

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

LET'S TALK, MARATHON COUNTY

How Do We Manage Immigration In Our Country?

Key Findings from the Immigration Deliberative Dialogues

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OVERVIEW OF LET’S TALK, MARATHON COUNTY

GOALS OF LET’S TALK, MARATHON COUNTY

In the fall of 2023, the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service (WIPPS) launched the Let’s Talk, Marathon County project.¹ Let’s Talk, Marathon County is aimed at fostering constructive conversations among residents on a variety of public issues.²

1. Create spaces for residents of central Wisconsin to address issues that matter in a civil and constructive manner.
2. Build and sustain a community culture of civil dialogue around important issues.
3. Improve feelings of trust among fellow residents despite differences in viewpoints.
4. Train local facilitators with capacity to moderate future deliberative dialogues.

The Let’s Talk team assembled a panel of nearly 100 community members from across Marathon County to meet in groups of approximately 10 people to engage in conversations about public issues, starting first with *How Do We Support Youth Mental Health in Our Communities?* In 2024, additional dialogues were held on the topics of *How Do We Address Homelessness in Our Communities?* and *How Do We Manage Immigration in Our Country?* Different topics will be discussed over the next year. The goal was to select a panel of community members who reflected a range of political affiliations, a cross-section of demographics, and geographic representation from rural and urban areas of the county.

WHAT ARE DELIBERATIVE DIALOGUES?

Let’s Talk, Marathon County uses a deliberative dialogue process to facilitate conversations among community members. Deliberation—sometimes called “choice work”—is a way for the public to weigh together various approaches to solving problems and find courses of action consistent with what communities and individuals hold valuable. An issue guide was provided to the participants and it consisted of background information, including a curated page of background statistics on immigration. In addition, it outlined three potential approaches for managing immigration, including (1) welcome immigrants and be a beacon of freedom; (2) enforce the law and be fair to those who follow the rules; and (3) slow down immigration and focus on common bonds. For each approach, the issue guide provided possible actions and drawbacks.

IMMIGRATION DELIBERATIVE DIALOGUES

In the summer of 2024, eight deliberative dialogues were conducted on the topic of *How Do We Manage Immigration in Our Country?* Dialogues were held in three locations in Wausau, as well as in the villages of Marathon City and Mosinee; two dialogues were held virtually. Within each dialogue, the goal was to include approximately 10 panelists. In addition, each dialogue was structured to reflect a distribution of approximately 30% liberal, 40% moderate, and 30% conservative. A total of 56 of the 92 Let’s Talk panelists registered for one of the immigration dialogues; after accounting for cancellations and no-shows, a total of 53 individuals participated. Two additional Spanish language dialogues were conducted in-person in Wausau on the topic of immigration. There were 17 participants in the Spanish language dialogues.

| Immigration Deliberative Dialogue Participants | | | | | | |
|--|----------------------|-------------|-------------------------|-------------|--------------------------|-------------|
| Political Affiliation | Let’s Talk Panelists | Percent (%) | Registered for Dialogue | Percent (%) | Participated in Dialogue | Percent (%) |
| Liberal | 27 | 29 | 16 | 29 | 15 | 28 |
| Moderate | 39 | 42 | 25 | 45 | 24 | 45 |
| Conservative | 26 | 28 | 15 | 27 | 14 | 26 |
| Total | 92 | 100 | 56 | 100 | 53 | 100 |

¹ Let’s Talk, Marathon County is fully funded by New Pluralists: <https://newpluralists.org/>. WIPPS was chosen from a pool of almost 800 applicants and no taxpayer dollars were used for this project. More information can be found at: <https://wipps.org/lets-talk/>.

PANELISTS' VIEWS OF THE DELIBERATIVE DIALOGUES

At the conclusion of each deliberative dialogue, participants were asked to complete a brief, 20-question survey about their experiences engaging in the deliberative dialogue. The questions were designed to gather information about whether the dialogues expanded participants' views on the issue of homelessness; helped them consider tradeoffs and solutions; increased appreciation for diverse viewpoints; and increased interest in engaging in community issues. Overall, 100% of dialogue participants completed the survey. The following are highlights of the participant's feedback.

