

Supporting Immigrants and Refugees: Connector Programs

Background

Connector Programs focused on supporting the economic integration of immigrants and refugees started in Halifax, Nova Scotia more than a decade ago. Created as a unique workforce development initiative, the program was designed to support immigrants and refugees in building their professional networks, as well as to give employers access to a pool of untapped talent in their communities.

In the U.S., it's estimated that approximately 80% of jobs are filled through professional and social networks, yet many immigrants and refugees lack access to these networks. Connector models address this barrier by fostering connections among internationally trained immigrants and established professionals, employers, and community members.

At a Glance

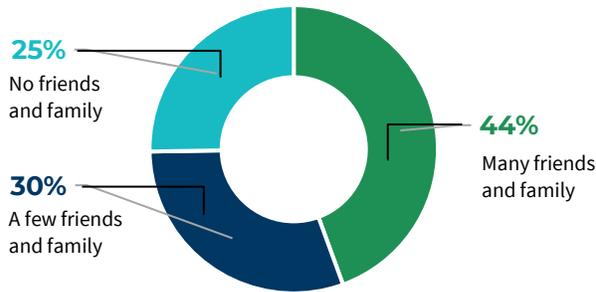
Connector programs are increasingly prevalent in U.S. cities with growing immigrant and refugee communities. Connector programs serve to:

-  Identify local business and community members (“connectors”) who can share access to their professional networks with immigrants and refugees (“connectees”)
-  Facilitate interactions between connectors and connectees through informal meetings and networking events
-  Provide connectees with opportunities to learn about the local job market, establish a business network through referrals, and improve job search and networking skills
-  Help industry professionals meet pre-qualified talent that may be a fit for their business or a business in their network

Connector programs offer matches and short-term connections between connectees and connectors in their professional field or related fields. Although participation does not guarantee employment or long-term mentorship opportunities, through the model’s informal or semi-structured interviews, connectees can practice networking skills and form professional connections. Connectors commit to engaging connectees with other professionals in their networks, who in turn commit to making further connections.

Impact

Research shows that making connections and establishing professional networks can improve the career advancement of internationally trained immigrants.¹



According to the IMPRINT Coalition’s “Steps to Success,” nearly half of respondents (44%) who reported currently having “many” friends and family in the U.S. to rely on had achieved earnings success, compared to 30% of those with “a few” and just 25% of respondents with “no” friends and family to rely on in the U.S.

Typically overseen by non-profit or local government initiatives, connector programs offer many benefits to employers, programs, and individual participants. Typically overseen by non-profit or local government initiatives, connector programs offer many benefits to employers, programs, and individual participants. They can significantly enhance local talent pipelines, develop program and employer ambassadors, and help foster the cultural competency skills of program participants.

“

It was very hard to find a job without references or U.S. experience. My dream job was accounting, and it was through the Professional Connections [connector program] that I could do this. It was the **very best way for me to reach my goal.**”

Consolate, Accountant
Connectee

“

We are in real need of skilled professionals to provide health care related services [...] and there are many [internationally trained] professionals here who have a rich background of knowledge and experience.”

Kathy, former director, Hanley Center for Health
Connector

¹ <https://www.imprintproject.org/stepstosuccess/>

Connector programs can help communities to:



Strengthen relationships between the business community and service providers



Support efforts to identify employment opportunities within the community



Identify advocates to participate in immigration and employment convenings



Spark connections to new industries seeking to recruit and employ talent



Foster opportunities for cultural competency training and exchange

Many communities have created connector initiatives with limited pilot programs that inform larger-scale initiatives. These programs foster organizational and institutional partnerships that can benefit larger or longer-term mentorship, fellowship, or internship opportunities and regional welcoming initiatives.

Connector Program Models:

- **The National Connector Program**, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada
- **St. Louis Mosaic Project's Professional Connector Program**, St. Louis, Mo.
- **Portland Professional Connections**, Portland, Maine
- **Pittsburgh Connector Program**, Pittsburgh, Pa.

Program Snapshot: The National Connector Program (Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada)

The **Halifax Partnership**, launched in 2009 as the first connector program model, works to increase economic development in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The organization's connector program matches the community and connectors with connectees. Through direct referrals from connectors, connectees learn about the local job market and rapidly grow their business network, increasing their likelihood of finding employment. Connectors benefit by gaining access to pre-qualified job seekers, and by helping to grow their industry and local workforce. Since its inception, the program has helped more



than 1,000 people find jobs in Halifax; as part of the **National Connector Program**, it has been replicated in 35 communities across Canada and in a small but growing number in the U.S.

