Low-wage immigrant workers are concentrated in service; production, transportation, and material moving; and natural resources, construction, and maintenance occupations. The state has seen sizable wage growth among its lowest earners in recent years, likely driven by a 2019 state law mandating annual updates to the state minimum wage, tied to broader economic indicators. However, some low-wage workers in Connecticut—immigrant and U.S. born alike—face challenges to their ability to earn steady wages and enjoy the full protections of labor law.

Connecticut's ability to enforce labor laws has been strongly affected by disinvestment in the state Department of Labor. The department has seen its staffing levels fall, recovered less in owed wages for workers, and seen its backlog of cases awaiting investigation rise. This has created an environment that some observers argue invites employers to underpay or otherwise mistreat workers. Immigrant workers are often less aware than other workers of their rights under wage, hour, and workplace safety laws. And they may be more reluctant to assert their rights or report bad employers to state authorities, particularly if they have only temporary legal status in the United States, or no legal status at all.

Connecticut has invested in educating some immigrant-dense segments of its workforce, such as domestic workers, about their rights. But there is more the state could do to maintain strong labor law and wage standards for all residents. Recommendations include:

- ▶ Prioritize state funding to expand Department of Labor inspection efforts, focusing on investigations of larger employers in sectors where labor violation rates are known to be high.
- ▶ Increase efforts to educate immigrant workers about their rights in the workplace, what systems exist for them to seek recourse, and how noncitizens' immigration status does and does not affect their ability to access enforcement systems if they face abuses.
- ▶ Strengthen the labor division within the attorney general's office to focus on prosecuting civil violations of labor laws, as has been done in other states.

Health Care and Social Assistance

Low-income immigrant families' access to safety net programs such as food and cash assistance and public health insurance is strongly shaped by both federal and state laws. Rates of access to public health insurance, in turn, shape these families' ability to access needed preventative and specialized health care, with benefits that extend to broader community health and reduced uncompensated care costs.

Connecticut has taken a number of steps that have helped to expand low-income immigrant families' health-care access, but challenges remain. The state has taken up options to expand public health insurance, with federal funding, to children and pregnant women with lawful permanent resident status (also known as a green card) during their first five years in that status, and to fund prenatal care for pregnant women regardless of their immigration status. Connecticut has also dedicated state funds to providing public health insurance for children ages 15 and under regardless of immigration status. The state's federally qualified health centers and school-based health centers have created a network of basic health care for all state residents, including those who lack insurance. Yet changes may be ahead for certain noncitizens' access to such health centers, and more broadly, many immigrant families still face barriers to needed health care, including transportation barriers, limited access to medical specialists, language barriers and/or cultural misunderstandings between providers and patients, and difficulties navigating unfamiliar and confusing health systems.

Recommendations to improve immigrants' access to health care include:

- ▶ Increase the availability of in-person interpretation services for Spanish speakers and speakers of languages that have become more common in the state, such as Haitian Creole.
- ▶ Leverage strategic partnerships between health-care providers, community-based organizations, and other institutions trusted by immigrant communities to integrate broader social services with medical services.
- ▶ When funding is available, consider expanding HUSKY (Connecticut's Medicaid program) to a broader set of state residents, regardless of immigration status, or consider exploring options to expand access to private insurance through the state health care exchange to state residents currently excluded by their immigration status.

Small Business Development

As is the case across the country, immigrants in Connecticut are more likely than the native born to start and run small businesses, including restaurants and other food service establishments, construction companies, and landscaping and other home and property services. Businesses such as these provide important services to the state's residents and contribute immensely to the vitality of many of its cities and towns. However, Connecticut ranks low among U.S. states for ease of launching new businesses, and interviewed stakeholders described start-up funds and small business support programs as focused on potential high-value or "big fish" enterprises, and less so on the types of businesses the state's immigrants tend to start and operate. The "paper culture" of the United States—meaning its finance, banking, tax, zoning, health and

safety, and other regulations—can also be quite different from the business environment immigrants may be familiar with from their countries of origin.