- **A majority of Let's Talk dialogue participants reported that the dialogue helped them better understand the issue they discussed and also helped them to evaluate the pros and cons of potential solutions to managing immigration in the country.** Sixty-three percent (63%) of community members reported that participating in the dialogue helped them better understand the issue "quite a bit" or a "great deal" and 63% reported that the dialogue helped them evaluate the pros and cons of potential solutions "quite a bit" or "a great deal."
- **At least half of the participants reported at least some disagreement among the panelists, yet nearly all identified at least some common ground among the participants on the topic of immigration.** About 70% reported "quite a bit" or "a great deal" of common ground; about one-fourth (24%) reported "some" common ground. When response categories are combined, 94% of the participants reported at least some common ground.
- **The dialogues helped community members expand their views on the issue of how to manage immigration in the country.** About 51% of community members reported that they considered perspectives or viewpoints they hadn't considered before "quite a bit" or "a great deal." Eighty-seven percent (87%) responded that they valued the input provided by the other participants "quite a bit" or "a great deal"; 50% felt that their input was valued "quite a bit" or "a great deal" by the other participants.
- **The dialogues were characterized by high levels of respect, including for those with differing views.** About two-thirds (64%) of dialogue participants reported that those with differing views acted "very respectfully" toward one another.
- **The dialogues helped participants appreciate diverse viewpoints and helped them develop greater comfort with and trust in fellow community members with differing views.** About two-thirds (66%) of the dialogue participants reported that participating in the dialogues made them value viewpoints on the issue that differ from theirs "somewhat more" or "much more" than before the dialogue. Seventy-four percent (74%) reported being "somewhat more" or "much more" comfortable interacting with members of their community who hold different viewpoints from theirs than before the dialogue.
- **Dialogue participants reported greater confidence in their community's ability to engage in civil conversations.** A large majority (88%) reported that participating in the dialogue made them "somewhat more" or "much more" confident that their community can engage in civil conversations about immigration.
- **In general, participants reported an increased interest in learning more about the topic of immigration and an increased interest in engaging with fellow community members about the issue.** When considering the percentage of community members who selected "quite a bit" or "a great deal," 68% reported that participating in the dialogues made them want to learn more about the issue they discussed; talk more with fellow community members about the issue (57%); collaborate more with fellow community members (59%); and be more involved in decision-making in their community about the issue (67%).

PANELISTS' INSIGHTS ON MANAGING IMMIGRATION

This following summarizes key themes and panelists' insights from the eight Let's Talk dialogues held on the topic of *How Do We Manage Immigration in Our Country?* Detailed reports can be located at: <https://wipps.org/lets-talk/>. At the start of each dialogue, the moderator informed the participants that they themselves would be using the term "unauthorized" when referring to individuals in the country illegally or without documentation. This term was selected to be more neutral and less partisan. However, participants were not instructed as to which term they should use, nor were they prevented from or asked to refrain from using alternate terminology. In the *Let's Talk Key Findings—Immigration Deliberative Dialogues* report, we followed an approach of using the term "unauthorized immigrant" in the narrative. The *Let's Talk Supplemental Report—Immigration Deliberative Dialogue Summaries* used the terms as they were reflected in the notes.

Summary of Let's Talk Deliberative Dialogue Participant Views about Actions to Manage Immigration

