

A question for my fellow downstaters: What comes to mind when you think of “up north”?

Perhaps a family cabin or favorite campsite; swimming, fishing, or boating on a lake; Traverse City cherries or Mackinac fudge; Lumberman’s Monument or the Cross in the Woods. You probably imagine miles and miles of breathtaking shoreline and acres upon acres of deep woods (currently bursting with color – trek north soon, if you can!)

And what about the community? Do you think of the retired snow-birders with second homes on Torch Lake or modest cabins on some quiet country road? Or the young families trying to make it in their hometown amidst a housing crisis? Do you think of rural red with Trump flags waving? The 5th generation family farmer struggling to grow crops and hire help? The smalltown festivals and rural poverty and scrappy service providers?

But what about the Afghan family settling in Traverse City or the Ukrainian woman starting her business in Alpena? The Central American working in Petoskey nurseries, the Haitian picking crops in Antrim County, the Mexican fixing cargo planes in Oscoda? Do you imagine the young Romanian woman working at a resort in Gaylord or the Jamaican man working at a hotel in Charlevoix? And what about all those who rely on their hard work? And all those who strive to support their health, education, families, and general well-being?

These are all experiences I’ve encountered in my three years of crisscrossing the northern parts of our beautiful lower peninsula. While the immigrant, migrant, and refugee population in northern Michigan is certainly smaller than downstate, they are there nonetheless, and nearly as diverse in countries of origin, languages, education, employment, immigration status, and economic realities. They have chosen northern Michigan for its quiet atmosphere, its available work, and the communities supporting them there.

Since 2020, Strangers No Longer has worked to bring together churches, schools, nonprofits, and other institutions welcoming immigrants in various capacities across the northernmost 21 counties of the lower peninsula (Diocese of Gaylord).

In 2023, we had a major Assembly for Human Dignity in Traverse City, which caught the attention of the State of Michigan. This year, we received funding from the State’s Office of Global Michigan to officially launch “Belong: Northern Michigan Immigrant Inclusion Network.”

As an active collaborative network, Belong aims to make Michigan’s Northern Lower Peninsula an inclusive and welcoming region for immigrants and refugees. We do this by educating our local communities, providing support and resources to newcomers and the institutions serving them, and advocating for culturally appropriate solutions to immigrants’ needs.

Since our January launch, Belong has accomplished the following:

- Our Membership Directory includes 85 individuals representing 55 institutions – and growing!
- We hold monthly virtual meetings and quarterly in-person meetings (Diocese of Gaylord Cathedral)- including presentations by mental health experts, health departments, immigration attorneys, the Gaylord Bishop, and the State of Michigan
- Know Your Rights and Train-the-Trainer Presentations in various communities
- 5+ Listening Sessions (House Meetings) among the immigrant communities
- Free interpreter training certification for 12+ bilingual residents across northern Michigan, in partnership with the Office of Global Michigan and the Hispanic Center of West Michigan
- Meetings with Sheriffs about the 287(g) ICE agreements
- Northern Michigan (Petoskey, Alpena) representation at the national Welcoming America Interactive in Detroit this May
- Northern Michigan (Oscoda) youth representation on the State’s inaugural Michigan Immigrant Youth Leadership Council
- We presented to various State departments at the State’s Language Access Conference in Lansing this summer
- The State’s Hispanic Commission recognized Gladys Muñoz, Belong leader from Guadalupe Chapel (Traverse City), for her outstanding leadership and advocacy
- We hired Lauren Vitas, Iosco RESA leader in Alpena, as a part time NE Michigan Organizer and admin support, in addition to my 0.75 time with Belong.

Perhaps the biggest success, however, is the enthusiasm and active leadership of immigrants, parishioners, educators, and service providers in northern Michigan. There are so many institutions supporting immigrants but they are geographically isolated from each other, so this opportunity to come together is incredibly appreciated and enthusiastically supported.

We look forward to our inaugural Belong Conference on April 24, 2026 in Gaylord, where we can showcase all this work, advocate for more resources and support for immigrants, and invite new partners to join Belong. We hope to have 300 in attendance!

Additionally, we’re getting ready to launch an Economic Development Taskforce to lift up the skills, work ethic, and entrepreneurial spirit immigrants bring to Michigan. We are excited to partner with employers, chambers, business associations, colleges, and more!

To continue all this work, we need the direct support of the community. While we’ve received financial support this year from the Office of Global Michigan, both state and federal budgets are at risk of cuts in the upcoming years, so we cannot continue to rely on government funding. We need your help to ensure we can continue this much-needed work. Thank you!

In peace and solidarity,

Amy Ketner

Director of Leadership Development