

A I heard the mayor of Baltimore on the radio this morning. She's worried about refugees sent to her city by federal officials - the mayor worries that too few refugees will settle in her home town.

B Why is that?

A Baltimore was once a thriving port and factory town, but since 1950 it's lost a third of its population, it's dropped to just over six hundred and twenty thousand. Like other northeastern cities, it's grappled with economic decline, shrinking tax rolls and the legacy of race laws which corralled black residents in districts blighted by bad schools and crime. Urban renewal projects have brought tourists and professionals back to some districts after decades of neglect. One of the mayor's favourite projects is to attract ten thousand new families to Baltimore, but that remains a far-off dream.

B But this year the International Rescue Committee or IRC, a charity paid by the government to help refugees settle in twenty-six American cities, launched a scheme to help clients buy homes in Baltimore.

A I know one. Mr Akwei, a human-rights activist from Africa who sought asylum in 2005, was one of the IRC's first homebuyers. Mr Akwei is a human dynamo. After years driving a taxi, he's now writing children's books, working for a programme that teaches immigrants about recycling rubbish, and setting up a community group to improve relations between black Americans and African incomers. He has a patent pending on a new school-crossing sign.

B And how did his home searching go?

A To find his new home, Mr Akwei took free bus tours laid on by City Hall, designed to show would-be residents overlooked corners of Baltimore. The city offered a grant towards his deposit, as it does to all qualifying incomers who promise to stay for at least five years. After Mr Akwei showed a record of saving money, the IRC offered a separate grant towards his transaction costs, as well as financial-literacy lessons. In all, Mr Akwei received sixteen thousand dollars to help buy his house, for which he paid one hundred and fifty-five thousand dollars.

B But cash isn't the main lure for refugees who reach America. The great gift is the immediate right to work, followed by a legal pathway to permanent residency and eventually citizenship. Actual welfare payments are small: a single adult refugee coming to Baltimore may receive one thousand one hundred and twenty-five dollars from the federal government on arrival, then short-term state benefits of two hundred and eighty-eight dollars a month. The benefits include temporary health insurance, but mostly stop after eight months.

A The message is hammered home that refugees must find jobs and pay their bills, but few need telling. Refugees know what it's like to lose a home, so rent is the first bill they pay. They penny pinch to build up savings. Much talent goes to waste as refugees with college degrees work as car-park attendants at Baltimore airport. But still the city has much to offer. Houses are cheaper than in Washington, an hour to the south. Unlike many suburbs, the city offers public transport and a diverse population. Such diversity is an economic boon and provides niche markets for small businesses.

B This isn't to paint America as a paradise for asylum-seekers. The country has accepted just seventy thousand refugees annually in recent years. To put that in perspective, one and a half million refugees may reach Germany this year. Nor is America's welcome uniform. If many Europeans fret about sharing generous welfare systems, lots of Americans fear infiltration by terrorists. Some conservative states, such as South Carolina, have seen angry public meetings about refugees in towns that have received none.

A A trophy for scaremongering goes to Donald Trump, the businessman hoping to be the Republican presidential candidate. If elected, he promises to expel all Syrian refugees in case extremists lurk in their midst, suggesting that asylum-seekers may be the greatest Trojan horse of all time. In fact, refugees are screened by several intelligence and security agencies for eighteen months or more.

B Done right, offering a haven can be an act of enlightened self-interest.

Outline Baltimore was once a thriving port and factory town, but it has lost a third of its population since 1950, and one of the mayor's favourite projects is to attract ten thousand new families. She is worried that too few of the refugees sent to her city will settle there. The great gift for refugees who reach America is the immediate right to work, followed by a legal pathway to permanent residency and eventually citizenship. The message is hammered home that they must find jobs and pay their bills, but few need telling as they know what it is like to lose a home.

A diverse population is an economic boon and provides niche markets for small businesses. Done right, offering a haven can be an act of enlightened self-interest.

Questions

1 Has the fate of Baltimore been shared by other cities? 2 What do you think of Baltimore's policy with respect to refugees? 3 Do you know of Donald Trump? 4 What is the history of immigration in America?