| Issue Approach and Action Items | Let's Talk Deliberative Dialogues | | | | | | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
| | 7/10/2024 | 7/16/2024 | 7/19/2024 | 7/24/2024 | 8/5/2024 | 8/13/2024 | 8/19/2024 | 8/22/2024 |
| APPROACH 1: WELCOME IMMIGRANTS; BE A BEACON OF FREEDOM | | | | | | | | |
| Provide legal residency to DREAMers | Support | Support | Support | Support | Support | Mixed | Support | Support |
| Allow all residents to get a driver's license regardless of status | Support | Support | Support | Support | | Mixed | Support | |
| Provide a path to legal status | Support | Support | Support | Support | Mixed | Mixed | Mixed | Mixed |
| Welcome immigrants eager to work in low-skilled or shortage jobs | Support | Support | Mixed | Support | Mixed | Mixed | Support | Mixed |
| Accept more refugees fleeing violence and deprivation | Support | Mixed | Support | Oppose | Oppose | Mixed | Support | Mixed |
| APPROACH 2: ENFORCE LAWS; BE FAIR TO THOSE WHO FOLLOW THE RULES | | | | | | | | |
| Build a secure southern border wall | Oppose | Oppose | Support | Mixed | | Support | Mixed | Mixed |
| Prosecute employers if they hire workers without legal papers | Oppose | Oppose | | Mixed | Support | Mixed | Oppose | Oppose |
| Identify and deport those who entered illegally; require reapplication | Oppose | Oppose | Oppose | Mixed | Mixed | Mixed | Oppose | Oppose |
| Detain all adults that enter illegally, even if it means separating families | Oppose | | Mixed | Oppose | | | Mixed | Oppose |
| Cut off federal funding to "sanctuary cities" | Oppose | Oppose | | Oppose | | Oppose | Oppose | Mixed |
| APPROACH 3: SLOW DOWN IMMIGRATION; FOCUS ON COMMON BONDS | | | | | | | | |
| Reform policy to provide a clear and affordable path to citizenship | Support | | Support | Support | Support | Mixed | Support | Support |
| Require English immersion programs in school | Oppose | | Mixed | Support | Mixed | Support | Oppose | Mixed |
| Reduce the number of authorized immigrants admitted each year | Oppose | Mixed | Support | Oppose | Oppose | Mixed | Oppose | Oppose |
| Give preference to those who already speak English | Oppose | | Oppose | Mixed | | Oppose | Mixed | Oppose |
| Restrict reunification to spouses/children, and needed workers | | | | | | | Oppose | Mixed |

If a cell is blank, the action item was not discussed by the group or was only raised by one person without affirmation for or against by other participants.

➤ **Given the diverse political makeup of each group, one might expect that there would be considerable disagreement about the various approaches to managing immigration. However, in most of the dialogues, the moderators and observers noted that there was a great deal of common ground among the participants. Participants were able to disagree with each other by explaining their ideas and without attacking dissenting views.**

➤ **Participants generally agreed that managing immigration requires a combination of action items drawing from multiple approaches and perspectives. The complex nature of the issue requires a multi-faceted approach. Themes of clarity, consistency, and fairness emerged and participants across groups frequently described an immigration system that, from their perspective, seems too complicated and is not always enforced fairly.**

APPROACH 1 – WELCOME IMMIGRANTS; BE A BEACON OF FREEDOM

- **The issue of DREAMers³ not having a path to citizenship was one that most of the groups felt should be addressed by policymakers, including through the use of a potentially streamlined process.** Many of the groups found it to be unfair that children brought to the U.S. illegally should be punished for their parents' actions.
- **While many of the groups reflected strong support for giving those who entered the U.S. without permission years ago a path to legal status, views of this action item's expanded view of a legal pathway were more mixed when compared to the prior action item referring specifically to DREAMers.** Many participants noted that immigration has been part of the country's history and that legal pathways have been available. Other participants wanted to distinguish immigrants who entered legally from those who came illegally.
- **Groups were keenly aware that some industries rely on immigrant/migrant labor⁴ and that unauthorized labor is a significant part of the Wisconsin agricultural workforce. However, welcoming immigrants specifically to work in low-skilled or shortage jobs had mixed response due in large part to questions about the extent to which the economy relies on immigrant workers, how many workers are needed, and how processes would be put in place to manage industry-based immigration strategies.** Participant comments reflected a tension between an economic need for labor with a need to enforce immigration policies.
- **Allowing residents to obtain a driver's license regardless of their immigration status received generally strong support across the dialogues in which this action item was discussed.** In supporting this action item, participants wanted to ensure that everyone on the roads would have passed a state driver's test and therefore would increase safety for all.
- **Whether to accept more refugees⁵ fleeing violence and deprivation in their home countries generated a broad spectrum of views, with most groups having views that were mixed or opposed.** In arguments in favor of accepting more refugees, supporters noted that many people in the U.S. today are descendants of those who came from similar situations as refugees. Those against accepting more refugees discussed the financial strain on U.S. systems and raised concerns about a perceived lack of willingness of some to assimilate to U.S. culture.

