

Serving Diverse Refugee & Immigrant Youth & Young Adult (YYA) Populations

with Culturally & Linguistically Accessible Programming



A Learning Brief by the International Rescue Committee



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Introduction

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) serves over 200,000 newcomers annually through programs delivered in 30 U.S. cities. This work is designed to help families build thriving lives in their new communities. It incorporates a wide range of programming, including refugee resettlement, workforce development, health and wellness programming, youth services, and comprehensive immigration services. IRC brings an unparalleled reach into some of the United States' most diverse immigrant communities, serving families from more than 100 nations and employing staff who speak more than 30 languages.

With support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the IRC has launched the Immigrant Youth and Young Adult (YYA) Career and Education Technical Assistance Project. Through this project, the IRC is working directly with 12 organizations to strengthen their capacity to serve disconnected YYAs, typically defined as young people between 16 and 28 years of age from diverse immigrant communities. In working to support youth and young adults – especially those who are disconnected from education and quality jobs and careers – there is a growing need to intentionally focus on the diversity within this population and, in particular, on the growing number of youth and young adults that are also immigrants to the US. Indeed, there are now nearly 47 million immigrants in the US, the highest number on record. Immigrants now make up nearly 15% of the American population, and in some states in the South and Southwest, nearly 1 in 4 residents are immigrants.

While historically and at present, immigrants are very active in the labor force (exceeding the labor force participation rates of native-born Americans year after year), it is also true that they have higher rates of poverty and lower median earnings (12% lower native-born workers in 2021). Immigrant workers disproportionately fill low-wage jobs in sectors that often offer little opportunity for education, career, and economic advancement. Further, immigrant women – especially young women who are parents to children – are especially likely to get derailed from education and career opportunities. In 2021, less than half (48.4%) of immigrant women with children under 3 were working, a full 20% lower rate of labor force participation than native-born mothers. In 2021, immigrant workers with less than a high school diploma earned an average of just \$610 a week, whereas immigrant workers who had completed a bachelor's degree earned nearly three times as much.

For youth and young adults who are also immigrants, it is critical to ensure that these individuals have opportunities to identify and persist in education and career training activities as they move through the critical late teen and early 20s phase of their life and the programs and services, they need to be successful in this must be responsive to the unique needs of this population.¹

¹ <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/forbrn.nr0.htm>

This Learning Brief seeks to –

- ▶ Inform YYA service providers about the experiences of new American YYAs from diverse immigrant communities
- ▶ Increase knowledge of immigrant statuses and opportunities available to those from diverse immigrant backgrounds
- ▶ Discuss best practices for building culturally and linguistically accessible programs for immigrant YYA

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Definitions

This section provides basic definitions for some of the most common terms a youth service provider might see in their work with immigrant youth and young adults.

Having a basic background on immigration statuses can illuminate common barriers and challenges that can impact programming decisions for young adult-serving organizations. While not comprehensive, the definitions below represent foundational terms that can support youth service providers' work.

Refugee – An individual who has fled from their home country and cannot return because they have a well-founded fear of persecution based on religion, race, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group.

Asylum Seeker - A person seeking sanctuary but who is not yet legally recognized as a refugee. Asylum seekers are those awaiting a decision on an asylum claim.

Asylee - A person who has received asylum status.

Humanitarian Parolee - A status granted sparingly to allow people generally inadmissible or otherwise ineligible to be formally admitted to the US for a temporary period, usually for urgent humanitarian reasons or a significant public benefit. (Example: Afgan parolees, Ukrainian parolees)

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) - A Program that temporarily delays the deportation of undocumented immigrants who came to the United States as children.

Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) - A type of visa that is granted to Iraqi or Afghan nationals who worked for, or on behalf of, the U.S. Government in Iraq or Afghanistan and met certain requirements.

Resettlement Agency (RA) – Provides resettlement assistance and is initially the sponsor of a refugee entering the United States. RAs contract with the US Department of State to provide services such as reception, basic orientation, counseling, food, shelter, and health services to refugees.

T Visa – A T visa holder is a victim of human trafficking who has been granted T nonimmigrant status, which allows them to remain in the U.S. for up to four years. To qualify for a T visa, victims must have experienced a severe form of trafficking, such as sex trafficking, and must have cooperated with law enforcement in the investigation or prosecution of the crime.

