

LOUISVILLE BUSINESS FIRST

OPPORTUNITY LOUISVILLE

POWER THROUGH THE PEOPLE

Inside the efforts to make Louisville
a destination for migrating talent



BY PIPER HANSEN, PAGES 16-25

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SPORTS

Racing Louisville post labor deal

Racing Louisville FC is set to capitalize on the demise of the NWSL draft.

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AUTOMOTIVE

A new home for supercars?

A dealer of exotic cars has its eye on a former movie theater property in the area.

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'WE NEED TO MAKE SURE THAT WE'RE GROWING'

Jefferson County's population growth lags compared to peer cities. A look at what's happening to change that trend.

BY PIPER HANSEN | phansen@bizjournals.com

In spring 2017, Stacy Griggs was taken aback by a news story he'd stumbled upon about Wellington, New Zealand.

It said the city's economic development agency finally had a plan to respond to the scarcity of a skilled talent pool hindering the tech sector's success.

With the help of employers, a \$224,000 campaign called LookSee Wellington was launched to host 100 people for four days with the hope of converting them to residents and employees.

Dubbed the "ultimate tech career trip," those chosen from almost 50,000 applicants sat for prearranged job interviews, participated in area exploration and met up with locals. Griggs said 70 participants accepted

job offers by the end of the weekend.

This summer, Griggs is in part sponsoring the Go Beyond initiative, a project that has the same goal as LookSee: convert job applicants to Louisville residents and employees.

"Name something that we [in Louisville] do for talent attraction that is different from what any other community does," said Griggs, who is CEO of the digital advertising firm El Toro.

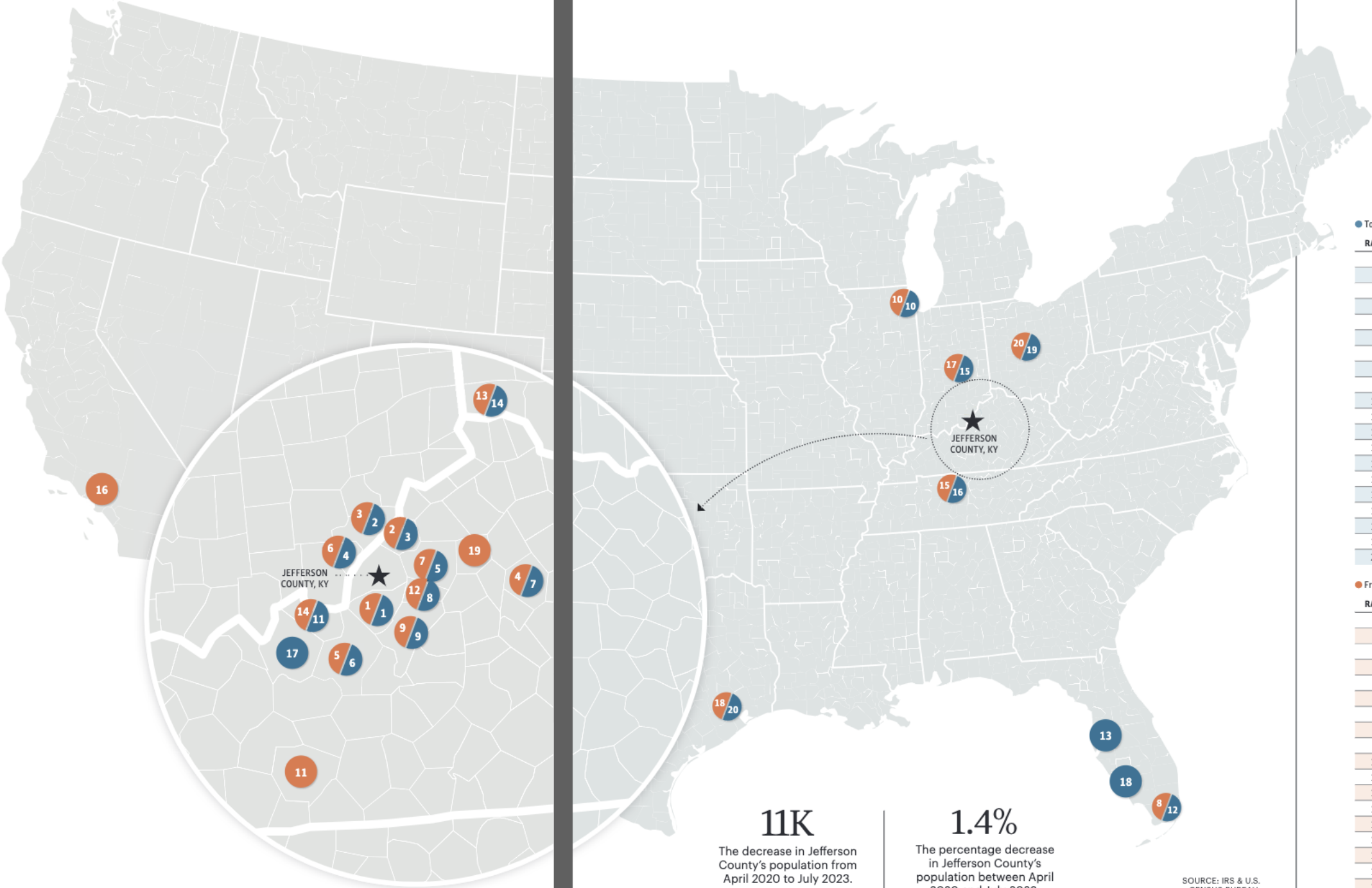
"I couldn't."