APPROACH 2 – ENFORCE THE LAW AND BE FAIR TO THOSE WHO FOLLOW THE RULES

- **There was largely mixed support across the dialogues for securing the southern border by building a wall.** Those who strongly opposed building a wall said it will not prevent people from crossing the border, while those in favor said that having an open border is bad for the country and illegal immigration is unfair to those coming legally.
- **The discussion of prosecuting employers who hire unauthorized workers created a wide range of responses among participants, with most opposing this action item. Participants recognized that large employers would be impacted differently than small employers.** The groups how workers are affected, how businesses operate, and the effect on industries that rely on unauthorized labor. Overall, there was more opposition to this item than support.

³ A DREAMER is a young immigrant who is a recipient of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), an executive branch program created by President Barack Obama in 2012. The term "DREAMer" comes from the DREAM Act, a bill that sought to provide legal status to young immigrants who were brought into the U.S. by their parents. For more information, see <https://www.bushcenter.org/topics/immigration/dreamers>

⁴ Migrant can refer to any person who moves from one place to another, especially in order to find work or better living conditions. Migrants can be "immigrants" if they intend to stay permanently in a country other than their place of birth or "non-immigrants" if they intend to stay temporarily. For readability, we will use the broader term "immigrant" here as a short-hand and note that it could also include migrant labor.

⁵ The term refugee refers to status granted to an individual, prior to departure for and arrival in the United States, who has been determined by competent authority to be fleeing persecution or have a well-founded fear of persecution in their own country because of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion.

- **There was mostly opposition to the action item of identifying and deporting those who had entered the U.S. illegally and requiring that they reapply for entry into the country; several groups expressed mixed views of this action item. Across the groups, the discussions of this action item illustrated the complexities and competing priorities of managing U.S. immigration policy.** On the one hand, while many groups expressed concerns about how the policy would be implemented, its costs, and potential economic consequences, participants also recognized the need to ensure secure borders and to uphold existing immigration laws and fair processes.
- **There was mostly strong opposition to the action item of detaining adults who enter the U.S. illegally and possibly separating families.** Participants had considerable worry about the effects of separating children from their parents and asked what will happen to those who are detained, and how such policies would even help.
- **There was generally strong opposition to withholding federal funds from sanctuary cities⁶, due largely to concerns that such a policy would have a disproportionately negative impact on communities-at-large.** Participants noted that the drawbacks outweigh any potential positives and the negatives affect the entire community.

APPROACH 3 – SLOW DOWN IMMIGRATION AND FOCUS ON COMMON BONDS

- **There was considerable support across all groups for reforming policies to allow for a clearer and more affordable path to citizenship. Of all of the various action items discussed across all three approaches, the idea of making the citizenship process more clear and understandable was among the action items with the strongest and most consistent support.** Participants noted that there are too many conflicting federal policies and awareness of the policies is limited. The process needs to be simplified and more easily-understandable. Several pointed to the need for costly immigration lawyers to help navigate the rules and regulations.
- **There was largely mixed support for requiring English immersion programs in school. While some participants noted the value of learning English in terms of being able to more-easily navigate U.S. society and in school, others expressed concerns about the costs of implementing such programs.** Concerns were also expressed about whether such programs would be considered “indoctrination” and reminiscent of detainment camps in Canada that stripped First Natives people of their cultures and languages.
- **A majority of the groups were opposed to limiting or reducing the number of authorized immigrants admitted each year, with some expressing concerns about how such limits would be determined and what the criteria would be for who would be allowed into the country. Others noted a preference for increasing legal immigration, including providing visas to help address workforce shortages.** Participants spoke of the benefits of having authorized immigrants come to this country, such as the wealth of new cultures, technological innovations, and economic benefits.
- **When asked to share their thoughts about giving preference to immigrants who speak English, participants were largely opposed.** An individual’s English language skills does not define their value as a person.
- **Restricting reunification of workers’ families to only their spouses and children was not discussed by the majority of groups.** Of the two groups that did discuss the item, one was against the proposal and the other group had participants on both sides of the issue.

⁶ According to a report issued by the University of Pennsylvania’s Perry World House , there is no consensus or legal definition of the term “sanctuary city.” Generally, sanctuary cities (as well as other sanctuary jurisdictions, such as counties and states) direct their local law enforcement agencies to refrain from actively assisting ICE and other federal agencies with enforcing federal civil immigration law. Many of these localities prefer to refer to themselves as “welcoming cities”—that is, cities that have policies to welcome all individuals and promote the inclusion of residents in local civil society regardless of their immigration status. See <https://global.upenn.edu/perryworldhouse/news/sanctuary-cities-explained>

In an effort to be inclusive of a broad range of community members' perspectives, beginning with the immigration dialogues, the Let's Talk team assembled a new mini-panel consisting of 22 Hispanic community members. All of these individuals had limited English language proficiency and therefore the dialogues were conducted in Spanish. Two (2) in-person Spanish language dialogues with 17 of the 22 mini-panelists were held in Wausau on the topic of immigration. In general, the range of support for specific action items in the Spanish language dialogues mirrored those of the full Let's Talk panel. Participants in the Spanish language dialogues echoed many of the same benefits and drawbacks.

RESOURCES

As a courtesy to readers interested in more information, we have provided some below information about local and other organizations addressing immigration and/or assisting immigrants, including refugees. This list is not intended to be an exhaustive list or representative of all community resources.

- ACLU Wisconsin - <https://www.aclu.org/know-your-rights/immigrants-rights>
- Catholic Charities of the Diocese of La Crosse (they have offices in Wausau that provide related services such as housing. There is an office in La Crosse does provide immigration services) - <https://cclse.org/immigration/>
- ECDC Multicultural Community Center - <https://www.ecdcus.org/>
- Forward Service Corporation Refugee Services - <https://fsc-corp.org/program/refugee-services/>
- Forward Service Corporation Wausau Locations - https://fsc-corp.org/locations/? sfm_wpsl_county=Marathon
- Hmong American Center - <https://www.hmongamericancenter.org/>
- Hmong and Hispanic Communication Network (H2N) - <https://wipps.org/programs/h2n/>
- HOLA - <https://holawisc.org/>
- Latinx Advocate (provides specialized services to Spanish speaking victims of sexual and domestic abuse, labor and sex trafficking victims, offered through The Women's Community) - www.womenscommunity.org
- Migrant Project (helps migrant, seasonal farmworkers or dairy workers with civil legal problems, through Legal Action of Wisconsin) - www.legalaction.org
- Marathon County Literacy Council - <https://mclitofwausau.org/>
- New Beginnings for Refugees Wausau - <https://newbeginningswi.org/>
- Northcentral Technical College English Language Learning - <https://www.ntc.edu/academics-training/english-language-learning>
- Southeast Asian Program (provides specialized services to Southeast Asian victims of sexual and domestic abuse, labor and sex trafficking victims, offered through The Women's Community) - www.womenscommunity.org
- U. S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (formerly Immigration & Naturalization Service) www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis
- Wausau Free Clinic - <https://www.wausaufreeclinic.com/>
- Wisconsin DCF Refugee Resettlement Agencies - <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/refugee/resettlement-agencies>
- Wisconsin Job Center - Directory of Workforce Services (can click on Marathon County to view employment and training services that include English as a Second Language (ESL) - <https://www.wisconsinjobcenter.org/>