Strategies for removing barriers and more fully tapping the entrepreneurial energies of the state’s current and future immigrant-led small businesses include:

- ▶ Strengthen partnerships among the state’s various business support programs and local entities to ensure services intended for local entrepreneurs are visible, accessible, and relevant to local immigrant-led businesses and potential start-ups.
- ▶ Make legal requirements and other technical information more accessible to speakers of languages other than English by translating key documents into top languages spoken by the state’s immigrants.
- ▶ Ensure that ethnic media outlets and business associations serving local immigrant communities are included when state and local government entities distribute procurement and other business partnership opportunities.
- ▶ To inform state and local economic development efforts, survey immigrant-led businesses and gather information on particular barriers they may face and services that would be helpful to their growth.

Immigration Legal Services

Noncitizens navigating the complexities of the U.S. immigration system often need help from legal service providers, whether to apply for more-durable forms of status (e.g., asylum, permanent residence, or citizenship), to sponsor family members’ immigration to the United States, or to explore possible options to stay in the United States after being placed into removal proceedings. Demand for immigration legal services in Connecticut has greatly increased as more newcomers with temporary statuses (such as humanitarian parole) have arrived in the state in recent years, and as the Trump administration has sought to end temporary protections and ramp up arrests and deportations of unauthorized immigrants. Legal service providers in Connecticut, like those across the country, are struggling to meet even a portion of this demand. At the same time, a large body of evidence shows that having representation greatly increases due process, boosting case efficiency and noncitizens’ ability to obtain protections for which they qualify.

Affordable legal services (whether pro bono or low bono) have traditionally been more available for immigrants seeking help with simpler application processes, which require less time and expertise than representation in immigration court. Assistance with asylum cases and defense against removal is harder to come by in Connecticut, and funding for such services has largely come from private sources. Only some legal service providers in the state are able to handle any removal defense cases, and of those, most are only able to accommodate a small number of cases at a time.

To ensure due process, policymakers and funders could consider several recommendations:

- ▶ Increase funding for immigration legal services, and ensure the funding is flexible enough for providers to use in ways that best increase their capacity. Some organizations need more lawyers, while others could use more interpreters, social workers, paralegals, or other support staff. Such

funding could be targeted to localities with fewer providers, or to boost representation rates among immigrant groups that do not speak Spanish and may be left out of mainstream systems.

- ▶ Incentivize creative approaches to meeting noncitizens' legal support needs despite funding shortfalls. Strategies to stretch available funding include adopting a workflow model that maximizes the contributions by non-lawyer staff; pro se (self-representation) clinics; and trainings and written materials that help noncitizens prepare themselves and their families for the risk of arrest, detention, or removal.
- ▶ Educate staff of state agencies that may play a role in immigrants' legal cases—including law enforcement and departments of motor vehicles—about how their agencies' work intersects with immigration law and policy. As part of this, efforts could be made to strengthen working relationships between these agencies and legal service providers.

K-12 Education

Access to free, public elementary and secondary education has powered the successful integration of children from immigrant and refugee families into the mainstream of U.S. civic and economic life for generations. Many immigrant-background children (those with at least one foreign-born parent) are classified as English Learners (ELs, also known as Multilingual Learners or MLs), meaning they are receiving English acquisition instruction at the same time as they are learning course content required for their grade level. EL enrollment in Connecticut K-12 schools increased by more than 17,000 students between school years 2016–17 and 2023–24, and their share of the student population grew from 6.8 percent to 10.5 percent. While ELs are enrolled in the vast majority of the state's school districts, they are concentrated in its larger towns and cities, particularly the Bridgeport, Danbury, Hartford, New Haven, and Waterbury school systems.