Program Snapshot: The St. Louis Mosaic Project's Professional Connector Program (St. Louis, MO)

The St. Louis Mosaic Project's **Professional Connector Program**, an initiative of the St. Louis Mosaic Project at the World Trade Center launched in December 2013, is also modeled after Halifax's Connector Program. The Professional Connector Program model addresses a common barrier faced by many immigrants and refugees: a lack of access to a professional peer network in the U.S. Through individual connections, as well as through partnerships with local universities, organizations and agencies, college-educated connectees are matched with peers who possess related professional experience. Meetings can be as informal as a chat over a cup of coffee (e.g. informational interview) or more formally structured. This approach provides connectees with the opportunity to practice communication skills, networking skills, and their marketing pitch—while simultaneously building their professional network. The program has assisted hundreds of connectees in career networking.

Program Snapshot: Portland Professional Connections (Portland, ME)

An initiative of the City of Portland's Office of Economic Opportunity and the Portland Regional Chamber of Commerce, **Portland Professional Connections** was launched in 2020 with a goal of matching Portland's internationally trained and educated professionals with Portland based professionals with strong ties to key industries. This informal networking program is as simple as having a cup of coffee and a chat, and then Connectors share three contacts from their networks by making meaningful introductions for Connectees. Since its launch, the program has served approximately 100 connectees with an ~30% placement rate.

Program Snapshot: Pittsburgh Connector Program (Pittsburgh, PA)

The **Pittsburgh Connector Program**, hosted at All for All, was launched in June 2018 to address workforce needs by connecting immigrants with professionals in the region. Also closely modeled after the Connector Program in Halifax, Nova Scotia since its launch the program has successfully connected 80 percent of its connectees with professionals in relevant occupations. To engage its connectees, the program works closely with a range of partners including English language learner (ELL) providers and resettlement agencies, and it makes connections at job fairs and community events. Other outreach methods for both connectors and connectees include social media and direct contact with potential connectors through cold-calling or word of mouth. The program currently has hundreds of connectors to draw on.

Connectee Eligibility

Each community requires potential participants to meet certain criteria in order to take part in its connector program. These criteria can include:

- A minimum of a college degree and relevant work experience
- A résumé documenting education and experience
- English language skills, evaluated either informally through a program orientation or demonstrated via a standardized test or relevant degree
- A long-term work permit or visa (not a student F visa)
- Proof of residency with intent to stay in the region

Connector Eligibility

For most programs listed above, any working professional is eligible to be a connector. Some additional criteria may include:

- A minimum of five years' experience in their field
- Access to a network of professional connections
- An understanding of local industry trends

Some programs have found that connections work best when the program's goals resonate personally with connectors who can actively recruit other professionals to the program. A successful program also considers a connector's work schedule and allows for flexibility in scheduling the connector's participation.

Connector Program Staffing Needs

Although connector programs are less labor-intensive than mentorship, fellowship, or internship initiatives, connector programs do require a significant commitment of time and energy to program development, participant recruitment, and monitoring. Connector program staff responsibilities include:

- Recruiting connectees and connectors
- Building relationships and maintaining collaborations with local partners such as chambers of commerce and non-profit service providers
- Ensuring alignment of partner priorities and program goals and objectives
- Monitoring and evaluating program development and implementation

Partner Support

A successful connector program should match connectees based on their skills and experience and consider local workforce demand. Effective collaborations with a chamber of commerce and employers to determine recruiting needs in the local labor market are essential. In addition, leveraging existing partnerships and building new relationships with organizations in the public, non-profit, and private sectors play a vital role in the steady recruitment of connectees and connectors.

For organizations with interest in launching a connector program in their community, the **National Connector Program** through The Halifax Partnership offers helpful resources and partner support.

Additional Resources:

“Become a Connector Community”

National Connector Program

If your community is interested in starting a connector program, this guide and FAQ outline initial steps and benefits.

“Building Connections to Supporting Immigrant and Refugee Professionals”

World Education Services (WES) webinar, April 7, 2021

This webinar discusses how the Portland Professional Connections program, in partnership with the Portland Regional Chamber of Commerce, fosters economic inclusion by ensuring that all Portlanders have strong professional networks and therefore access to opportunities for upward economic mobility and career advancement.

“Guide to Immigrant Economic Development”

Welcoming America

This guide provides examples of the benefits of connector programs and case studies of programs in Halifax, Canada and St. Louis, MO.

“New program to connect unemployed/underemployed immigrants to local professionals.”

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, 2018

For more information, **contact WES Global Talent Bridge.**