



CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS

SUPPORTING ESSENTIAL WORKERS, GROWTH, AND CHANGE DURING COVID-19

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I. INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has recently brought Nebraska onto the national and international stage, and the attention is not all positive. To begin, the state's strong economy has attracted a growing number of immigrants to both rural and urban areas. Criticisms have been raised around the lack of access to adequate protections for these immigrants who are filling roles of essential workers and being exposed to the virus on the job. This has led to a disproportionate amount of ethnic and racial minorities contracting COVID-19. If the state wants to keep our towns strong, healthy, and growing, we will need to include, support, and consult many of Nebraska's most vulnerable essential workers when creating change that protects everybody.

Today, our state is facing the crisis of a century, and some of our most essential workers have the greatest risk. Whether we are laborers, neighbors, family members, or friends of those employed in meat processing facilities, we need to listen to their stories, recognize immediacy, and provide support. We should help not only because immigrant workers are the backbone of Nebraska's growing communities in both rural and urban areas, but due to the immediate and dire situation they, our neighbors, friends, and family face.

In the U.S. food processing industry, 49.1 percent of jobs are occupied by immigrants.¹ Those foreign born account for 21.6 percent of all food sector workers, which makes up 3.8 million workers exposed to COVID-19.² These numbers are further exemplified, as "Among 9,919 (61 percent) cases in 21 states with reported race/ethnicity, 87 percent occurred among racial and ethnic minority workers."³ More locally, since Oct. 2, Nebraska's meatpacking plants accounted for 1 in 5 of the state's confirmed cases at more than 5,000 people infected and 21 deaths.⁴ Each one of these people were placed at risk for economic incentives.

1 "Covid-19: Immigrant Workers Are Essential in Securing U.S. Food Supply Chain." New American Economy Research Fund, April 16, 2020, research.newamericaneconomy.org/report/covid-19-immigrant-food-workers/. Accessed November 2020.

2 Ibid.

3 Waltenburg, Michelle A., et al. "Update: COVID-19 Among Workers in Meat and Poultry Processing Facilities-United States, April-May 2020." Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, July 10, 2020, doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6927e2. Accessed November 2020.

4 Lussenhop, Jessica. "Tony Vargas in Nebraska: The human cost of political inaction on COVID." BBC News, Oct. 2, 2020, [bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-54183191#:~:text=Of%20the%20state's%2025%2C000%20Covid,related%20deaths%20among%20meatpacking%20workers](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-54183191#:~:text=Of%20the%20state's%2025%2C000%20Covid,related%20deaths%20among%20meatpacking%20workers). Accessed November 2020.

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Since late October, national estimates of COVID-19 among meatpacking workers have reached over 50,000 and at least 255 have lost their lives.⁵ According to more conservative estimates, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) outlines among the 23 states reporting COVID-19 (many states are not reporting) in the meat and poultry processing sector, 16,233 cases and 239 fatalities were reported.⁶ Nebraska is leading the country with more than 5,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases among meatpacking facility plant workers and 21 deaths.⁷ Erik Omar, executive director of Immigrant Legal Center, writes, “Sixty-six percent of Nebraska’s meat processing workers are immigrants, many of whom are unjustly denied access to unemployment benefits and not allowed to receive stimulus money through the most recent CARES Act.”⁸ Indeed, immigrants are essential workers and community members who pay their fair share of state and federal taxes.⁹ Protecting and supporting the individuals most at risk secures each of our families’, friends’, and neighbors’ health in this uncertain time. One area increasingly at risk is our rural communities.

For more than 100 years, Nebraskans have developed and demonstrated a keen ability to grow, adapt, work hard, listen, and build communities that the nation can look to as an example of resilience and inclusion. However, if you fast forward just a few months from early outbreaks,

the situation became more serious, as state politicians insisted meatpacking plants and other manufacturing centers stay open without reporting COVID-19 cases.¹⁰ By Dec. 10, there were a total of 145,836 COVID-19 cases across Nebraska and 1,348 deaths.¹¹ Whether you believe these services should or should not be open, COVID-19 is disproportionately impacting Nebraskans of color. As Nebraskans, our responsibility is to address and improve the circumstances that immigrants are forced to operate within.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, we are reminded that 19.3 percent of the population lives in rural America, and they live on 97 percent of the country’s land.¹² Where one lives should not dictate access to safe employment, good health care, and a high quality standard of living. Yet, COVID-19 cases in rural America are increasing and these communities are no longer as “off the grid” as we’d like to think. Nationally, there are 15.8 million cases of COVID-19 and 294,362 deaths as of Dec. 10.¹³ Regardless of how you cut the data, rural areas share 2,239,095 of reported COVID-19 cases, which accounts for 38,172 deaths as of Dec. 5.¹⁴ Not being exempt, rural and urban people alike are called to come together and find tangible solutions to this expanding problem.

5 Douglas, Leah. “Mapping COVID-19 outbreaks in the food system.” Food & Environment Reporting Network, April 22, 2020, thefern.org/2020/04/mapping-covid-19-in-meat-and-food-processing-plants/. Accessed November 2020.

6 “CDC COVID Data Tracker, United States COVID-19 Cases and Deaths by State.” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#cases. Accessed July 2020.

7 Gamboa, Suzanne. “Coronavirus Reported in over half of Latino meat, poultry workers in 21 states, CDC says.” NBC News, July 8, 2020, [nbcnews.com/news/latino/coronavirus-reported-over-half-latino-meat-poultry-workers-21-states-n1233192](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/coronavirus-reported-over-half-latino-meat-poultry-workers-21-states-n1233192). Accessed November 2020.

8 “Lack of COVID protections threatens Nebraska workers, communities, food production.” Immigrant Legal Center, April 29, 2020, immigrantlc.org/foodworkerscovid/. Accessed November 2020.

9 Ibid.

10 Walton, Don. “Ricketts says meatpacking plants need to stay open.” Lincoln Journal Star, April 23, 2020, [journalstar.com/news/state-and-regional/govt-and-politics/ricketts-says-meatpacking-plants-need-to-stay-open/article_c670fce7-7930-58b6-87fb-c7e0e5938194.html](https://www.journalstar.com/news/state-and-regional/govt-and-politics/ricketts-says-meatpacking-plants-need-to-stay-open/article_c670fce7-7930-58b6-87fb-c7e0e5938194.html). Accessed November 2020.

11 “Nebraska COVID Map and Case Count.” The New York Times, [nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/nebraska-coronavirus-cases.html](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/nebraska-coronavirus-cases.html). Accessed October 2020.

12 “What Is Rural America? One in Five Americans Live in Rural Areas.” U.S. Census Bureau, Aug. 9, 2017, [census.gov/library/stories/2017/08/rural-america.html](https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2017/08/rural-america.html). Accessed November 2020.

13 “COVID in the U.S.: Latest Map and Case Count.” The New York Times, [nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/coronavirus-us-cases.html](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/coronavirus-us-cases.html). Accessed October 2020.

14 “COVID-19 Dashboard for Rural America.” Daily Yonder, [dailyyonder.com/covid-19-dashboard-for-rural-america](https://www.dailyyonder.com/covid-19-dashboard-for-rural-america). Accessed December 2020.