His idea to imitate LookSee on a small scale was tabled for years until a group of 2023 Bingham Fellows, a Leadership Louisville Center program, approached him about talent attraction.

Go Beyond draws inspiration from LookSee and "aims to create a com-

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petitive application process which presents targeted industry professionals with an opportunity to visit Louisville for a premiere experience showcasing what our city has to offer," according to a one-pager from its organizers. The pilot program targets the tech and health care sectors.

Leveraging the visitors and businesses attending the Bourbon & Beyond music festival in late September, Go Beyond intends to set up areas at the Highlands Festival Grounds and Galt House Hotel for attendees to interact with each other and participating companies recruiting talent.

"If we can get somebody to come to Bourbon & Beyond and experience Louisville at its best, that's an amazing opportunity to convince them that this is the kind of place they'd like to live," Griggs said.

His effort, and that of many others across the city, is just one of the ways Louisville can achieve the population growth it needs to prevent it from falling behind its peers.

While it may look like a simple display of hometown pride, the work is playing out across a 12-county Louisville Metropolitan Statistical Area that's only grown its population by 0.3% since the pandemic.

Estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau released in June show Jefferson County's population decreased by 1.4%, nearly 11,000 people, between April 2020 and July 2023. Louisville proper's population was 631,976 in 2020 and it is now 622,981.

Louisville's peer cities have also experienced a population decline since 2020, but none of them lost as many residents as the River City.

Nashville's population decreased 0.5%, about 3,500 people. Cincinnati experienced a 0.4% decline, about 3,500 people.

Looking at full Metropolitan Statistical Areas, from 2020-23, the Louisville MSA gained 2,602 people (0.2%); Nashville MSA gained 80,929 people (4%); Cincinnati MSA gained 19,505 (0.9%); and Indianapolis MSA gained 45,723 (2.2%)

Population trends in the Louisville area now

In July 2023, Jefferson County's population was just over 770,000. Louisville Mayor Craig Greenberg's Grow Louisville Together plan, one part of his strategic goals for progress during



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his term in office, hopes to increase that number to 1 million by 2038.

The mayor's plan intends to support a number of population growth initiatives like turning commercial buildings in Downtown Louisville into residential spaces and continuing work with Thrive by 5 to create universal and free pre-K across the city. The plan intersects with other citywide initiatives to increase the number of affordable housing units, investing money in redesigning streetscapes and more.

In a summary of the population growth plan, the mayor's office says the post-Covid employment land-

Stacy Griggs, president and CEO of El Toro, is among those working on attracting people to Louisville.

scape has made it easier than ever for people to "decide where to live regardless of where the company they work for is located.

"Quality of place and social infrastructure drive the decisions on where young people and families live," the office said. "Louisville must increase investment in public amenities and safety, create opportunities for residents across all neighborhoods."

