



# Championing Newcomer Talent: A Colorado Playbook



## Five Action Steps From Our Immigrant Inclusion Summit

Colorado employers are expected to add 42,000 jobs in 2024, a sign of a strong state economy that may continue to strain a tight local labor market: Throughout 2022 and 2023, there were two jobs for every one unemployed worker in Colorado.

“We must think about partnerships that grow opportunities for all Coloradans: No matter where we come from, we are all part of this state,” said Alison Griffin, a Denver-based workforce and education expert and Senior Vice President with Whiteboard Advisors. “By shifting our perspective, we create tremendous possibilities in what we can build for all of Colorado.”

Local workforce trends have left many Colorado employers hyper-focused on recruiting and retaining workers, eager to connect with new sources of talent. The opportunity to reimagine the local workforce drew more than 100 stakeholders to a first-of-its-kind Colorado Immigrant Inclusion Summit.

Hosted by EnGen, the sold-out event convened local employers, adult educators, government leaders, and service providers in a solutions-oriented dialogue about strengthening connections to workers from immigrant backgrounds, who now represent 1 in 8 workers in Colorado.

“Immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers fill critical roles across our state economy, from internationally trained professionals [who have college degrees and high-demand experience from other countries] to entrepreneurs, to front-line workers who fill hard-to-fill roles,” said Tiffany Jaramillo, who manages English instruction and career opportunities programs at Emily Griffith Technical College. “They bring diversity to our workforce, which fosters opportunity and collaboration.”

## Fostering Newcomer's Potential

Colorado has emerged as a national leader in advancing immigrant workforce inclusion, enacting numerous policies and programs that support Colorado workers – including newcomers – with work-based learning programs and support for professional licensing.

Yet in Colorado and across the country, just **4%** of adult English learners can access the English instruction that will help them access workforce opportunities. Access gaps have widened with the recent arrival of nearly **40,000** asylum seekers, a population that can qualify for work authorization via a program called Temporary Protected Status (TPS), depending on the individual's country of origin. Local employers struggle to connect with this high-potential talent pool of newcomers, even after they've received work authorization.

**“We must flip the conversation from ‘what are newcomers’ needs’ to ‘what are the assets that they bring?’”** said Sachith Siriwardane, Senior Manager of Strategic Partnerships at Guild, which works with the nation’s leading employers to unlock opportunities for America’s workforce through education, skilling, and career mobility. **“These workers are motivated, approach challenges with a learner’s mindset, and retain at very high rates at their companies. Employers who are thoughtful in their workforce strategies have an opportunity here to really unlock a loyal, engaged population.”**

Immigrants, refugees, and speakers of other languages have much to offer to Colorado’s workforce: Multilingualism and diverse world views are consistently linked to innovation, problem-solving, and improved bottom lines at companies. Workers from refugee backgrounds stay with their employers for longer than other hires. More than **30%** of local immigrants and refugees come to Colorado with degrees and experience from other countries, including high-demand fields like healthcare.


**“If you’re interested in employing newcomer populations, and leveraging all of the assets that this group brings to your workforce, there needs to be some intentionality,”** said Anthony Cherwinski, Global Talent Administrator with the Colorado Office of New Americans. **“How can we shift recruitment, onboarding, and management? Career mobility can be reimagined, and shifts to these processes don’t have to be costly to employers.”**

# Building an Ecosystem of Inclusion


The need for change doesn't fall solely to employers: "We must work together to create talent pipelines," said Jaramillo.

Speakers called for expanding pre-employment support – connecting newcomers with English skills and communications skills to navigate the job search and interview process – as well as post-employment programs like mentorship and coaching to ensure that workers thrive. Summit participants then gathered in break-out groups to brainstorm practical solutions to five priorities for Colorado's economy:

**1 HIRE FOR SKILLS.** Assessing job candidates based on their skills – rather than degrees or credentials – opens opportunities for job seekers and employers alike by expanding the talent pool. Skill recognition can be a challenge for many newcomers: Validating international degrees and credentials is a complex process in the best of circumstances. People who have been displaced from their homes may not have proof of education attainment. Instead of requiring a credential, allow candidates to demonstrate their applicable skills as part of the hiring process.