II. COMPLICATING THE NARRATIVE

COVID-19 is not restricted to densely populated urban areas. In a similar tone, racially and ethnically nonwhite populations also live away from cities and coastlines, contrary to over simplistic and racist notions of residence. For example, when most people hear “boomtowns” they may think of North Dakota oil towns or other types and/or places of new energy development. Yet, immigration is increasingly being understood as connected to boomtowns emerging across rural America. What this means is that rural areas are no longer understood as strictly off the grid, as they are becoming more internationally connected. This intertwined global situation has opened rural areas as important places for immigration resettlement.

Almost 60 million people in the U.S. live in rural areas, or 1 in 5 Americans.¹⁵ These numbers may not surprise anyone, but if you consider nonwhite populations in these areas, the figures get more complex. In 2010, racial and ethnic minorities in nonmetropolitan centers accounted for 10.3 million people or one-fifth of rural residents.¹⁶ This reminds us that rural America is not nearly as homogenous as many narratives would suggest, and growing minority populations in rural Nebraska are complicating this narrative.

To untangle these numbers, let’s make sense of a couple terms. To begin, “demographic structure” includes the age, gender, and racial or ethnic composition of a population in a particular place and time. Next, “demographic restructuring” refers to substantive changes in these components.¹⁷ These definitions help clear a

path for understanding how industry, people, and cultures are in a constant process of shaping one another whether we can recognize it on the surface or not. Indeed, racial and ethnic diversity has a demographic and economic grip on rural America, now and into the foreseeable future.¹⁸ In modern news, media, academia, and politics, rural areas are often ignored, as they are incorrectly understood as homogeneously white and without material struggles. This simplified story ignores the complex relationships taking place across various identities that include racial and ethnic differences.

Following demographic data, this culturally homogenous narrative is found to be inaccurate. In regard to foreign-born persons, only North Dakota, West Virginia, and South Dakota witnessed faster growth rates than Nebraska between 2010 and 2016.¹⁹ During this period, Nebraska witnessed a 20 percent growth in foreign-born population, and the data continually tells a story of a large and expanding foreign-born and migrant population in Nebraska.²⁰ While our communities change, adapt, and grow, we recognize that community infrastructure needs to be rethought, remade, and recreated to help all in the state. Policy needs to resist dominant narratives that ascribe rural areas as totalizing white. Across the nation and Nebraska, people too often forget about the lives of Black, Native American, Asian, nonwhite Latino, immigrants, LGBTQ+, and disabled people. Only with the help of all these voices can our state create a more honest narrative that helps everyone inch closer to beating COVID-19 together.

15 “What Is Rural America? One in Five Americans Live in Rural Areas.” U.S. Census Bureau, Aug. 9, 2017, [census.gov/library/stories/2017/08/rural-america.html](https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2017/08/rural-america.html). Accessed November 2020.

16 Lichter, Daniel T. “Immigration and the New Racial Diversity in Rural America.” *Rural Sociology Society*, vol. 77, no. 1, pp. 3-35, March 1, 2012, doi: 10.1111/j.1549-0831.2012.00070.x. Accessed November 2020.

17 Barcus, Holly R., and Laura Simmons. “Ethnic Restructuring in Rural America: Migration and the Changing Faces of Rural Communities in the Great Plains.” *The Professional Geographer*, vol. 65, no. 1, pp. 130-152, March 9, 2012, doi.org/10.1080/00330124.2012.658713. Accessed November 2020.

18 Lichter, Daniel T. “Immigration and the New Racial Diversity in Rural America.” *Rural Sociology Society*, vol. 77, no. 1, pp. 3-35, March 1, 2012, doi: 10.1111/j.1549-0831.2012.00070.x. Accessed November 2020.

19 Batalova, Jeanne, and Elijah Alperin. “Immigrants in the U.S. States with the Fastest-Growing Foreign-Born Populations.” Migration Policy Institute, July 10, 2018, [migrationpolicy.org/article/immigrants-us-states-fastest-growing-foreign-born-populations-2016](https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/immigrants-us-states-fastest-growing-foreign-born-populations-2016). Accessed November 2020.

20 Ibid.

III. WHY IS THIS RELEVANT TODAY AT THE PEAK OF THE COVID-19 EPIDEMIC?

In the midst of COVID-19 chaos, we must ask if our policymakers are producing agendas and legislation that have Nebraska's most vulnerable and underserved essential workers in mind, as rural areas are increasingly among the hardest hit from this virus. Again, rural communities are much more ambiguous than we often think, as there are varying definitions and many formerly classified rural spaces are absorbed by metropolitan centers. Even so, what is rural and urban is much more blended than we might imagine. The commonality between the two spaces offers the possibility to bridge and support our most underserved essential workers with necessary services and resources to protect all.

Rural Nebraska and America are strong. If Nebraskans are serious about supporting rural communities, people, and families during COVID-19, providing essential support for our most vulnerable populations is a good place to start. In many communities, these people, often immigrants, are the backbone of our schools, businesses, and communities.²¹ We are simply stronger together. The impact of the virus varies greatly across rural states, yet per-capita infections are most extreme in communities occupied by meat-packing plants, predominantly in the Midwest, low-income African American communities in the Southeast, and Native American communities. To create an impact that is measurable, we need to identify the myriad of barriers currently in place and the opportunities created if they are removed.

IV. SYSTEMATIC INFRASTRUCTURE NEEDED AND BARRIERS TO INTEGRATION IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Language is often considered one of the largest hurdles for migrant families to overcome. This is especially true in quickly-changing rural areas as

21 "Update: COVID-19 in Rural America - July 8, 2020." Housing Assistance Council, ruralhome.org/whats-new/mn-coronavirus/1819-covid-19-in-rural-america-update. Accessed November 2020.

many navigate integrating into a new community. Addressing these challenges is vital to accommodate the learning needs of increasingly diverse students, many of whom are in need of cultural services to center on instructional support and English as a second language (ESL) resources.²² Teachers are also calling for increased backing to provide the necessary training and workshops for intercultural understanding. With these structures in place, educators hope to more effectively communicate and connect with students, respect differences, and bridge cultural divides and experiences.

Beyond in-school education, similar resources and infrastructure are needed for social service and public health workers, medical providers, and law enforcement. Not to mention, broadband access is making an impact on the ability of rural communities to reach the previously mentioned resources across our state, region, and nation. Each of these priorities offers rural communities an opportunity to become more cohesive and for all members to better understand and connect with one another.

A. BUILDING AND TRANSITIONING OUR RURAL SPACES TOWARD MORE INCLUSIVE PLACES

Nebraska has long been a state settled by immigrants. Since 1990, new waves of migrants have emerged, altering racial and ethnic demographics. At that time, immigrants represented only 1.8 percent of the state's population. By 2018, that figure had grown to 7 percent. To understand where and how Nebraska communities are growing, we must consider our origins. An important place to start is during the Great Plains population peak and its subsequent out-migration or drain.

The term "brain drain" is commonly used to describe the out-migration of individuals from rural communities toward more metropolitan or suburban centers. Originally, brain drain was used to describe a more global context referring to the out-migration of the most educated and skilled people from the Global South (formerly

22 Lichter, Daniel T. "Immigration and the New Racial Diversity in Rural America." *Rural Sociology Society*, vol. 77, no. 1, pp. 3-35, March 1, 2012, doi: 10.1111/j.1549-0831.2012.00070.x. Accessed November 2020.

referred to as developing or second- or third-world) toward the Global North (developed or first-world). Yet, the origins of brain drain help explain the term's contemporary relevance in migration. Indeed, rural Nebraska is a globalized place that is far from isolated and homogenous.

V. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF RACIAL AND ETHNIC RURAL RESTRUCTURING

States such as Nebraska and Kansas experienced peak populations in 1900 with many other Great Plains states reaching their highest point in 1920 or 1930. This trend would continue until out-migration was fueled by the Great Depression.²³ Following, rural out-migration was again influenced by post-World War II resettlement and the mechanization of agriculture in the 1960s. It was not until the 1970s that manufacturing started to move from urban to rural areas due to lower wages and fewer unions. Because of a high turnover of domestic workers, manufacturing sectors, with an emphasis on meatpacking plants, began to focus on recruiting immigrant labor in the 1980s. This trend surged into the 1990s; Southeast Asian refugees and Latino workers were among those most heavily recruited.²⁴ Ultimately, demographic restructuring led to the development of many multicultural communities across the Great Plains.²⁵

During this time, the agricultural sector began to decline as a growing employer. Yet, manufacturing in the Great Plains grew faster than in other rural regions in the U.S., and the 1970s

brought a specific focus on meatpacking.²⁶ Thus, 1970 marks a strong beginning of nonwhite demographic restructuring, as the Great Plains has been experiencing a rural racial and ethnic reorganization largely peaking in 1990.²⁷ One demonstration of migration in the Great Plains is the younger overall age structure than the U.S. as a whole.²⁸

Age is an integral part of migration, and communities are demographically altered by people moving in and out. Popular audiences are often misinformed about the exact numbers and concentrations of migrants. This creates an incomplete image and ignores proportionate measurements. Looking at 1980 to 2009, rural diversity increased by 40 percent, which was almost as high as metropolitan areas.²⁹ Several of these emerging rural industries are in sectors of agriculture, meatpacking, and construction, which many white native-born workers have been found to avoid.³⁰ Further, rural migration in particular spans across skills in industries that include oil, logging, interior installation, furniture, and textiles. Yet, skillsets are not limited to these sectors.

23 Archer, J. Clark, and Richard E. Lonsdale. "Geography of Population Change and Redistribution Within the Post-Frontier Great Plains." *Great Plains Research*, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 43-61, 2003, [jstor.org/stable/23804534](https://www.jstor.org/stable/23804534). Accessed November 2020.

24 Ibid.

25 Dalla, Rochelle L., et al. "Examining Strengths and Challenges of Rapid Rural Immigration." *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*, 2004, digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1714&context=greatplainsresearch. Accessed November 2020.

26 McGranahan, David A. "Can Manufacturing Reverse Rural Great Plains Depopulation?" *Rural America/Rural Development Perspectives*, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 1998, ideas.repec.org/a/ags/uersra/289741.html. Accessed November 2020.

27 Barcus, Holly R., and Laura Simmons. "Ethnic Restructuring in Rural America: Migration and the Changing Faces of Rural Communities in the Great Plains." *The Professional Geographer*, vol. 65, no. 1, pp. 130-152, March 9, 2012, doi.org/10.1080/00330124.2012.658713. Accessed November 2020.

28 "Population Dynamics of the Great Plains: 1950 to 2007, Population Estimates and Projections." U.S. Census Bureau, July 2009, [census.gov/prod/2009pubs/p25-1137.pdf](https://www.census.gov/prod/2009pubs/p25-1137.pdf). Accessed November 2020.

29 Lichter, Daniel T. "Immigration and the New Racial Diversity in Rural America." *Rural Sociology Society*, vol. 77, no. 1, pp. 3-35, March 1, 2012, [doi: 10.1111/j.1549-0831.2012.00070.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1549-0831.2012.00070.x). Accessed November 2020.

30 Gouveia, Lourdes, et al. "The Great Plains Migration: Mexicanos and Latinos in Nebraska." *New Destinations*, January 2005, [researchgate.net/publication/279756749_The_Great_Plains_Migration_Mexicanos_and_Latinos_in_Nebraska](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/279756749_The_Great_Plains_Migration_Mexicanos_and_Latinos_in_Nebraska). Accessed November 2020.

As we consider each of these historical narratives, we must ask if we equate rural people as being “real Americans,” as rural is often misunderstood as synonymous with white populations. If we reject this narrative, we open up the possibility to integrate our rural communities with new people, ideas, growth, and opportunities for all living in rural America. As a nation, immigrants are responsible for much of the rural growth. One study found 21 percent of population growth was attributed to immigrant workers and families.³¹ For example, between 2000 and 2010, nonwhite populations accounted for almost 83 percent of rural population increase.³² If Nebraskans are serious about their rural communities growing, schools staying open, and hospitals operating, we need to learn more about our neighbors and fellow residents.

Further, what is bringing people here, and how are individuals creating and joining already established communities and support systems? To start, there are important differences between immigrants and refugees. Even as motivations for traveling to the U.S. differ greatly, these communities are often underserved in similar ways. In 2016, Nebraska led the nation with the highest number of refugees settled per capita at 76 per 100,000 residents.³³ Many political leaders across the state have voiced satisfaction in these figures, and they take pride in a strong economy with hard workers. Nebraskans are known and often eager to share their home with those in need.

31 Mathema, Silva, et al. “Revival and Opportunity, Immigrants in Rural America.” Center for American Progress, Sept. 2, 2018, americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/reports/2018/09/02/455269/revival-and-opportunity/. Accessed July 2020.

32 Johnson, Kenneth M. “Rural demographic change in the new century: slower growth, increased diversity.” University of New Hampshire, Carsey School of Public Policy, Feb. 21, 2012, doi.org/10.34051/p/2020.159. Accessed November 2020.

33 Radford, Jynnah, and Phillip Connor. “Just 10 states resettled more than half of recent refugees to U.S.” Pew Research Center, Dec. 6, 2016, pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/12/06/just-10-states-resettled-more-than-half-of-recent-refugees-to-u-s/. Accessed July 2020.

VI. HOW DID RECENT IMMIGRANTS COME TO BE IN NEBRASKA?

Often, politicians frame immigration as a demonized process where migrants and their families “invade” our communities, forgetting about many multigenerational networks. This narrative is both toxic and inaccurate. Americans should recognize the basics of an exploitative recruitment process that brings many immigrants to meat processing plants in urban and rural communities. Residents must educate themselves on the intentionally predatory corporate recruitment tactics of undocumented workers to protect those already exploited during the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁴

First, labor trafficking is complex, as “U.S. citizens, legal permanent residents, foreign nationals with temporary work visas, and undocumented immigrants are all vulnerable to labor trafficking in the agricultural sector.”^{35,36} Yet, this mistreatment is situationally specific, and is not equal across all groups as certain people are disproportionately impacted. Next, meatpacking corporations began to heavily recruit immigrant labor in the 1960s, and it would peak again in the 1980s and 1990s to outcompete rivals, weaken unions, and increase profits.³⁷ In the 1990s, chicken plants drastically

34 Sapna, Jain. “Can We Keep Meatpacking Companies Accountable for Hiring Undocumented Immigrants?” Emory Law, Emory Corporate Governance and Accountability Review, law.emory.edu/ecgar/content/volume-3/issue-3/essays/keep-meatpacking-accountable-hiring-undocumented-immigrants.html. Accessed November 2020.