Growing momentum of creating a better, more attractive community

With a number of initiatives run out of the mayor's office with partners

across the city, all hands seem to be on deck to attract and keep Louisville residents.

Talent attraction leaders said population growth is a collaborative effort built on a social media and branding foundation.

Live in Lou, a talent attraction and retention initiative run by Greater Louisville Inc., was born out of a 2015 Greater Louisville Idea Development Expedition to Portland, Oregon.

Christine Tarquinio, GLI's vice president of talent, workforce and brand strategies, launched Live in Lou

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immediately after the trip dedicated to studying talent attraction. It remained dormant while she researched motivators for people looking to relocate.

“People were looking for the ability to make a difference,” Tarquinio said. “They wanted to positively impact their community and we definitely have that opportunity.”

To add to that, Louisville is generally less costly compared to larger metros, she added.

Starting in 2018, Tarquinio began developing social media channels for Live in Lou. Research from New York-based marketing firm Development Counsellors International informed her strategy, as it showed that those looking to relocate usually begin by searching for ideal communities online. The Live in Lou brand is easily recognizable and clearly run by people who know Louisville.

Across platforms, a periwinkle background illuminates a white

Companies are made up of people. People care about good schools, they care about safe environments for their family and their kids. They care about clean air, clean water and they care about a community that’s livable and thriving. If a company doesn’t get involved in those types of things, then it’s kind of to your detriment.”

Stacy Griggs, president and CEO of El Toro

uppercase L logo – one of the stems of the letter looks like the pillars that hold up the Abraham Lincoln Bridge. Posts include bright images of outdoor patios, restaurant decor, trailheads and specialty bakery items.

The accounts share weekend to-dos: free and ticketed events, concerts, workout classes, which bars are hosting trivia, sports game start times, volunteer opportunities and restaurant specials.

The channels, Tarquinio said, are



Christine Tarquinio, Greater Louisville Inc.

“visually representative of what makes us different from other communities.”

In addition to creating the perfect feed

Live in Lou uses those social channels to highlight the “ancillary initiatives” it has developed.

One of those initiatives is City Champs, a 2017 Bingham Fellows idea for the ultimate welcome wagon.

Through that program, more than 160 trained residents help ease a person’s

transition to the area through connectivity and sharing lived experiences – and it works.

Fatima Thompson, who relocated to Louisville from Nashville in 2022 (she’s originally from Panama), said she knew about the Live in Lou brand from working in tourism and with the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce. She used City Champs as a resource before working at GLI, where she now organizes training and programming for those joining the ambassador ranks.

Many champs speak second languages, work for notable area employers and have embedded themselves into a corner of the community they’re excited to tell others about; a brief search of champ profiles show a variety of interests including remote work opportunities, things to do for families with young children, the performing arts, best cycling routes, wheelchair accessibility and women-owned businesses, she said.

“The more that we tell the story about Louisville and everything that

A WORD FROM OUR SPONSORS



JOHN GARDNER
President
Bank of America
Kentucky

If I have seen you lately, you have probably heard me talking with great enthusiasm about our financial centers opening over the next several months. It’s an exciting time to be a part of Bank of America, whether you are a valued client, a business looking for complex solutions, or one of our 150+ Louisville teammates. We’ve all been waiting, and I am proud to say it is time.

One exciting benefit of us opening doors in the Louisville Metro Area is the presence of America’s Home Grant and Down Payment Grant programs, offering up to \$17,500 to qualified home buyers. I encourage you to visit our site to learn more and help us spread the word.

What would you like the power to do? Drop into one of our newly opening locations and let us know so we can help.



ADRIA JOHNSON
President & CEO
Metro United Way

We’re excited to once again sponsor Business First’s Opportunity Louisville series because we believe in our community and want to make it better for everyone through the work that we do every day. For more than 100 years, Metro United Way has been in the Greater Louisville region improving lives and today we are more focused than ever on three priorities: thriving kids, strong households, and an equitable community. We

do this work in many ways through existing, proven programs and partnerships, as well as new, innovative initiatives. We are a change organization addressing key drivers of inequities investing where the need is the greatest – in each of the seven counties we serve – so that all can live up to their fullest potential. We applaud Business First for its commitment to our region and for providing opportunities for us to discuss some of these very issues that affect us all.