 *Resources:* The restaurant industry has a long tradition of championing skills-based hiring. In this HR Dive commentary, the National Restaurant Association offers insights for employers across other industries. [Read more.](#)

**2 BUILD NEWCOMER-FRIENDLY TRAINING PROGRAMS.** Companies grappling with skills and talent gaps are hyper-focused on upskilling their workers, yet many training programs are offered solely in English, creating a barrier for speakers of other languages. Employers and educational providers can partner to create tailored training pathways, like pre-apprenticeship programs, that are accessible to newcomers. Employers can also offer on-site, career-aligned English instruction, connecting newcomers with career-aligned English skills and support for areas of life beyond the workforce, like healthcare, childcare, and financial literacy.

 *Resources:* EnGen's career-aligned, personalized English upskilling platform connects working adults with both English skills and customized content to prepare them for careers in high-demand fields – healthcare, manufacturing, technology and more – and to support other real-world goals. Thanks to a partnership with the Colorado Office for New Americans' [Virtual Career Aligned English as a Second Language](#) (VCESL) program, EnGen licenses are available free of charge to Colorado employers, organizations, and learners. [Learn more.](#)

"To help New Americans gain the English skills they need in order to successfully navigate the workplace while simultaneously helping them achieve goals and milestones in their chosen careers is my honor, and is an excellent reminder of the need for more programs like this to be created nationwide. When communities thrive, we all thrive," said Candace Heckstall, VCESL Manager with Colorado's Office of New Americans.

**3 CHAMPION INCLUSIVE HIRING PRACTICES.** Employers can benefit from training and coaching too, especially on challenging subjects like unconscious bias or cultural competence. HR leaders can re-evaluate their current hiring practices and build new standards for understanding candidates' international experience, considering resume gaps that may result from displacement, or prioritizing skills-based based hiring (see previous section) practices.

✓ *Resources:* The Colorado Office of New Americans has created a three-part video series that supports employers in building inclusive approaches to recruiting, reviewing applications, interviewing, onboarding, managing and upskilling. [Watch the webinars here.](#)

**4 INTENTIONALLY INCLUDE MULTILINGUAL STAFF.** Multilingualism is an asset at any workplace. Employers can cultivate a culture of linguistic diversity by ensuring that English isn't a barrier. Invest in translation and interpretation services, especially during critical onboarding periods. Make commitments to using "plain" workplace language – cutting down on jargon and unnecessarily complex or formal language. One summit participant, a local employer, flagged that his workplace distributes a glossary of workplace acronyms to all employees.

✓ *Resources:* Employers need not start from scratch in building strategies to support multilingual workers – or approach the work alone. [Anthill](#) offers software and resources for multilingual employee onboarding, [Jeenie](#) provides on-demand simultaneous interpretation, and [One Language Pro](#) provides consulting services for language access and plain language.

**5 LAUNCH SEAMLESS TALENT PIPELINES.** Employers that commit to inclusive hiring should be recognized – and intentionally connected to job seekers at events like newcomer job fairs or career summits. Colorado's workforce ecosystem – including educators, service providers, and community-based organizations – should be aware of these companies too. "Let's build an Indeed for Colorado," suggested one participant. 'Immigrant-friendly' companies can post open positions in a dedicated portal that workforce partners can share with potential candidates.

✓ *Resources:* The Tent Foundation has convened more than 300 companies across the world in committing to collectively hiring hundreds of thousands of refugees. The global model offers a blueprint for Colorado, with the potential to connect local employers, workforce development organizations, educators, and other stakeholders. [Learn more.](#)

## A Workforce for All Coloradans

Company-wide investments to more inclusive recruitment and retention will reap returns in attracting and engaging newcomer talent. The benefits extend to other talent pools as well, including incumbent workers.

"If you change your processes, it will benefit others too," said Jaramillo.  
"Skills-based hiring leads to expanded talent pools. Changes being made don't just serve a particular population. A rising tide lifts all boats, makes [processes] more equitable for everyone."

EnGen is committed to helping to create an ecosystem of workforce leaders that champion newcomer talent across Colorado – and ensuring that they have resources and support to drive the work forward.

Email [colorado@getengen.com](mailto:colorado@getengen.com) for a product demo and to learn how employers, organizations, and learners can access free EnGen licenses in Colorado.