35 Fitch, Claire, et al. “Public Health, Immigration Reform and Food System Change.” Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future, 2017, clf.jhsph.edu/sites/default/files/2019-04/health-immigration-reform-and-food-system-change-report.pdf. Accessed November 2020.

36 “Recognizing Labor Trafficking.” Polaris, polarisproject.org/labor-trafficking/. Accessed November 2020.

37 Whittaker, William G. “Labor Practices in the Meat Packing and Poultry Processing Industry: An Overview.” Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, Oct. 27, 2006, digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc819383/. Accessed November 2020.

increased immigrant recruits as African American workers became more unionized.³⁸ For example, “by the early 1960s, 95 percent of meatpacking workers outside the South were unionized and wages were comparable to those in auto and steel production.”³⁹ Thus, it was not until meatpacking industries moved to more rural locations that alternative labor sources were heavily recruited abroad. Finally, many workers were/are recruited under false pretenses in their countries of origin, as laborers are often told they would have access to green cards, visa extensions, and debtless travel.⁴⁰ After moving individuals and/or families, companies leveraged employees with exploitive systems such as debt bondage, dishonest housing, and wage withholdings.⁴¹

Current locations of meat processing plants (many rural) serve as contemporary archives of exploitive recruitment practices. Immigration processes are often brutal, and “the obstacles and inefficiencies of the immigration system, which effectively prohibit many workers in the U.S. from obtaining legal work authorization and an eventual path to citizenship, contribute to agricultural and meat processing workers’ increased health risk and lack of representa-

tions.”⁴² By understanding how and why immigration has increased in rural regions, one can easily notice that migrants are often recruited, exploited, and not provided the services they were promised upon arrival. Failing to protect immigrant workers in meat processing facilities during the COVID-19 pandemic adds another deadly layer if left unaddressed.

From a more microlevel, each person and/or family has their own distinct stories articulating their motivations as to why and how they left their home countries. In regard to voluntary immigrants, there are often economic factors, family ties elsewhere, and occupational and educational opportunities in another country that make relocating attractive. For refugees seeking asylum, many are forced to leave their homeland due to fears surrounding political persecution, religious violence, climate change, and other threatening human rights issues.

Nebraska has emerged as an attractive location for many immigrants and refugees alike. Influencing relocation, industrial histories are often at the center of these narratives and heavily affect rural communities. For example, in the 1980s and 1990s, unionized meat processing plants across the nation led to many businesses relocating to smaller Nebraska communities (e.g., Schuyler, Lexington, Madison, and others).⁴³ In addition, many immigrant and/or refugee laborers continue to find work at meat processing facilities favorable for employment as pay is above minimum wage and working conditions accommodate a variety of language skills. A few of the origin locations include Central America, Somalia, Myanmar, South Sudan, and Vietnam. Coming to rural communities, many individuals find these spaces more straightforward and easier to navigate when public infrastructure is strong.

38 Groves, Stephen, and Sophia Tareen. “U.S. meatpacking industry relies on immigrant workers. But a labor shortage looms.” *Los Angeles Times*, May 26, 2020, latimes.com/food/story/2020-05-26/meatpacking-industry-immigrant-undocumented-workers. Accessed November 2020.

39 Gershon, Livia. “Why Does Meatpacking Have Such Bad Working Conditions?” *JSTOR Daily*, May 8, 2020, daily.jstor.org/why-does-meatpacking-have-such-bad-working-conditions/. Accessed November 2020.

40 Fitch, Claire, et al. “Public Health, Immigration Reform and Food System Change.” Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future, 2017, clj.jhsph.edu/sites/default/files/2019-04/health-immigration-reform-and-food-system-change-report.pdf. Accessed November 2020.

41 Bauer, Mary, and Meredith Stewart. “Close to Slavery: Guestworker Programs in the United States.” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, Feb. 19, 2013, splcenter.org/20130218/close-slavery-guestworker-programs-united-states. Accessed July 2020.

42 Fitch, Claire, et al. “Public Health, Immigration Reform and Food System Change.” Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future, 2017, clj.jhsph.edu/sites/default/files/2019-04/health-immigration-reform-and-food-system-change-report.pdf. Accessed November 2020.

43 “Hispanic Migration.” *Nebraska Studies*, Nebraska Educational Telecommunications, nebraska-studies.org/2000-2024/nebraska-beef-goes-global/hispanic-migration/. Accessed July 2020.

TABLE 1: FOREIGN-BORN NEBRASKANS BY GLOBAL REGION

Continent	Number in Nebraska	Percent of total
Latin America	73,067	52.6
Asia	38,642	27.8
Africa	13,440	9.7
Europe	11,169	8.0
Northern America (Canada)	2,073	1.5
Oceania	562	0.4

A predominant demographic gravitating to these locations and professions are laborers and families from Central and South America. Nebraska remains appealing to many immigrants for the same reasons it does to those who have been here for more than two or three generations: reasonable cost of living, relatively low crime rate, and well-funded public schools. Important to note, many migrants join already established communities with friends and family. The presence of familial networks lowers the barrier to entry and builds upon vital support systems for continuing important cultural practices and ways of life. Lazaro Arturo Spindola, executive director of the Nebraska Latino American Commission shares, “Latinos tend to stay together as families. We place a very high value on the family unit. So, young people tend to stay close to their families. Even if they go to college, they try to go to a college that is close to their household.”⁴⁴ Many white Nebraskans will find this narrative true for themselves as well.

VII. IMMIGRANT BIRTH PLACES

While much of Nebraskan’s attention centers around Latino immigration, data shows that the state’s foreign-born residents come from a variety of places. For example, those born from Asian and African cultures represent nearly 38 percent of foreign-born Nebraskans with a primary emphasis on Vietnamese, Somali, and Sudanese populations. See Table 1 for the number of foreign-born Nebraskan residents by global region.⁴⁵

When there is an increase in foreign-born people, a multitude of languages other than English often emerge. In 2016, an estimated 206,900 Nebraska residents older than 5 spoke a language other than English. The five most common languages other than English were Spanish, Vietnamese, Arabic, Chinese, and languages spoken by people coming from Myanmar (Burmese, Karen, and Chin).

44 Tobias, Mike. “Nebraska’s Hispanic/Latino Population Could Triple By 2050.” Nebraska Educational Telecommunications, Aug. 20, 2013, netnebraska.org/article/news/nebraskas-hispaniclatino-population-could-triple-2050. Accessed November 2020.

45 “Nebraska Demographics & Social.” Migration Policy Institute, migrationpolicy.org/data/state-profiles/state/demographics/NE. Accessed November 2020.

TABLE 2: NEBRASKA'S POPULATION BASED ON THE 2019 CENSUS BUREAU ESTIMATE

Race	Percent
White alone, not Hispanic or Latino	78.2
Hispanic or Latino	11.4
Black or African American alone	5.2
Two or more races	2.3
Asian alone	2.7
American Indian and Alaska Native alone	1.5
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander alone	0.1

VIII. DISTRIBUTION OF ETHNIC AND RACIAL GROUPS IN NEBRASKA

An estimated 19.2 percent of Nebraska's population is classified as a racial or ethnic minority.⁴⁶ See Table 2.⁴⁷ Nebraska's racially and ethnically diverse populations are predominantly concentrated in a few counties of the state.⁴⁸ The highest concentration of minority populations are in the following counties: Colfax, Dawson, Hall, Douglas, Thurston, Dakota, Saline, and

46 Taylor, Sarah, et al. "Mapping Quality of Life in Nebraska: Population Distribution by Race, Ethnicity, and Age." University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2018, digitalcommons.unl.edu/mapquallifene/3. Accessed November 2020.