Employment Authorization Documents (EAD) – A document issued by the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) that allows nonimmigrant visa holders to work in the United States. EADs are required for people who are not citizens or lawful permanent residents to prove that they are allowed to work in the country.

Understanding Immigration Status and Context for Informed Program Design

Having a basic background on immigration statuses can illuminate common barriers and challenges that can impact programming decisions for YYA serving organizations. It can also help inform an individual's eligibility for special programs and services. For example, if a client has the status of a refugee, they are eligible to be referred to an RA for tailored support and can be enrolled in a refugee-serving public benefits program. Additionally, if you know that your organization is serving students who have DACA status, a reasonable assumption can be made that they have family members who are undocumented and would benefit from youth and family community building and connections to vetted, trustworthy legal service providers. A basic understanding of the most common immigration statuses can support high-quality program design that is responsive to students' needs and contexts.

The chart below highlights key facts about 8 common immigration statuses, including the type of institutional support each status holder is eligible for and whether the holder is authorized to work.

Status	Work Authorization	Institutional Support	Notes
Refugee	Yes, Employment Authorization Document issued upon arrival	Assigned to RA	Gets status and EAD before arrival to the U.S. Extensive processing takes place abroad prior to arrival in the U.S.
Asylee	Yes but must apply for Employment Authorization Document upon grant of asylum	Processed through the border or a U.S. asylum office	Receives status after arrival, eligible for refugee services

Status	Work Authorization	Institutional Support	Notes
Asylum-Seeker	May apply for Employment Authorization 150 days after submitting an application for asylum	None	May or may not be lawfully present (for example, with parole). Must submit a formal application for asylum either affirmatively to USCIS or as a defense to removal in immigration court – Support from a legal services provider strongly recommended.
Humanitarian Parolee	Most parolees must apply for Employment Authorization (exceptions include Afghans paroled through OAW and Ukrainians paroled through U4U).	Depends on the program – may be assigned to an RA	Temporary status – Most recently commonly used for Ukrainians, Afghans, Cubans, Haitians
DACA	Individuals with DACA must apply for employment authorization.	None	DACA is granted for up to 2 years and may be renewed. DACA does not provide a pathway to permanent status.
SIV	Yes, they are employment authorized upon admission	Assigned to RA	Eligible for all refugee services
Undocumented	No	None	May or may not have pathway to permanent status – consult a legal services provider
T Visa	T visa holders must apply for employment authorization	Eligible for RA support	T visa holders must apply for lawful permanent residence after 3 years continuous physical presence in the US and before their T status expires – consult a legal services provider

**This is not official legal advice and service providers should not attempt to provide legal advice to clients. Youth service providers should refer clients to qualified legal service providers (experienced immigration attorneys or DOJ-accredited representatives) as needed.*

Understanding The Newcomer Experience

Newcomers to the United States face a variety of complex challenges as they work to integrate and rebuild their lives. Regardless of a person's specific status, there are common barriers that diverse immigration populations must navigate.



Language Barriers: Many newcomers to the U.S. arrive with only basic English language skills. Some are pre-literate in their native language. Language barriers can impact individuals' ability to access to services like healthcare, education and employment. It can also restrict social mobility and integration.



Transportation: Transportation is critical for all individuals to access education, employment and social service opportunities. Newcomers to the U.S. must either learn to navigate public transport or pursue obtaining a driver's license and vehicle. In areas where there are limited public transport options this can be difficult. Obtaining a driver's license and vehicle can be more reliable but often takes time and can be costly.



Culture Barriers: Culture shock and cultural differences can be a challenge for newcomers. They must learn about the norms in their new home for communication, dress, social and economic engagements, the workplace and more.



Discrimination: Immigrants may face prejudice and discrimination from some members of their new community. This can take place in a variety of different settings, impacting their ability to feel a sense of safety and belonging in their new home, workspace and social spaces.