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The study's analysis of K-12 education supports for immigrant-background and EL children placed a heavy focus on instructional quality for ELs and their access to effective program designs, as well as system capacities for effective and meaningful communication with parents. Broadly speaking, the study found that while the state's policies signal that quality instructional programs should be used for ELs, its system design lacks structures and other capacities to support the creation and scaling of such programs. This is at the root of other key findings, including that appropriate instructional designs for ELs are not well supported or widely available, even when required; that general education teachers frequently lack preparation to work effectively with ELs; and that K-12 system leaders and teacher educators within higher education often do not have EL expertise. The lack of consistent implementation of effective program models can be seen through comparison to other states; for example, Oregon and Connecticut have comparable numbers of EL students, but while Oregon has 140 dual language programs, Connecticut has approximately 25.

Connecticut has a number of opportunities to ensure education leaders at the school, district, and state levels have the technical support and capacities to more fully realize the goals of existing state education policies and, in doing so, to support the success of EL and immigrant-background students. These include:

- ▶ Convene a state legislative task force to examine the existing educational programs and resources districts and schools are using to support EL and immigrant students' success, the obstacles they face in bringing quality designs to scale, and steps that should be taken to facilitate optimal scaling.
- ▶ Increase the number of expert staff within the Connecticut State Department of Education and regional educational service centers who are able to support schools and districts in implementing EL and bilingual program models that meet the expectations and requirements set forth in state policies.
- ▶ Increase the number of institutions of higher education with the capacity to prepare teachers of ELs, especially bilingual certified teachers, in order to help the state's K-12 schools provide effective instructional programming at the scale needed.
- ▶ Step up support for school and system efforts that meaningfully engage and partner with immigrant parents, including establishing EL/ML advisory councils, expanding two-generation programming focused on integration topics and challenges, and measures aimed at helping parents understand and navigate U.S. school processes.

Early Childhood System Services

Reams of research demonstrate the links between young children's early brain development and their future education and career success, making the quality and accessibility of early childhood services of vital importance to Connecticut's youngest residents. This includes several services for children ages 0–5, particularly child care, preschool, home visiting, and Birth to Three programs.

Children in immigrant families made up 29 percent of the state's young child population as of 2023. And in 2019–23, 37 percent of Connecticut children ages 0–5 were Dual Language Learners (DLLs), meaning they had at least one parent who speaks a language other than English at home. Given these significant numbers, state policymakers and service providers face important questions related to the extent to which early childhood services are available, affordable, and accessible to these children and their families. In addition, DLLs are disproportionately likely to come from low-income households and to have parents with low levels of formal education, characteristics that make them important targets for such services. The question is how to improve the capacities of early childhood services to address the particular cognitive, socioemotional, and language development needs of DLL and immigrant-background children via effective instructional designs—capacities that, to date, are uneven and underdeveloped.

Opportunities to build these capacities fall broadly into two categories: scaling up early childhood services to match the level of need for them, and ensuring services are prepared to support children of all backgrounds, including DLLs and those from immigrant families. Recommendations include:

- ▶ **Expand the state's bilingual instruction requirement to include 4-year-olds in preschool programs.** While such a requirement may initially be difficult to implement across all early education

programs, focusing its implementation on preschool programs run by public schools is feasible and would dovetail well with efforts to expand quality instructional designs for DLLs and ELs in the state's elementary schools.

- ▶ **Identify DLLs across all early childhood service settings, leveraging Early Start CT to develop and expand uniform practices.** There is a particularly urgent need to identify DLLs in early childhood education and care settings, as a means to both put critically important information into the hands of frontline staff and support system-level efforts to improve program services. The creation of Early Start CT provides an important opportunity to achieve these goals: it can serve as a cornerstone for a coordinated approach across state early childhood programs and generate standardized data the state can leverage to inform professional development offerings, staff recruitment and hiring, and broader system planning efforts.
- ▶ **Invest in educator and administrator skills.** While efforts have been made to share information about and encourage use of instructional designs that are effective for DLL children, Connecticut does not appear to have workable strategies for ensuring their implementation at a scale commensurate with local needs. A key element of such strategies would be investing in educator and administrator skills, including through relevant courses and degrees at the state's institutions of higher education and through in-service offerings. Developing these strategies in tandem with efforts to strengthen dual language programs in elementary schools could improve the continuity and effectiveness of service across early childhood and K-12 systems.
- ▶ **Create and sustain multilingual campaigns to strengthen parents' knowledge of early childhood development and teaching strategies.** With several of the state's early childhood programs manifestly unable to meet service demands, and nearly all programs short on workers with the skills to effectively engage with parents who have limited English proficiency, state and community actors should seek to arm immigrant parents with accessible resources to help them boost their children's early learning and healthy development. This could include utilizing emerging technologies to share multilingual information and resources as well as in-person learning opportunities.