47 "QuickFacts: Nebraska." U.S. Census Bureau, July 1, 2019, census.gov/quickfacts/NE. Accessed July 2020.

48 Taylor, Sarah, et al. "Mapping Quality of Life in Nebraska: Population Distribution by Race, Ethnicity, and Age." University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2018, digitalcommons.unl.edu/mapquallifene/3. Accessed November 2020.

Scotts Bluff.⁴⁹ This demographic data also helps locate immigrant communities often at a high risk of coming into contact with COVID-19.

In addition to immigrants often being at risk, Tribal communities across our state are facing dire conditions as a result of COVID-19. Nebraska's first peoples, Native Americans, are particularly susceptible to this pandemic due to issues of nutritional access, resource distribution, and education. Health conditions associated with vulnerability to COVID-19 in Native communities include diabetes, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), and obesity. Increasingly, Tribal communities are finding innovative ways to rebuild their traditional food systems and combat nutritional supply chains. The rest of the non-Native public needs to listen closely and recognize the severity of this situation. An effective way to respond is by supporting Indigenous sovereignty and the methods taken to ensure the safety of their people. In many Tribal communities, there has been a surge in COVID-19 cases. Limited health care, resources, and services are harming Native communities similarly to many immigrant communities and industries. As there are clear hot spots where COVID-19 is spreading, we must also remember communities whose infrastructure is particularly vulnerable to an outbreak.

Nebraskans recognize the state is changing, and many rural residents take pride in growing and learning about their neighbors. Every community across Nebraska, with exceptions of Tribal populations and African American populations, was an immigrant settlement. For example, if you come from Czech heritage, you know about Kolache Days in Verdigré, the Bohemian Alps, and Prague (named after the capital of the Czech Republic). If you are Irish, O'Neill's St. Patrick's Day celebration is legendary. Germans are also often proud of their cultural heritage exemplified in the popularized fast food chain Runza. If you live in south Omaha, you come out to eat and dance at El Grito de Independencia for Mexico's independence and Latino heritage. There is still so much more history and change to celebrate. Recognizing the parallels of how many of our ancestors found solace and a home in Nebraska is a necessary first step in seeing our own family in those who are moving

49 Ibid.

in today, came yesterday, or have been here for multiple generations.

Many of our ancestors struggled to find the resources and support to make it through all the ups and downs of rural life, as farm foreclosures are a part of many of our rural genealogies. We must ensure rural America is maintained as a place for family, growth, change, and diversity. As proud as many are of their heritage, and they should be, building empathy is vital to notice similar and new challenges facing minority populations in Nebraska. For these reasons, we must embrace, not assimilate differences. The cultural traditions that make our state special have been passed down generation after generation, and making space to celebrate new cultural traditions and resilience is what it means to be Nebraskan.

A. NEBRASKANS GROWING TO UNDERSTAND CHANGE TOGETHER

In addition to being a place of tradition and regional pride, immigration is integral to Nebraska's narrative. This story and conversation could not be more topical today, as immigration and COVID-19 demand attention. Yet, we must remember to fuse tradition and change while simultaneously being swift in action and patient with ourselves. All Nebraskans must feel welcome, supported, and a part of community growth.

This situation is not simple. It will take more than upbeat rhetoric of bridging different communities together. Even as immigrants contribute to growth in rural communities, their presence is often demonized through draconian immigration policy and poor access to education resources and medical care. If growing rural communities is what Nebraskans desire, they must create and brainstorm the infrastructure necessary to support underserved and underrepresented populations during the COVID-19 crisis.

Rural areas have consistently been losing people to out-migration for decades, yet there is not a link between Hispanic in-migration and

white relocation.^{50,51} Racial and ethnic minorities are not taking white jobs or gentrifying white neighborhoods. Rather, these individuals are creating jobs, building networks, and contributing to Nebraska communities. Many see an opportunity in rural communities that resonates with their own values and choose to work and invest in them. Working through change and communicating across cultural differences is a messy undertaking, but a process that is quintessential to the American experience. Let's do the work.

B. CONFRONTING RACIAL AND ETHNIC DIFFERENCE IN OUR COMMUNITIES

Navigating change is a challenge the majority of Nebraskans are ready for. A proud 91 percent of residents believe accepting people of diverse racial and religious backgrounds is a necessary trait to make one "truly American."⁵² Additionally, only 25 percent of Nebraskans say that being of Western heritage is somewhat or very important to being an American, compared to 75 percent who say it is not very or not at all important.⁵³ As these numbers do demonstrate division, they also suggest the majority of Nebraskans are working through the reorganizing and growing of their communities while simultaneously accepting cultural differences.

Most Nebraskans appear to demonstrate strong support and positive views of immigration and believe in a diverse America. In contrast, one poll found 57 percent of Nebraskans believe

50 Johnson, Kenneth M., and Glenn V. Fuguitt. "Continuity and Change in Rural Migration Patterns, 1950–1995." *Rural Sociology Society*, Oct. 22, 2009, onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1549-0831.2000.tb00341.x. Accessed November 2020.

51 Lichter, Daniel T. "Immigration and the New Racial Diversity in Rural America." *Rural Sociology Society*, vol. 77, no. 1, pp. 3-35, March 1, 2012, doi: 10.1111/j.1549-0831.2012.00070.x. Accessed November 2020.

52 "In Middle America, Nebraskans Struggle with a Changing Cultural Landscape." Public Religion Research Institute, Nov. 12, 2019, prri.org/research/in-middle-america-nebraskans-struggle-with-a-changing-cultural-landscape/. Accessed July 2020.

53 Ibid.

the American way of life needs protection from foreign influence. These social changes have caused 48 percent of respondents to feel like strangers in the U.S.⁵⁴ Sociologist Arlie Russel Hochschild’s award winning book, “Strangers in Their Own Land,” carefully lays out the phenomenon of white Americans’ perceived estrangement in detail.⁵⁵ This assumed alienation is reported to be felt slightly stronger by white than nonwhite Nebraskans. However, feeling ignored and/or out of place is tangibly different than individuals and groups who are culturally, politically, and economically not offered equal access or included in our communities. Race and ethnicity matter in our perceptions of changing communities, and this is an important conversation we need to have.

Nebraskans have their work cut out for them, as 79 percent believe the country is somewhat or very divided by race and ethnicity.⁵⁶ However, this division differs among generations. For example, Nebraskans between the ages of 18 and 29 prefer a nation of people from around the world.⁵⁷ Still, both white and nonwhite Nebraskans are noticing these tensions, and vital conversations around racial and ethnic diversity are at the forefront of policy impacting community development.

Even in the midst of racially-charged times, Nebraskans are optimistic the country can attend to racial issues and national problems surrounding race in our state and the U.S. One research study found that 70 percent of residents believe a diverse population makes the country stronger, and 64 percent believe diversity makes Nebraska stronger.⁵⁸ By working through these tensions, all people in the state have an opportunity to learn, grow, and create communities everyone can call home.

