

Maine Policy Review

Volume 21 | Issue 2

2012

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Recommended Citation

Cervone, Ed. "Attraction and Retention—Maine's Challenge." *Maine Policy Review* 21.2 (2012) : 8 -9, <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mpr/vol21/iss2/3>.

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Attraction and Retention— Maine's Challenge

by Ed Cervone

Population may be Maine's biggest challenge as we look for ways to grow our economy—and this is nothing new. In 2000, Deirdre Mageean, Richard Sherwood, and Gillian AvRuskin coauthored an article published in *Maine Policy Review* entitled, "Whither Maine's Population." Their analysis highlighted three interrelated trends: slow overall population growth, a reduction in the number of young people, and the aging of the population. They stressed that these trends would have real implications for economic growth, for workforce development, and for the delivery of services such as health care. The article urged Maine policymakers and leaders to plan and prepare so that we could address these challenges.

Twelve years later, these trends continue, and if anything, have accelerated. At the time of that article, Maine was the fourth oldest state in the nation by median age. Today, it is the oldest

state. Population projections now don't just call for slower growth, but actually for no growth. More of Maine's population will reach retirement age and exit the workforce, taking with them their skills and knowledge. We won't have enough younger workers to fill those vacancies, and it is not clear whether the younger workers we do have will possess the necessary skills to meet the demands of the market. Together, these factors will greatly hinder Maine's productivity and economic growth.

One thing is certain: If we are to grow the economy and sustain that growth over time, Maine will need more people. I am referring to people who currently aren't here, who will move to Maine communities, participate in the economy, raise families, and make Maine their home. This is our attraction and retention challenge. Since I have moved to Maine, we have approached this challenge in a relatively limited fashion. We have developed a handful of policy tools and programs, aimed predominantly at young Mainers who have left for academic or career pursuits, and we haven't provided resources to those efforts at a level that reflects the magnitude of the challenge. This is not to say that these tools and programs don't have value, nor that young Mainers aren't a good target population for attraction and retention efforts, but I would argue that this limited approach hasn't been successful in turning the demographic tide.

Why do people move to a region and why do they stay? People seek employment and economic opportunities. They seek a quality of life comprised of cultural, community, and environmental assets. They seek a diversity of people and experiences. People are more willing and able to relocate based on these assets than in the past, and they have more choices every day. Maine is in competition with the rest of the world, and we have everything to gain or lose. The good news is that we have many assets in place, but we have done an inadequate job of communicating that to the world.

In 2001, I was living in Colorado and decided to go back to grad school and then pursue a new career. I applied to a variety of universities around the country based on program offering and proximity to skiing. Maine made the list as an afterthought. There were mountains, snow, and programs at the University of Maine that matched my interests. I was accepted at the University of Maine and chose to come because the people there reached out to me and not only expressed an interest, but pitched a compelling future I hadn't considered. I saw real opportunity, and that brought me to Maine sight unseen. Once here I received a superior education in a diverse community of peers from around the world. The combination of community, people, natural beauty, and career opportunities kept me here—attraction and retention at work. I had lived, worked, and traveled around the country

and overseas and had not experienced the quality of life I have found in Maine. I am a rational person and certainly not unique, so it seems likely that a similar sell could be made to more people with a little planning and effort.

But we need to think more broadly than young Mainers who left home or even someone like me. We must sell Maine to the whole world. From a practical perspective, limiting the pool of potential new Mainers makes the difficult task of recruitment even more difficult and less likely to succeed. What's more, greater diversity would appear to have its own benefits. Growing and prosperous regions in our country are more racially and ethnically diverse than Maine. We strive to be similar to them in many other economic measures—why not population? We expect Maine children to grow up and compete in a global economy, yet many have no exposure to a global population and this leaves them at a competitive disadvantage.

Fortunately for us, some of this has already started to happen in pockets around the state. Families from Africa, Asia, and Latin America have immigrated to the U.S. and have chosen Maine for many of the same reasons listed in this essay. Some are here as refugees seeking a better quality of life; some have come to get an education in our high schools and colleges; and some have come for work in a variety of industries. All see opportunity here and the potential for prosperity. They bring with them their skills, their experiences, and their families. These are things our economy and communities need, and we could use a lot more.

Programs and policy are tools that will play a role, but they are not the solution. The best attraction and retention plan for Maine would focus on three tasks in which all Maine people and institutions

could play a role. The first is to ensure that the assets that make Maine “meaningfully unique” are intact and remain so for years to come. This includes industry, educational institutions, historic communities, cultural and arts institutions, and our vast natural resources. We cannot put off the hard work or the investments needed in these areas if we want people to come and stay. The second task is that we need to tell the world about all these great things, and we need to do it again and again. I have heard a number of thoughtful explanations rationalizing our reluctance to speak about our assets, but in the end those explanations are only useful if they lead to solving that problem. The third and most important task is that we need to be welcoming. This applies to all people. People who move here aren't here to take, and they aren't here to undo what makes this place Maine. Quite the contrary—they are here to give, to partake, and are drawn here by all that makes this place Maine. Their presence reinforces and sustains the identity of this state.

We have an opportunity and urgent need to change Maine's current demographic trajectory. Further delay would be a mistake. It will not be easy, but it is necessary. And in the end, greater diversity and greater numbers will strengthen our state in ways that will surprise us. It could even create the type of community and energy that brings back some of those young Mainers who left looking for something else. 🐟



Ed Cervone is the president and CEO of the Maine Development Foundation. Originally from Pennington,

New Jersey, he moved to Maine in 2001 to earn his master's of science in ecology and environmental sciences from the University of Maine's Department of Resource Economics and Policy. Cervone has been researching and working on economic policy issues in Maine for more than 10 years. He is a resident and city councilor in Hallowell.