TONYA ABELN
President, Churchill Downs Foundation
Churchill Downs Inc.

For over 150 years, Churchill Downs Incorporated has earned a reputation for delivering extraordinary experiences from a two-minute race, and as a company have expanded our entertainment offerings across the U.S., but also right here in Louisville, generating thousands of jobs, investing in Kentucky’s signature industry, and sustaining significant economic impact. We are excited to be a sponsor of Opportunity Louisville that will act as a

catalyst for impactful and lasting change across our community. As a committed corporate partner, Churchill Downs strives to enrich the communities where our team members live and work, supporting over 800 charitable organizations annually. It is incredibly important to support the distinct cultural identity of the region that serves both as our corporate headquarters and the home of our most iconic asset, the Kentucky Derby. Churchill Downs is proud to join Louisville Business First in discovering the path to creating a more vibrant and extraordinary Louisville.



makes Louisville special, the more that people are going to be intrigued,” said Thompson, who is now the manager of talent outreach and engagement at GLI.

Live in Lou also maintains a job board, workforce ecosystem hub (that serves as a resource for employers and employees), leadership program for college students and private label job recruitment campaigns (especially for the health care sector).

“We’re not going to be the next Nashville overnight, everybody can relax,” Tarquinio said. “But we do need to make sure that we’re growing. Because if we’re not growing, other communities will and we’ll start to atrophy.”

She said the research her team has done in the last several years on relocation motivators largely included the availability of good-paying jobs and business growth opportunities, family resources like child care and school options and an all-around good quality of life.

Griggs, the El Toro CEO, said the



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ideal scenario for his employees is that they’re able to grow up with the company, especially given the resources that surround the office. Employee groups like a company volleyball team, or frequent Dungeons & Dragons campaigns, make colleagues first friends, he said, and that’s just the beginning.

“Companies exist within a fabric, within an ecosystem. And that fabric here is the community of Louisville,” Griggs said. “Companies are made up of people. People care about good schools, they care about safe environments for their family and their kids. They care about clean air, clean water and they care about a community that’s livable and thriving. If a company doesn’t get involved in those types of things, then it’s kind of to your detriment.”

Looking at Louisville from a wider perspective
During the first half of May, Louisville

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Partnering to create opportunities

Bank of America continues to invest in our communities to help create jobs and fuel economic opportunity. Whether it’s supporting local organizations like Louisville Business First or lending to small businesses and entrepreneurs, we’re committed to keeping Louisville healthy, strong and connected.

What would you like the power to do?®



John Gardner
Market President
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Business First – via parent company American City Business Journals – performed an online quantitative survey. A total of 871 respondents were recruited through an email campaign across all ACBJ markets, excluding Louisville, to gather perceptions and opinions.

Respondents were largely those in top-level management positions or higher; and represent an evenly distributed range of company sizes based on annual revenue and employee count. (Much more on this in the next Opportunity Louisville special report set to publish Dec. 6).

As a place to live, respondents believe Louisville to be a conveniently and centrally located city with a riverfront, lively entertainment scene and Southern culture. As a place to work, people associate the city with accessibility, a rich social and cultural landscape and diverse economic environment.

More than 26% of respondents had

never been to Louisville or the region. Four out of every 10 respondents said they had been to Louisville for business while others had come to the area for vacation, bourbon tours or were visiting family. Just under 48% of those who came for business said their experience was very good or excellent.

The majority of respondents said having easy access to a talented workforce was a driving factor for business relocation. About 30% of respondents agreed with a statement that “there is enough workforce talent in the metro area to meet the needs of employers.”

Job numbers collected by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in June 2024 the unemployment rate for the Louisville area was 4.4%, a number that has stayed around that point all year. In June 2023, the unemployment rate was 3.9%. The national unemployment rate in June was 4.3%, up from 3.8% a year earlier.

During the Kentucky General Assembly’s 2024 interim session, lawmakers who are part of the Work-



Fatima Thompson, economic development manager, Greater Louisville Inc.

force Attraction and Retention Task Force have been meeting monthly to study and identify challenges employers face in attraction and retention.