54 Ibid.

55 Hochschild, Arlie Russell. “Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right.” The New Press, Feb. 20, 2018.

56 “In Middle America, Nebraskans Struggle with a Changing Cultural Landscape.” Public Religion Research Institute, Nov. 12, 2019, prri.org/research/in-middle-america-nebraskans-struggle-with-a-changing-cultural-landscape/. Accessed July 2020.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

IX. COMMUNICATING ACROSS DIFFERENCE

To gather a deeper understanding of interpersonal communication across cultures, pondering what race means to each of us is helpful. By using data to express miscommunication across culture, we can portray the complexity of our perceptions toward social interactions. For example, when considering whether or not to spend time with someone, only 15 percent of Nebraskans report they are likely to consider the race and ethnicity of the other person.⁵⁹ How, then, is race perceived and constructed in conversation?

In a similar vein, yet distinct, Nebraskans ages 18 to 29 are more likely than those 65 and older to say they are somewhat likely to consider race when spending time with another person.⁶⁰ This difference may be explained through younger generations being more conscious of how race is embedded in power when communicating interpersonally. Not to mention, younger Nebraskans represent a more diverse demographic than those older. Being aware of race and considering ethnicity as a part of interpersonal communication may be helpful in improving intercultural communication outcomes across the state. Indeed, Nebraska continues to negotiate change and transition toward a more inclusive society, where voices from all backgrounds are equally represented and heard.

X. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR COHESION ACROSS GENERATIONS

Residents in rural areas are disproportionately older than their metropolitan or suburban counterparts. Intergenerational conflict is nothing new to rural America, yet in growing multi-ethnic rural communities, new challenges and opportunities are emerging. First, elderly populations in rural communities are struggling to access consistent and nearby health care. Thus, mutually beneficial opportunities can be created for both the old and the young through bolstering public education, welfare safety nets, and ESL programs; indeed, “Hispanic upward mobility is directly connected

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

to elderly well-being.”⁶¹ This relationship between elderly white populations and younger Hispanic workers is becoming increasingly important and understood in rural communities, as we consider other connections between varying younger generations of new rural residents and aging rural white populations.

As time passes, U.S. minority populations consisting of predominantly second- and third-generation nonwhite persons will challenge both their parents’ first-generation values, as well as regionally European and/or white values. Many multigenerational Nebraskans will likely be familiar with family tales of anti-immigrant rhetoric aimed at Irish and Italian Catholics, Germans, Czech, Chinese, and Jews from eastern Europe. But, if we ask what we can do right now, we can support the next wave of people who are populating our once declining rural communities.

“The new growth of rural immigrant minorities, in particular, is linked in fundamental ways to a much larger set of theoretical and substantive issues: the globalization of labor; structure of agriculture; agro-food systems; loss of community; economic development and cultural change; environment and ‘green jobs’; growth and decline in the rural labor force; demographic change (including fertility); educational attainment and the structure of rural schools; rural children’s healthy development; crime and deviance; racial stratification and rural poverty; and racial relations, among other topics.”⁶²

Throughout each of these challenges and opportunities, rural places are paving the way for how to overcome ideological differences and conflict during racial and ethnic demographic change. Focusing on mutually beneficial outcomes across generations is a good place to start.

61 Lichter, Daniel T. “Immigration and the New Racial Diversity in Rural America.” *Rural Sociology Society*, vol. 77, no. 1, pp. 3-35, March 1, 2012, doi: 10.1111/j.1549-0831.2012.00070.x. Accessed November 2020.

62 Ibid.

XI. RACIAL AND ETHNIC INEQUALITY OF COVID-19 IN RURAL AMERICA

In a similar vein to recognizing intergenerational connections to community growth, health care has emerged as an increasingly important issue in rural areas over the past few decades. For many Nebraskans, COVID-19 has exposed the holes in rural health care and exacerbated the already present need for better facilities, access, and treatment. Today, the same populations most historically at risk and vulnerable in our health care systems are facing an unprecedented threat due to COVID-19. Indeed, those who are “low wage workers, people without health insurance, people with underlying health conditions, people of color, and Indigenous people are greatly at risk in our rural and urban communities.”^{63,64}

With increased risk, how does COVID-19 complicate rural health care infrastructure? An alarming 41 percent of rural hospitals function on a negative profit margin.⁶⁵ More than 100 rural hospitals have been closed in the last 10 years. Many consumers face greater distances to travel for basic treatment, as COVID-19 exposes an already vulnerable health care system that struggles to provide institutional support for rural societies’ most at-risk groups, including

63 Henning-Smith, Carrie, et al. “Unequal Distribution of COVID-19 Risk Among Rural Residents by Race and Ethnicity.” *The Journal of Rural Health*, May 12, 2020, doi.org/10.1111/jrh.12463. Accessed July 2020.

64 Artiga, Samantha, et al. “Communities of Color at Higher Risk for Health and Economic Challenges Due to COVID-19.” Kaiser Family Foundation, April 7, 2020, kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/communities-of-color-at-higher-risk-for-health-and-economic-challenges-due-to-covid-19/. Accessed November 2020.

65 Topchik, Michael. “Rural Relevance 2017: Assessing the State of Rural Health Care in America.” The Chartis Group, 2017, chartis.com/forum/insight/rural-relevance-2017-assessing-state-rural-healthcare-america/. Accessed July 2020.

the elderly.^{66,67} As discussed earlier, rural areas are not monolithically and/or homogeneously white, and individuals of color, namely immigrants in meat processing facilities, have been disproportionately exposed and harmed by COVID-19.

XII. IMMIGRATION AND CHANGE IS NEBRASKA'S STORY

As racial and ethnic diversity increases in rural and urban communities across Nebraska, a large number of nonwhite residents report having a direct familial connection with immigration, even if they are second, third, or fourth generation. More than 4 in 10 nonwhite Nebraskans have at least one parent and/or grandparent born outside the U.S. These numbers compare to the rate of white Nebraskans at just under 1 in 10 having one parent born in another country and less than 3 in 10 for their grandparents. Immigration comes in historical and circumstantial waves based upon a number of factors, yet these variables often have more similarities than differences.

The majority of Nebraskans recognize their communities are home to immigrants and are changing. Yet, perceptions of immigration are heavily racial, as Black and brown are not synonymous with immigration. Negative and/or positive views toward immigration pertain to views of immigration changing communities. Recognizing the difficulty and fear of change, 63 percent of Nebraskans who feel their communities are changing “a lot,” believe immigrants

are changing their community negatively.⁶⁸ Whereas, 73 percent, who feel their communities are changing “a little,” believe these changes are positive.⁶⁹ These numbers may point to radical misconceptions of people rooted in fear of “the other” as being dangerous. Immigration is not a zero-sum game. Nebraska is a big state, and there is enough room for all bodies, families, and cultures to call this place home.