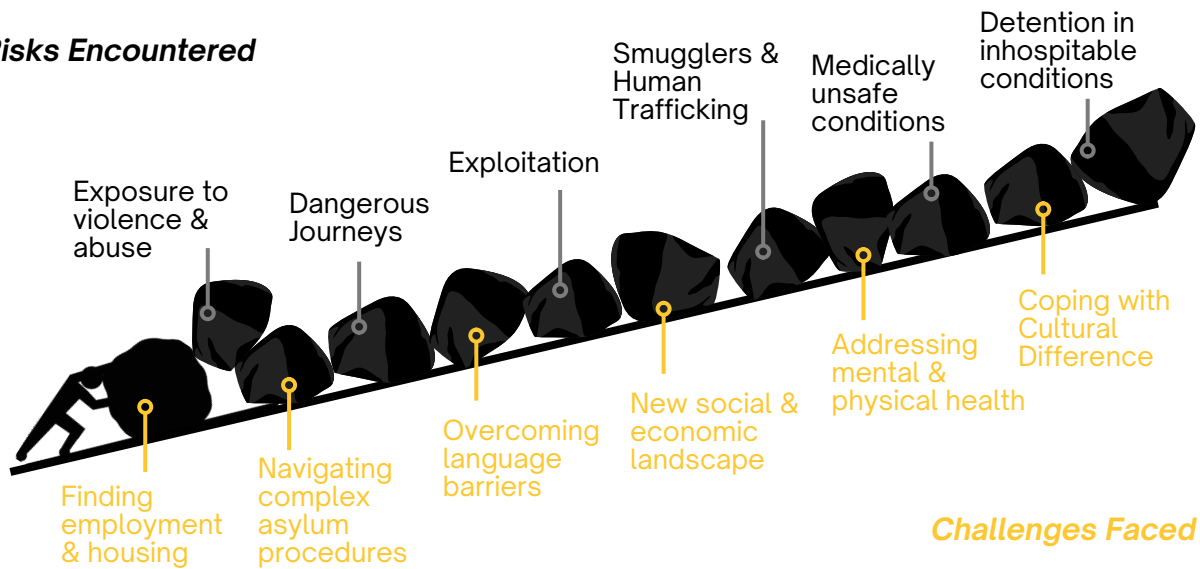
Employment: Newcomers to the U.S. may find employment difficult to navigate. Employers may discriminate against those with immigrant backgrounds, be unfamiliar with their EADs when completing new hire paperwork or require a certain level of English in order to gain employment. Some newcomers may also struggle with employment if they do not have work authorization and or their work authorization may only be valid for a specific period of time, making employment especially challenging.



Housing: Immigrant to the U.S. must navigate the increasing costs and availability of housing as they seek to find a stable, permanent place to live.

Diverse Immigrant Populations commonly face many challenges on their path to the United States.

Risks Encountered



Partnering with a Resettlement Agency

Resettlement Agencies (RAs) are non-profit organizations that help refugees and other diverse new American populations to integrate and build new lives in the U.S. RAs contract with the US Department of State to provide services such as reception, basic orientation, counseling, food, shelter, and health services to refugees. There are ten national resettlement agencies in the U.S. and over 350 affiliates providing services across the country. Each of these organizations works with community partners to determine where refugees will be resettled and to provide them with assistance to get established in their new communities. A list of these organizations and their affiliate locations can be found on the [UNHCA | USA website](#).

Although specializing in refugees, RAs commonly provide services to new Americans broadly speaking, including those who are seeking asylum or have received asylum, are humanitarian parolees, SIV holders, have DACA status, T Visas, and in some cases may serve immigrants without documentation. Services are tailored to the needs and eligibility of each specific population, and eligibility often depends on the specific immigration status of an individual. RAs are subject area experts in serving diverse immigrant populations and have deep experience in developing culturally and linguistically accessible programming for these populations. RAs commonly provide include –

- Reception support for newly arrived immigrants, including orientation, counseling, food, shelter, and connections to health services
- Employment services, including helping newcomers to find and maintain employment, as well as basic and advanced job training programs
- Social services such as support with applications for cash and medical assistance, social security card applications, ongoing case management support, and enrollment in school for school-aged newcomers
- Language lessons range from introductory to advanced and are tailored to the specific needs of language learners from different backgrounds
- Supportive services include the provision of seasonal clothing, basic furniture and household items, connection to childcare, transportation support, and more
- Legal services to support immigrant status adjustments and other legal needs

RA's have the potential to serve as critical partners for alternative education providers in the U.S. Youth-serving organizations focused on re-engagement and education delivery can leverage RA's expertise in serving diverse immigrant populations. A partner relationship between a youth-serving alternative education provider and an RA could include the following –

Re-engagement and Excel Centers are youth serving organizations that seek to provide an alternative pathway to completing high school education and connecting young people to career and technical opportunities.

