

New Hampshire, 94 Percent White, Asks: How Do You Diversify a Whole State?



Melina Hill Walker and Dick Martin at a gathering of business leaders, government officials and others this week on how to make New Hampshire more diverse. Credit Katherine Taylor for The New York Times

By [Katharine Q. Seelye](#)

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- MANCHESTER, N.H. — Catalina Celentano used to hold training sessions for hospital workers in Lynn, Mass., to familiarize them with the cultures of patients from Cambodia, Russia and the Dominican Republic. When she moved to New Hampshire, she suddenly found herself in an ethnic vacuum.

“I went from being able to speak Spanish every day to not speaking Spanish at all because there wasn’t anybody to speak Spanish to,” said Mrs. Celentano, who was born in Colombia to a Colombian mother and Hungarian father. “The only person I spoke Spanish with was a cleaning lady and she moved back to Colombia.”

New Hampshire, like its neighbors Vermont and Maine, is nearly all white. This has posed an array of problems for new arrivals, who often find themselves isolated and alone, without the comfort and support of a built-in community.

It has also posed problems for employers in these states, who find that their homogeneity can be a barrier to recruiting and retaining workers of different ethnicities and cultural backgrounds.

The issue prompted about 100 business leaders, government officials and members of nonprofit organizations to meet Thursday to search for ways that New Hampshire — which is 94 percent white — might lure other racial and ethnic groups, as well as younger people.

Will Arvelo, New Hampshire's director of economic development, said the gathering appeared to be the first broad-based effort in New England, if not the country, to focus on how to diversify an entire state.

With nonwhites [poised](#) to make up a majority of the American population in the next three decades, he said, diversity has become a bottom-line imperative for companies competing for talent, especially for workers who can speak other languages. As it stands, New Hampshire is 3 percent Latino, 2 percent African-American and 3 percent Asian, according to the census, with some people identifying as more than one race. The nation as a whole is 17 percent Latino, 14 percent African-American and 6 percent Asian.

“New Hampshire's future economy is dependent on our ability to set ourselves up as a welcoming state,” Mr. Arvelo said at the meeting. “We do a great job marketing ourselves around travel and tourism. How do we use those tools to attract talent?”

The project grew out of informal talks over the last few years among a racially diverse coalition of people, including Mrs. Celentano, who say they want to change New Hampshire's demographics. The effort is so new that it has no name. But it is drawing important players.

The gathering took place at the offices of Eversource, the energy company, where 17 percent of the company's 8,000 employees are not white.

“We truly believe that this effort will be hugely beneficial to our business operations,” said Paula Parnagian, the diversity and inclusion manager for Eversource.

For Jerri Anne Boggis, executive director of the Black Heritage Trail of New Hampshire, in Portsmouth, N.H., the participation of major companies is a sign of the urgency of the mission.

“It's not just the social justice groups that are doing this, it's the businesses,” she said. “We're talking about the economic engine of our state, and we can't move forward without them.”



Deo Mwano, left, and Will Arvelo, New Hampshire’s director of economic development, at the conference. Mr. Arvelo said the meeting appeared to be the first broad-based effort to diversify an entire state. Credit Katherine Taylor for The New York Times

New Hampshire’s neighbors, Vermont and Maine, are 95 percent white, making northern New England collectively the whitest region in a nation where white residents make up just over 60 percent of the population, according to the census.

Northern New England does contain pockets that are less monolithic. They are concentrated in the largest communities — Portland, Me.; Burlington, Vt.; and in Manchester, N.H. In Manchester, for example, the white population has dropped to 82 percent, down from 98 percent in 1980. Since then, other ethnicities have been increasing, and as of 2016, Manchester was nearly 8 percent Hispanic, nearly 5 percent black and more than 4 percent Asian. In Lewiston, the second largest city in Maine, Somalis are well-established.

Mostly, though, Northern New England is nearly all white. The reasons stem from a variety of factors, including a lack of big urban areas, where jobs are more plentiful, a wider range of housing is available and cultural differences are a little more accepted than in smaller places.

“Northern New England is a huge collection of very, very small towns,” said Peter Francese, a demographic analyst based in Exeter, N.H.

“Housing is at the core of why there aren’t more immigrants — there’s no place for them,” he said. “An ethnic person who wants to come in with a family of four or five people is not going to find a home they can afford, and there’s almost no rental housing whatsoever.” In addition, Northern New England has the nation’s highest concentration of second homes, making the housing market especially tight.

And, he said, much of any newer housing is only for people 55 or older. If developers built housing for younger people, he said, they would likely have children, which means a need for schools, which means higher property taxes — anathema in a place like New Hampshire, which has no income tax.

Maine, Vermont and New Hampshire also have some of the nation’s oldest populations. [More people are dying here than being born](#), forcing these states to grapple with the consequences of their limited demographics.

The irony is that with their own populations stagnant, these states must look to outsiders if they want to grow.

“We have true work force needs,” said Loretta Brady, a psychology professor at St. Anselm College, who has worked with the Manchester Chamber of Commerce on matters of diversity and participated in Thursday’s conference.

“We have 2.7 percent unemployment, an opioid crisis that has significantly impacted employability and the reality of an aging population that will absolutely require direct service care at some point,” said Ms. Brady. “And we don’t have a pipeline of talent that’s going to support that.”

Part of the problem, Rogers J. Johnson, president of the Seacoast N.A.A.C.P., told the group, was “a lack of recognition as to the seriousness of this problem.” He said that many people in New Hampshire view race as an issue in the South but not in the North.

In workshops and panel discussions, people wrestled with ways New Hampshire could draw people of different backgrounds. Their suggestions included: a better understanding of licensing and skills that refugees bring with them so they could more easily work here; a system of rewarding businesses that hire a more diverse array of workers; a central location with a database, speakers’ bureau and training opportunities that could help companies understand what “diversity and inclusion” means and how it could benefit them, and a focus on keeping workers as much as hiring them in the first place, since many leave after finding the state inhospitable.

“We haven’t even talked about housing and transportation,” Mrs. Celentano, who used to teach cultural training in Massachusetts and is now a community relations specialist for Eversource, told the group. In the workshop she participated in, she said, people asked: “How do we bring in millennials when they can’t afford housing or can’t get from Point A to Point B?”

She said in an interview later that the lack of certain basic services also made settling in places like New Hampshire difficult for minorities. These include hair salons that cater to African-American women, she said, as well as restaurants and supermarkets that offer ethnic foods and stores that sell traditional clothing.

The next step? Another meeting soon.

“At some point we have to pull the string and say what’s coming out of here,” Mr. Arvelo, the state director of economic development, said. “The pressure is on us to perform and to be able to prove that this is not a one-off meeting, that it’s a sustained effort.”