Often, when considering what “change” means for a community, what we define as change matters. For example, 41 percent of nonwhite Nebraskans were born in the state, compared to 55 percent of white Nebraskans.⁷⁰ These numbers demonstrate that interstate white migration might be dismissive as not bringing change or difference. Thus, attributing change to nonwhite Nebraskans carries with it racialized language that needs to be unpacked. Nonwhite Nebraskans are significantly younger than white Nebraskans, with 77 percent of nonwhite Nebraskans under 50 years old compared to 48 percent of white Nebraskans.⁷¹ This intergenerational dynamic carries a capacity to connote and attribute change with nonwhite Nebraskans. Where accepting change is a necessary part of accepting and celebrating difference, much of this data suggests that change is relative.

On the other hand, division may be attributed to the settings and types of interactions Nebraskans are having with people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Those who say they have at least some interactions with people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds say those interactions are primarily in the workplace at 63 percent.⁷² Other venues of interaction are in friendship circles (49 percent), at a school their child is attending (28 percent), within their family (23 percent), at local civic gatherings (17 percent), at religious services (14 percent), or at a

66 “Rural Hospital Closures: More Information.” The Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research, University of North Carolina, shepscenter.unc.edu/programs-projects/rural-health/rural-hospital-closures/rural-hospital-closure. Accessed July 2020.

67 Henning-Smith, Carrie, et al. “Unequal Distribution of COVID-19 Risk Among Rural Residents by Race and Ethnicity.” *The Journal of Rural Health*, May 12, 2020, doi.org/10.1111/jrh.12463. Accessed July 2020.

68 “In Middle America, Nebraskans Struggle with a Changing Cultural Landscape.” Public Religion Research Institute, Nov. 12, 2019, prri.org/research/in-middle-america-nebraskans-struggle-with-a-changing-cultural-landscape/. Accessed July 2020.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.

school they attend (6 percent).⁷³ Each institution offers different types of interpersonal interaction that vary from voluntary to involuntary.

Data also suggests that people are increasingly comfortable with difference. Nebraskans report that 69 percent of their interactions with people who do not share their race to be somewhat or mostly positive.⁷⁴ Whereas, only 5 percent of Nebraskans stated their interactions with others of different racial or ethnic backgrounds were somewhat or mostly negative.⁷⁵ As similarly communicated earlier, younger Nebraskans between ages 18 and 29 were more likely than those 65 and older to report positive interactions with people of different races and ethnicities.⁷⁶ This same assessment did not significantly vary between white and nonwhite Nebraskans.⁷⁷ Exposure to difference, type of interactions, and location of connections are important factors in our communication and perceptions of racial and ethnic groups and/or identities we do not share with others. Being blind to cultural difference can be problematic, as it ignores areas of friction that are key to negotiating relationships embedded in power. However, finding similarity in mutually constructed community development plans can open the door for more positive relationships, healthier communities, and more complete narratives.

XIII. SOLUTIONS WITHIN OUR COMMUNITIES

Nebraskans are not known for taking kindly to those outside their community telling them what to do. Rejecting strictly outside answers, Nebraskans know that as long as all voices are at the table, the solutions are local and within reach. Today, many immigrants and their extended families are opening new businesses where previous industries have struggled to turn a profit. Prime examples, grocery stores, specialized markets, and main street service industries, have experienced growth in many booming rural

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid.

communities. If left unchecked, unsupported, and/or unaddressed, out-migration in rural communities threatens closure, access, and ability to keep open essential services such as schools, health care, and grocery stores.⁷⁸ To figure out how to slow this draining, we need to listen to everyone.

Recent research suggests the absence of grocery stores across the Great Plains has led to the region being labeled as the largest concentrated food desert in the U.S., with almost half of those places being rural.⁷⁹ Residents of small-town America will be the first to tell you the greatest threat to rural communities is the closure of grocery stores, schools, and hospitals, as they are often considered the lifeblood of rural economies. When immigrant populations grow in our rural towns, schools stay open, hospitals offer more services, and communities grow.⁸⁰ The answers to many of our worries are already here.

A. PROVIDING AND MAINTAINING RESOURCES AND SERVICES WHERE COMMUNITY IS EXPANDING

When infrastructure changes, places transform. People change places. People build a place. Together, people solve problems and recreate space to assist in making a home all people can take refuge in. We all help create this place, and we all have a right to create a home without infringing on others' rights. By first recognizing the need for political infrastructure when immigrant communities are growing, and next, constructing a difficult conversation around race and ethnicity in Nebraska, we can focus on generating a more inclusive understanding of how and why resources and services are needed to support immigrant families during COVID-19.

78 Mathema, Silva, et al. "Revival and Opportunity, Immigrants in Rural America." Center for American Progress, Sept. 2, 2018, americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/reports/2018/09/02/455269/revival-and-opportunity. Accessed July 2020.

79 Bailey, Jon. "Rural Grocery Stores: Importance and Challenges." Center for Rural Affairs, October 2010, cfra.org/publications/rural-grocery-stores-importance-and-challenges. Accessed November 2020.

80 Khrais, Reema, and Daisy Palacios. "How Latinos are transforming the economy of a small rural town." Marketplace, Sept. 8, 2017, marketplace.org/2017/09/08/how-latinos-transforming-economy-small-rural-town. Accessed November 2020.

Making this goal a priority protects the workers who grow our rural and urban communities. Further, action solidifies an inclusive future where an uncertain and deadly one currently exists.

XIV. IMMIGRANTS HELPING REBUILD RURAL COMMUNITIES

Rural hospitals have been operating at a reduced capacity, and states that did not vote to expand Medicaid are suffering the majority of hospital closures.⁸¹

In addition, people of color are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, and concerns surrounding general health care access are exposed, amplified, and overloaded in many rural areas. When layered on top of vulnerable populations, such as people of color, immigrants, refugees, people with disabilities, immunocompromised, elderly, and LGBTQ+ populations, rural, as well as urban, health care infrastructure becomes strained, expensive, and inaccessible during times of crises. Yet, even though many of these groups are at risk, they are simultaneously rebuilding our fractured communities.

Contrary to popular belief, agricultural work has become more year round for immigrant labor, as popular notions inaccurately assume workers are strictly seasonal.⁸² Even as temporary workers on agricultural visas pay taxes and support local economies, more long-term employment has led to an increased amount of migrants putting down roots, starting a family, and creating a home in the communities they work in. Immigration has the potential to build rural communities experiencing brain drain in the

81 Radford, Jynnah, and Phillip Connor. “Just 10 states resettled more than half of recent refugees to U.S.” Pew Research Center, Dec. 6, 2016, [pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/12/06/just-10-states-resettled-more-than-half-of-recent-refugees-to-u-s](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/12/06/just-10-states-resettled-more-than-half-of-recent-refugees-to-u-s). Accessed November 2020.

82 Jensen, Leif. “New immigrant settlements in rural America: problems, prospects, and policies.” Carsey School of Public Policy at the Scholars’ Repository, University of New Hampshire, Nov. 28, 2006, dx.doi.org/10.34051/p/2020.18. Accessed November 2020.

following ways: “reversing population loss, spurring economic growth, meeting labor needs to preserve key industries, contributing to the local tax base, and supporting hospitals and clinics to prevent health care deserts.”⁸³ Each of these contributions are year round and such labor should be recognized, as many agriculture economies are not delivering on the same financial promises of the past.