- Utilizing their expertise in delivering culturally and linguistically accessible programming, the RA might support the Re-engagement or Excel Center with assessing the accessibility of their programs for diverse immigrant populations
- Both organizations can serve as referral partners for each other – sending clients to receive services as needed based on the expertise, eligibility and opportunities present with each organization
- RAs typically provide dedicated ESL classes for a variety of language levels. Re-engagement and Excel centers could form a partnership to refer their students who need dedicated language support prior to enrollment in their programs.
- RAs have the ability to provide population-specific expertise along with training and interpretation support for many language and population groups. RAs commonly have deep experience leveraging interpretation and translation tools and often have staff from the diverse communities they serve, giving them a unique perspective on how to best engage with and serve diverse immigrant communities.

Resettlement Agencies (RA) In Action

Donata Bakobwa arrived in Tucson, Arizona, United States, from the Democratic Republic of Congo on March 16th, 2023. She arrived with her husband and 7 children, eager to get settled in her new life and begin providing for her family. Back home, Donata had considerable experience in the agricultural field and four years of primary school education.

Upon arrival in the US, Donata was resettled through IRC Tucson's Reception and Placement (R&P) programming and was enrolled into the Matching Grant cash assistance and employment program. Additionally, Donata was enrolled in free English classes held at Pima Community College's Adult Education Center. Through Matching Grant, she has received comprehensive employment services through her employment specialist and the Job Readiness Instructor, helping her learn how to apply for jobs, complete a resume, interview for a job, and learn what workplace culture is in the United States. Donata was also equipped with in-depth knowledge of COVID-19 and how to keep her and her family safe through IRC's health and medical team. The team met with the family and educated them on COVID risks, vaccinations, and how to mitigate infection with COVID-19.

Through Donata's cash assistance program, Matching Grant, she was offered a Job Readiness Training (JRT) course that equips newly arrived refugees with a basic understanding of how to apply for and retain employment in the United States. Hospitality Link training has been integrated into the modules of JRT, which Donata received when she participated in JRT with her family.



IRC Tucson Hospitality Link client, Donata Bakobwa, pictured with her family at the Hospitality Link graduation.

The JRT course was held in the family's home, interpreted into their native language, to accommodate childcare needs for family and their young children. Donata's goals are to provide for her family and learn more about the United States through employment. With her experience being an independent farmer, she would like to perfect her English and eventually work in sales and customer service.

Through support from the Hospitality Link program, Donata obtained a full-time job as a housekeeper at a Wyndham hotel in July of 2023. She worked closely with her IRC employment specialist since being enrolled in employment programming in March and was willing to attend any job interview that was offered to her. Her employment specialist coordinated with a long-time IRC employer partner, Wyndham hotel, to schedule an interview after Donata graduated from the Job Readiness Training course, which Donata successfully completed and was then offered the job.

The IRC in Tucson's expertise in serving diverse immigrant populations allowed them to seamlessly provide Donata with a variety of tailored services to help her both support her family and pursue her career goals. Having worked extensively with refugees with Donata's background previously, the IRC in Tucson knew was able to deliver culturally and linguistically accessible material to Donat and her family, connect her with the classes she needed to learn English, and help her to apply for all of the public benefits she was eligible for. Resettlement Agencies have the expertise and experience serving diverse immigrant populations to provide tailored and effective services to these populations.

Building Culturally Accessible and Inclusive Programs

- ▶ **Centering Immigrant Voice:** When discussing the refugee experience with dignity, it is crucial to center the voices of refugees themselves in the narrative. All too often, our preconceived notions and biases shape the narratives of refugees, incorrectly filling in gaps. To counteract this, we must allow former refugees to tell their own stories and share their experiences authentically. However, it is essential to strike a balance, enabling refugees to share their stories without overburdening them or exploiting their experiences.

