



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: September 15, 2021

CONTACT: Teresa Branson (616) 632-7586 | teresa.branson@kentcountymi.gov
Joel R. Lautenbach (616) 916-0575 | jlaut@samaritas.org

Kent County and City of Grand Rapids celebrate Welcoming Week, declaring “Belonging Begins With US”

(GRAND RAPIDS, Mich.) – From September 10-19, cities, municipalities, organizations and individuals within Kent County are celebrating Welcoming Week, an annual celebration led by Welcoming America to showcase the growing movement of communities striving to be more welcoming places for all, including immigrants.

“Kent County is a proud supporter of Welcoming Week as it emulates our commitment to embrace diversity, equity and inclusion and the [Kent County Strategic Plan](#) Priority for Inclusive Participation,” said Teresa Branson, Kent County Chief Inclusion Officer.

Over the last decade, Kent County’s population has grown at a record-breaking pace. The County has not just grown in number, but it has also become more diverse. Nearly 26 percent of residents identify as racially or ethnically diverse, and this number will increase in the years ahead.

This week, under the theme of “Belonging Begins With US” the Gateways for Growth Grand Rapids/Kent County [Facebook page](#) will highlight the strides made to create a welcoming and inclusive environment for New Americans through the [Kent County Welcome Plan](#); and encourage all members of the community to help others be seen, embraced and welcomed.

Welcoming Week is particularly timely as our area prepares to welcome over 200 Afghan refugees to the local community. Opportunities to support welcoming of our new neighbors will also be shared as they are known from the Gateways for Growth – Grand Rapids/Kent County Facebook page.

“We are committed to undertaking efforts and strategies and working with the Gateways for Growth Steering Committee, County Departments and the community to address the needs of our evolving population so that we can create a community of belonging, and provide equitable access to efficient, effective, and culturally responsive services,” said Al Vanderberg, Kent County Administrator/Controller.

-MORE-

The Gateways for Growth Grand Rapids/Kent County Steering Committee, comprised of representatives from the City of Grand Rapids, Kent County, West Michigan Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce and Samaritas, debuted the Welcome Plan in September 2020. The Steering Committee, in partnership with a task force of 36 organizations from across the community known as the Welcome Committee, guided the Plan creation process that centered immigrant voice through representation on the Committees and obtained through hundreds of surveys and several dozens of focus groups.

As the world emerges from the pandemic, Welcoming Week will look different around the world, with many communities hosting virtual events or limited in-person ones. To see a full list of events, visit welcomingweek.org. Nonprofit organizations, local governments, and individuals are encouraged to celebrate and commit to specific actions to foster welcoming in their homes, neighborhoods, organizations and other spheres of influence they have.

###

About Gateways for Growth Grand Rapids/Kent County

The Kent County Welcome Plan is the result of a national Gateways for Growth strategic planning award, helping local communities develop multi-sector plans to create a more welcoming and inclusive environment for immigrants and refugees. Our planning process was led by a steering team with representatives from the City of Grand Rapids, Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce, West Michigan Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, Kent County, and Samaritas, along with a task force of 36 organizations from across the community. Participatory in design and implementation, Welcome Plans reflect the voice of New Americans and provide a measurable framework for our community to work on. Not one entity is responsible for carrying out the entire plan, rather it requires all of us to find our place in the plan and collaborate to carry it out. Ultimately, as our region becomes even more welcoming it will become even more successful for us all.

About Welcoming America

Welcoming America is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that leads a movement of inclusive communities becoming more prosperous by ensuring everyone belongs. Through the Welcoming Network, we work to change systems and culture by providing communities the roadmap they need to create welcoming policies and share new approaches to inclusion to create an environment where everyone can truly thrive.