Rural economies are employing fewer people in agricultural sectors, and professions in manufacturing, retail sales, educational services, and health care are growing.⁸⁴ Agriculture remains vital to Nebraska’s economy; however, to grow the state’s rural and urban economies, all must adapt. As second and third generations settle down close to home, we see an increase in trained health care workers. With an aging population, rural America has been experiencing pains from shortages of physician specialists, dentists, nurses, and mental health providers.⁸⁵ Many people, especially younger demographics moving to rural America, have the capability to help fill some of these gaps. How then can we create political infrastructure for our present to thrive in and our future to grow into without forgetting our past?

XV. TOPICAL POLICY

Politics leaves a sour taste in many people’s mouths. Yet, local political leaders are crucial to integrating immigration discourse that is honest, fair, and relevant for communities facing ethnic and racial demographic restructuring. Nebraska has the capacity to grow their rural communities

83 Mathema, Silva, et al. “Revival and Opportunity, Immigrants in Rural America.” Center for American Progress, Sept. 2, 2018, [americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/reports/2018/09/02/455269/revival-and-opportunity](https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/reports/2018/09/02/455269/revival-and-opportunity). Accessed July 2020.

84 “Rural Economy Extends Beyond the Farm, More Work in Education and Health Care.” U.S. Census Bureau, Aug. 9, 2017, [census.gov/library/stories/2017/08/rural-economy-not-completely-dependent-on-farming.html](https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2017/08/rural-economy-not-completely-dependent-on-farming.html). Accessed July 2020.

85 MacDowell, M., et al. “A national view of rural health workforce issues in the USA.” Rural Remote Health, July 26, 2010, [ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3760483](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3760483). Accessed November 2020.

again, and supporting infrastructure like bilingual services, citizenship classes, multilingual church services, and celebrations centering on cultural events can all bring our communities together across difference.⁸⁶

Rural areas often lack the infrastructure to handle the initial flow of a diversifying population, primarily because unlike their urban counterparts, the change is fairly recent.⁸⁷ This does not mean navigation is impossible. However, rural areas need to recognize how infrastructure in more urban areas has been historically designed to accommodate immigrants' needs. We can build it on our own. We just need a blueprint. By being aware of these tensions and realities, rural spaces can begin to build infrastructure that politically centers the needs of new community members. Ultimately, many of these programs are designed to help those already living in these communities adjust, understand, and connect with their neighbors.

The nation is watching. A National Geographic article highlighted Nebraska's challenge to keep the state's most vulnerable populations healthy, college football open, and economy strong. The article reminds the public that 6.1 million cattle reside in the state while there are only 1.86 million people, and that Memorial Stadium, the football stadium at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, becomes the third-largest city in the state on Saturdays.⁸⁸ How we take care of our almost 2 million residents during COVID-19 tells a riveting story of how our values translate into supporting all Nebraskans regardless of race,

ethnicity, or country of birth. As this article suggests, the future of our rural and urban communities depends on the stability of our health care, community support, and benefits for our essential workers during an unprecedented time.

XVI. COVID-19 EXPEDITES THE NEED FOR SUPPORT

COVID-19 did not create Nebraska's problem; it exposed it. The Grand Island Independent writes, "In Nebraska, outbreaks have hit Grand Island, Omaha, Crete, Lexington, Madison, Dakota City, and Schuyler."⁸⁹ Each of these towns/cities are operating large scale meat packing plants such as Tyson Foods, Smithfield Foods, JBS USA, and Cargill. Even as protections are put into place, many argue this is not enough to adequately protect workers. If current actions are left as they are, families risk jeopardizing their aging family members, children, and extended family. We must recognize that kinship community dynamics greatly differ across cultures and impact COVID-19 transmission.

Kinship community dynamics may be understood as the differing cultural practices of who and how we consider family relations in a given community and household. They can be intergenerational, blended because of immigration, and flexible in who they consider a family member, as blood does not define relations. This strategy is complex and culturally relative. Yet, pooling resources, people, and goods allows for communities to survive and grow in a new environment. These relationships also increase vulnerability to COVID-19 and need to be considered in how we approach recreating infrastructure and providing services during this pandemic.

For many, choosing between a paycheck and family health further complicates households relying on above minimum wage income. Thus, finan-

86 Mathema, Silva, et al. "Revival and Opportunity, Immigrants in Rural America." Center for American Progress, Sept. 2, 2018, americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/reports/2018/09/02/455269/revival-and-opportunity. Accessed July 2020.

87 Jensen, Leif. "New Immigrant Settlements in Rural America: Problems, Prospects, and Policies." The Carsey School of Public Policy at the Scholars' Repository, University of New Hampshire, Nov. 28, 2006, dx.doi.org/10.34051/p/2020.18. Accessed November 2020.

88 Merrill, Elizabeth. "Football and the factory line: Living at risk in a heartland hot zone." National Geographic, May 20, 2020, nationalgeographic.com/history/2020/05/coronavirus-upends-meatpacking-jobs-football-grand-island-nebraska. Accessed November 2020.

89 Duffy, Erin, and Natalie Saenz. "I'm scared to return: Nebraska meatpacking workers and their families speak out." The Grand Island Independent, May 11, 2020, theindependent.com/news/local/i-m-scared-to-return-nebraska-meatpacking-workers-and-their-families-speak-out/article_516c9546-93aa-11ea-927e-7334c123158d.html. Accessed July 2020.

cial incentives help, but they are not addressing the cases and casualties associated with keeping meat processing plants open. Additionally, Nebraskans, and the nation, should not be in the dark on COVID-19, as the state has stopped reporting cases in meat processing facilities. We have an opportunity to stand with workers and families, and both are a part of the foundation that grows rural Nebraska.

In early May, Gov. Pete Ricketts reported that meatpacking workers account for one out of every six COVID-19 cases. Yet, Gov. Ricketts refuses to disclose future case numbers in these facilities. Failing to account for and protect essential workers in Nebraska would be to consent to exploitative practices that ignore equal treatment for all residents during this pandemic. If Nebraskans want a strong economy, open schools, healthy hospitals, stable communities, and fewer COVID-19 deaths, please support those most vulnerable in our state. Today, the work starts with recognizing that immigrants in this state are Nebraskans.

XVII. COMING TOGETHER FOR SOMETHING NEW, SOMETHING BETTER

How Nebraskans respond to each of these challenges and opportunities will dictate the future and growth of both rural and urban spaces across Nebraska. Traditional means of community growth are both returning and evolving. Many immigrants have called the same communities home for generations; dues and taxes have been paid, and each person's presence has been a part of making our state a place of growth and pride nationally and internationally. How can Nebraska continue to be better and find opportunity in a difficult situation? By listening to our essential workers' diverse and common struggles, immediate needs, and visions for community growth, we can co-create a future where Nebraska's pride is inclusive, nuanced, and honest.

Nebraska has the capacity to create a space where everyone is involved in civil discussions. This is not a vision for "one day." There simply is not time. Our voices need to be loud, our ears need to be open, and our communities need to grow into a promising future and an evolving rural America. We must recognize that assimilation is not the goal, but by celebrating difference, rural and urban communities across the state, region, and nation begin to embrace all voices, faces, ideas, and families. This is what always has and always will make America and Nebraska great.

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR RURAL AFFAIRS

Established in 1973, the Center for Rural Affairs is a private, nonprofit organization with a mission to establish strong rural communities, social and economic justice, environmental stewardship, and genuine opportunity for all while engaging people in decisions that affect the quality of their lives and the future of their communities. This institution is an equal opportunity provider and employer.