



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

For more information, contact:

Fred Tsao, 312.332.7360 x213 or ftsao@icirr.org

Meghan Lewit, 312.431.1923 or meghan@upwardlyglobal.org

Report Finds Significant Employment Barriers for Immigrant Engineers in Illinois

Talent that could help rebuild Illinois now going to waste

CHICAGO –At least 20% of foreign-educated engineers in Illinois are not using their professional training to its fullest potential, according to [a new report](#) released by the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (ICIRR) and Upwardly Global.

The report also finds that foreign-educated immigrant engineers are twice as likely to be employed in low-skilled jobs as their U.S.-born counterparts. As the state infrastructure needs continue to grow, demand for experienced engineers is expected to increase significantly. The report provides the first comprehensive demographic portrait of engineers in Illinois who were educated abroad, and outlines the obstacles that lead to “brain waste” in the state.

The demographic analysis, conducted by the Migration Policy Institute, revealed the following:

- 37% of all engineers in Illinois are immigrants; of these, 59% (48,200) received BA or higher in a country other than the United States.
- Foreign-educated engineers have exceptional levels of educational attainment: 47% have master’s or higher degree. 81% speak English well or very well.
- Foreign-educated engineers have strong ties to the US: 57% have been in this country at least 10 years
- Among foreign-educated engineers, 77% of men and 58% of women are employed. However, their jobs often do not match their training. Only one-sixth of all foreign-educated engineers work in engineering occupations, and 15% of these engineers work in low-skill positions.

The report also describes the findings of a survey of engineer job-seekers working with Upwardly Global’s Chicago office. Upwardly Global is a national non-profit organization that helps work-authorized skilled immigrants rebuild their professional careers in the U.S. by providing job search training and connecting them to employers.

Among the survey’s main findings:

- Most foreign-educated engineers do not get preliminary “Fundamentals of Engineering” (FE) certificates in Illinois. The most common reason cited why not is that it is easier to get such a certificate in other states.
- The engineers also noted that they often cannot compile the four years of work experience in the US to qualify for the FE: their experience abroad does not count if not supervised by a US-

licensed engineer. Foreign-educated engineers are thus trapped, unable to get a license and unable to get the work experience needed to qualify for a license.

- Many foreign-educated engineers whose talents are underutilized are not earning enough income to enable them to study and pay the fees for the licensing process.

“Foreign-trained engineers are highly educated and highly motivated, but their talents are terribly underused,” says Rebecca Tancredi, managing director of Upwardly Global in Chicago. “The current relicensing requirements put many of these skilled, experienced professionals in a position where they can’t work in their field because they haven’t relicensed, and can’t relicense because they don’t have U.S. work experience in their field. In order for the state to benefit from this talent pool, the licensing system needs to change.”

Zahraa Alkhafaji, a civil engineer from Iraq, encountered the licensing barriers faced by many foreign-trained engineers who wish to reenter their careers in Illinois—despite her professional experience in her home country the state did not recognize her foreign work experience toward the minimum four years required to take the FE exam. Like a number of other engineering professionals in her position, she took the exam in a neighboring state which has fewer restrictions.

“It was initially very hard to find employment as an engineer in Illinois, and instead I took work as a bank teller while supporting my mother, my sister, and her children,” says Alkhafaji. “I was fortunate to find Upwardly Global which helped me through the process, and I am now employed as an engineer. I am proud to call Illinois my new home, but I know that many others who come here from abroad struggle to get back into the field.”

This report is the product of a collaboration between Upwardly Global, the Migration Policy Institute, and ICIRR, with research and writing by ICIRR’s former immigrant integration policy fellow Fanny Lopez and support from the J.M. Kaplan Fund.

“We look forward to working with Upwardly Global, Migration Policy Institute, and state licensing agencies to enable foreign-trained engineers in our state to more fully use their skills,” says Fred Tsao, senior policy counsel with ICIRR. “We can no longer afford to let their education and talent go to waste.”

The Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights is a statewide coalition of more than 130 organizations dedicated to promoting the rights of immigrants and refugees to full and equal participation in the civic, cultural, social, and political life of our diverse society. For more information, visit www.icirr.org.

-END-