Why do we do it?	How do we do it?	Examples
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To empower our communities and give them a voice • To demonstrate shared power and break down hierarchies • To build trust in communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systematically and regularly collecting client feedback on programs and services and use to positively change programming 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systematically and regularly collecting client feedback on programs and services and use to positively change programming

Your Re-Engagement Center may already have a student advisory or leadership group, which can serve as an excellent space to integrate the voice of immigrant YYA who can serve on the advisory or leadership group. To encourage their participation, consider offering to provide interpretation during meetings, providing transportation assistance so they can attend, and taking extra time to explain what this advisory group does and why you are so interested in their voice being a part of it - this may be the very first time someone has asked them to participate in anything like this.

► **Strengths-Based Approach:** In discussions about the refugee experience, we often focus on the barriers and challenges refugees face. However, it is equally important to highlight the strengths that refugees bring with them during the migration and resettlement processes. By shifting the narrative to strengths-based storytelling, we not only recognize the resilience of refugees but also promote a more balanced and empowering perspective.

Why do we do it?	How do we do it?	Examples
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To reinforce notions of agency and choice • To emphasize what students can do for themselves - take ownership of their education/work • Accentuate the positive and build confidence • Creates an environment for individuals to thrive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Showing acceptance & empathy • Identifying individual needs and connecting them to resources • Focus on clients developing their own plans and goals for their work and education • Coaching over counseling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coaching and navigation services that allow clients to set their own goals and highlight client strengths and assets • Empowering clients with resources rather than gatekeeping • Use student strengths to build foundations for overcoming additional barriers and challenges

For example, a career coach for an immigrant YYA student would focus on the individual student's strengths and all they have overcome in their journey to the U.S. thus far as a basis for their coaching conversation on setting career and academic goals.

- ▶ **Trauma-Informed Approach:** Approach work with immigrant YYA in a way that builds trustworthiness and transparency, includes mutual collaboration and safety, and empowers their voice and choice.

Why do we do it?	How do we do it?	Examples
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To avoid retriggering, furthering trauma/harm • To provide stabilization and reduce stress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a safe and calming learning environment • Structure and routine to ease anxiety and promote safety • Promote student power and agency by providing students with choices as often as possible • Positive reinforcements over negative; create a positive environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give clear orientations for any programs and activities so students know what to expect • Taking care to explain systems/bureaucracy to minimize stress of unfamiliarity • Utilize or refer to peer-support activities • Define your professional role and set boundaries/expectations • Bringing in subject expert trainers for direct service staff on adopting this approach

As part of routine professional development opportunities, your youth Re-Engagement Center might consider including broad training on the challenges and barriers that diverse immigrant YYA face as part of their journey to the U.S to ensure that direct service staff can approach their work with immigrant students in a way that intentionally builds trust and does not re-traumatize.

- ▶ **Providing Linguistically and Culturally Accessible Materials:** To be effective, programs and services for diverse immigrant communities must take into account an individual's language and culture. Providers must take into account students' English language abilities as well as their literacy level in their native language.

Why do we do it?	How do we do it?	Examples
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To increase access to programs and services for English Language Learners • To better support students with different English levels in a classroom • To foster environments that are conducive to learning and support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledging diverse holidays, religious needs and creating space for these practices • Respecting and valuing cultural differences • Lean on staff with lived experience and linguistic backgrounds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use professional interpretation where possible • Using culturally relevant examples and images in curriculum • Using image-heavy materials • Creating vocabulary handouts for key languages and terminology

Consider basic steps like using multi-lingual signs on key areas of the classroom and your facility (e.g. bathrooms, exits, lunch or dining areas) to support newcomers in feeling comfortable, welcomed, and more able to navigate the space they are in.

- **Community Building:** Refugees often form tight-knit communities, providing support to each other.

Why do we do it?	How do we do it?	Examples
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To cultivate resiliency - build caring relationships outside of family • Foster sense of connection to combat isolation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating connections between students and families • Creating connections between organization / program and refugee / immigrant communities • Interactive classroom activities that foster discussion and connection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inviting families to events/ celebrations • Incorporating civic/ extracurricular activities where possible (ex. library field trip) • Interactive classroom curriculum where students learn from each other

Consider including interpretation and translation resources at Re-Engagement Center events and celebrations where families are included to ensure that they are accessible to immigrant YYA's families and communities.

Ahmad Walid Nazari, 26 years old, came to the United States as an Afghan Humanitarian Parolee in late 2021. Ahmad Walid arrived with his brother and was resettled by the IRC in San Diego, California. Fortunately, