

Study: Immigration to Chicago Drops

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CHICAGO—

For several years, human resources director Pete Tapaskar says it's been hard to fill all the open positions at his suburban Chicago-based technology company, ProSoft.

"Getting high skilled people is still a challenge," he said from his office in the Chicago suburb of Downers Grove.

To fill those highly skilled tech jobs, Tapaskar recruits from outside the United States. In fact, about 80 percent of ProSoft's workforce is from South Asia, and many, Tapaskar included, came to Chicago on special work visas, known as "H1B's."

"There is a high demand for the H1B's" for those who have high tech skills, he said.

While the demand for those visas remains high, many who get them are not choosing Chicago as their top destination. Instead, they choose to work in the south, Tapaskar said, "specifically Texas, and Atlanta, Georgia."

As populations change in large cities like Chicago, growth depends in part on legal international immigration. But in Chicago, the nation's third largest city, the numbers show it is not winning the popularity contest for immigrants.

"What we are seeing right now is a substantially decreased total of international immigration," said Elizabeth Schuh, principal policy analyst for the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP). "Prior to the recession we were between 50 and 60 thousand most years. Now, since 2010, we've been at about 23- to 24-thousand international immigration on a net basis."

Immigration was just one component of a recent study Schuh worked on for CMAP to explore how overall population is changing in the Chicago region.

Schuh says that dramatic drop — as much as two-thirds some years — contributes to Chicago's overall stagnant population growth. Since 2010, she said, "the Chicago region has been growing at a much slower rate than what we would consider to be our peers."

Those peers include large cities like Boston and New York City, where cold winter weather is similar to that of Chicago. Yet more immigrants are choosing to live in those cities, forcing Chicago down in the rankings of top locations for immigration.

"From 2005 to 2009 ... the Chicago region was 4th in the country in terms of its rank for just the raw number of immigrants it attracted," Schuh explained. "And for the same number of years from 2009 to 2014, the Chicago region was 8th. So just adding even across all of those years, you are seeing a substantial drop and you are seeing people go to other regions."

Those other regions include popular vacation and warm weather states like California and Florida.

But Tapaskar says the skilled legal immigrants he wants to recruit are forfeiting Chicago and flocking to tech-sector-rich locations such as Texas — for many reasons.

"The environment there is ideal for starting a business," he says. "Could be the taxes are lower, and employers are getting a lot of benefits from the state government."

But Tapaskar says one thing that could reverse that trend, and bring new immigrants to Chicago, is increasing the number of overall work visas allocated to immigrants each year, a move he hopes would attract more of the highly-skilled tech workers his business needs.