In conjunction with local stakeholders and a consulting and strategic firm, that task force’s main objective is to develop legislative recommendations for a statewide marketing program for workforce attraction and retention that will likely create a grant fund program.

“Without a healthy workforce, Kentucky residents will be unable to realize their dreams of home ownership, attaining higher education and taking care of their families,” said Sen. Mike Wise, R-Campbellsville, in a statement when he was named co-chair of the task force in June. “We need to continue creating a climate that attracts and retains the very best workers across all industries.”

Across the state, some cities are already running their own programs for population attraction and retention. The city of Paducah’s Remote Workers Incentive Program encour-

ages relocation inside its city limits to work-from-home employees with a financial package valued at \$6,500. Qualifying participants are eligible for moving expense reimbursement, internet allowance, payroll tax waivers and some free and discounted cultural and educational amenities.

Thompson said there isn’t a well-trodden path to increasing a population while gracefully dealing with the consequences and growing pains of that growth. But there has to be a plan and ongoing economic development that’s mindful of Louisville’s assets and its challenges.

Intentionality about branding, and about wanting to grow at all, makes a place more attractive to relocators and site selectors.

Thompson said now Louisville just needs to put its collective best foot forward.

“Growth is an easy way to make sure that you keep a moderate level of taxation for your citizens, for a high level of services for your citizens,” added Griggs. ■



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IMMIGRANTS BOOSTING POPULATION

International immigrants are helping hold up population figures for Louisville in recent years

Louisville’s population hasn’t slipped too far into rapid decline, due in part to the steady flow of immigrants and refugees to the area. The Kentucky Office for Refugees is based in Louisville and is a department of Catholic Charities of Louisville, which is federally designated to coordinate various refugee resettlement services.

According to fiscal 2024 data from the Office of Refugee Resettlement, part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, there were 10,955 Louisville entrants. The majority of them arrived from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria and Somalia. The number also includes benefits-eligible populations, like many Cubans and Haitians coming from other states, asylees and trafficking survivors, who are considered walk-ins and are in a different category.

Most people resettling in Louisville or being reunited with family are doing so by force. They’ve fled a country to seek safety from conflict, violence or persecution and unlike some immigrants, cannot return home.

Orientation and resources at one of Louisville’s resettlement agencies, Kentucky Refugee Ministries, points entrants to self-sufficiency and employment within the first four to six months after arrival.

The top five local employers for entrants in FY 2024 were Amazon, General Electric, Radial, Walmart and United Parcel Service Inc. and the average wage was \$16.89 per hour.

“Refugees and immigrants coming through KRM are mostly full-time [employees],” said John Koehlinger, KRM’s executive director. “... [There are] occupational taxes and benefits to those companies. People are building new lives for themselves



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Top photo: Kentucky Refugee Ministries Executive Director John Koehlinger.

Right photo: Kentucky Refugee Ministries is located on Cherokee Road.

PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER FRYER | LBF



on the basis of those jobs.”

KRM started its work in the 1990s with bare bones services and only the structure for programs that operate in full-force today. Those include English language courses, college and career readiness seminars and family services that connect youth to school registration, tutoring and more.

“People are usually willing to work if you give them opportunity,” said Semsudin Haseljc. “And that’s a good thing about acceptance in this community.”

Haseljc was one of six Bosnian refugees who sought medical treatment in Louisville in the early 1990s. He joined the KRM staff a few years later as a case manager.

He admits he struggled fitting in and subverting expectations of what

America would be like immediately: what sorts of homes he’d live in, the cars he’d drive (things he now works through with recent entrants through mentoring).

Ten years ago, Eisenmenger said KRM started Rise Up, a college and career access program that works to eliminate barriers to education and work they may miss out on. Part of the curriculum is social and emotional programming, Eisenmenger said, where instructors are “working with the trauma-informed-care lens to create ... a safe space where they [refugees] can talk to each other about their own experiences with trained staff and work through that while working on college and career readiness.”

KRM’s services work to create

there’s probably a 1 mile radius of 20 Bosnian businesses that operate.” Haseljc said since the city and county merged in 2003, leadership at the helm of Metro government has consistently maintained a welcoming rapport and dished out support for KRM, Catholic Charities of Louisville – Migration and Refugee Services and the Metro’s own Office for Globalization.