Statewide Coordination

Immigration and immigrant integration are twin issues that intersect in complex ways with many other policy areas. Looking to the future, this underscores the importance of building the state's capacities to understand and address these dynamics in a more coordinated fashion. Many other states have taken steps to study issues affecting their immigrant families, coordinate efficient responses to particular needs, and/or create standing capacity within government to build expertise and lead responses as needed.

Actions such as these can serve as models for Connecticut, offering ways to equip its leaders with the knowledge and means to better respond to integration and immigration policy needs and opportunities:

- ▶ **Creation of a state Office of New Americans.** Such offices exist in more than 15 states, though their placement within state bureaucracies varies. Their roles typically include coordinating state agency responses to integration and immigration policy concerns and advising the governor and agency executives on immigrant community and state agency concerns. Maine is the most recent state to

create such an office, which it launched in early 2025 and situated within the Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future. Its priorities include workforce pathways and entrepreneurship support for immigrants, improving coordination among organizations supporting immigrants, and expanding and strengthening English language acquisition opportunities.

- ▶ **Formulation of a New Americans Agenda.** The Massachusetts Office for Refugees and Immigrants, created in 1992, is one of the older state offices focused on newcomer concerns. A 2008 executive order by the state's governor redoubled the focus on addressing integration needs and created the Governor's Advisory Council for Refugees and Immigrants, directing it to work with the Office for Refugees and Immigrants and to oversee a unique statewide research and consultation process to identify ways to ensure full inclusion of immigrants and refugees in the state's economic and civic life. The resulting New Americans Agenda contains scores of recommendations that continue to shape state priorities and actions to this day in areas such as English language acquisition programs, entrepreneurship supports, and recognition of professional degrees and training obtained outside the United States.
- ▶ **Coordination of language access initiatives across state agencies.** Addressing language barriers in agencies' public-facing activities is both a practical matter, as states seek to protect public health and safety, as well as a requirement under federal civil rights law, which seeks to ensure that language barriers do not prevent individuals from accessing information or services to which they are entitled. Rather than have individual agencies or major programs develop individual translation and interpretation services policies and negotiate service provider contracts, some states and localities set an overarching policy and provide varying levels of coordination for these services. Policies in states such as New Jersey, New York, and Massachusetts typically set standards for such services, require development of language access plans by state agencies and their major programs, and create coordination and technical assistance resources to guide agency efforts. Additional important policy goals are achieving cost reductions and contracting efficiencies by aggregating demand.

Connecticut, like all states, is facing immense uncertainty about whether federal funding streams it has long relied upon will continue into the future, with potential implications for everything from the quality of its children's K-12 education to the vibrancy of its small business community. This comes as the state

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is adjusting to the end of pandemic-era federal funding infusions, and major funding cuts imposed by the Trump administration. Amid this uncertainty, and at a time of close federal attention to state policies toward immigrants, some of this study's recommendations may be actionable in the near term, while others may become actionable in years ahead, after the state has had time to adjust to new

realities. In the long term, finding ways to support the upward mobility of all Connecticut families, including immigrant families, will be critical to maintaining the vitality of the state's economic and civic life.

To read the full report, see:

www.migrationpolicy.org/research/connecticut-families

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Inquiries can be directed to communications@migrationpolicy.org.