

# Chicago Office To Help Immigrant Business Owners

Sophia Tareen, Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Chicago officials launched a new department Tuesday focused on helping immigrant business owners, a move Mayor Rahm Emanuel billed as a step toward making Chicago "the most immigrant-friendly city in the world."

The Office of New Americans is a modest step: It's a one-person department focused on improving access to existing services, instead of providing new ones, at least at first. One of the first tasks is to help expand an annual day of business workshops geared toward immigrant entrepreneurs.

But city leaders hope the department — which will soon cover other immigrant-related issues — will lead to more jobs and promote Chicago as a global economic hub, potentially luring in business. Adolfo Hernandez, a former activist who will head the office, said it's a signal that the city wants immigrant business.

"Chicago's history is closely tied to the (American) immigration story," said Hernandez, a native Chicagoan from the city's Little Village neighborhood, one of the largest Mexican business enclaves nationwide. "It's important that we recognize that immigrants bring a lot. They're not a drain on our resources. They're contributing."

Immigrants were more than twice as likely to start businesses as non-immigrants in 2010, and the number of immigrant business owners is growing, according to a study by Robert Fairlie, a professor at the University of California in Santa Cruz who has researched the issue for the U.S. Small Business Administration.

The reasons aren't clear cut, but Fairlie said that immigrants may face barriers in the labor market, such as language, having educational credentials that don't transfer or face discrimination. So starting a business is a way to counteract those factors.

"Immigrants tend to be pretty entrepreneurial, they're not the people who stayed in their home country, they've left," he said. "They already have some propensity to take risk."

Municipal departments dedicated to immigrants aren't new, but Chicago's approach appears more uncommon because of its kickoff emphasis on immigrant entrepreneurs. Chicago's department will expand its focus to other issues like language and U.S. citizenship.

Earlier this year, New York City announced some initiatives to help immigrant business owners. Los Angeles has programs for minority-owned businesses and

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Philadelphia contracts with a nonprofit that helps immigrant entrepreneurs.

Hernandez said new immigrant businesses could be a key to jumpstarting the economy. He envisions working with Chicago Public Schools, community groups and government agencies for education and training.

Business owners said a department for immigrants — the first of its kind for Chicago — is welcome.

One of the city's most prominent immigrant-owned companies is Patel Brothers, a grocery store chain featuring Indian foods. In 1974, the family business opened a store in a segment of Chicago that's become one of the largest South Asian business enclaves this side of the globe. Now, Patel Brothers has 46 stores nationwide.

Swetal Patel, a vice president and son of one of the owners, said the company also supports ancillary businesses, like a plastic bag manufacturer.

"We provide revenue into the economy, jobs for people," he said.

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