He called WorldFest, Louisville’s international festival that takes place annually during Labor Day weekend, an open invitation for people like him to come.

Individual refugees have individual needs

Koehlinger said the U.S. Department of State doesn’t cherry-pick refugees based on proficiency in English, work experience or adaptability to slide quickly into a professional job. It’s simply out of the urgency of one’s protection needs.

Some refugees, like Justin Dushime, speak multiple languages and carry higher education credentials. Others are single mothers with no more than a secondary school education and some understanding of farming.

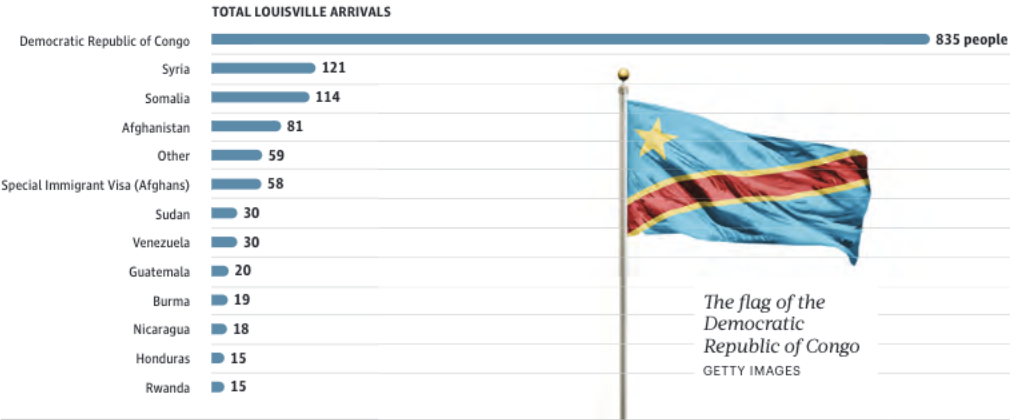
Multigenerational refugee families often have the odds stacked against them, said KRM Family and Youth Services Manager Adrienne Eisenmenger. Eldest siblings get asked to translate or contribute to the household income; family members cook and clean. Mostly, they adjust.

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KRM’s services work to create

FROM AROUND THE GLOBE

A look at where people are immigrating to Louisville from around the world.



BENEFITS-ELIGIBLE POPULATIONS (SEE DESCRIPTION IN STORY ON PAGE 24)



*MOVING TO LOUISVILLE FROM ANOTHER STATE | SOURCE: DATA, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES VIA KENTUCKY REFUGEE MINISTRIES

an equitable playing field by helping refugees reach self-sufficiency. On a case-by-case basis, refugees are placed in jobs, with mentors, in housing units and are given small cash allowances.

Louisville’s rapid growth as a logistics and distribution hub has allowed refugees to enter into every level and “play a key role in that economy,” Koehlinger said.

“This idea that immigrants are a dynamic element in our economic growth is necessary for workforce development,” Koehlinger said. “I think that’s been accepted for a long time in Louisville.”

Dushime, a Congolese refugee, and his wife worked at Amazon for a year on a split shift in order to care

for their young daughter. Today he works for KRM as an interpreter and job developer.

He has an environmental chemistry degree and was managing a water treatment plant in Rwanda where he and his family initially sought refuge.

Dushime said it’s hard to go into a previous career directly after entry. He failed an American license certification the first time because of mistakes due to unit conversions.

Once he did complete that certification, the job offers he received asked Dushime to relocate – something he wasn’t ready to do.

Dushime said he and his wife have worked through language barriers and understanding American customs, all while living in Louis-

ville with access to resources KRM provides. But the promise of their daughter makes it easy to put down roots and hard to even consider leaving.

She starts preschool this winter, Dushime said.

“While parents are working entry-level jobs, their kids are going to school, some of them are doing quite well,” Koehlinger said. “They’re going on to community colleges, four year colleges, pursuing professions and wanting to stay here. I mean, this is the state and this is the city that welcomed them, they feel comfortable.

“Long term, that’s a source of talent attraction boosting our educational attainment for these second-generation refugees.”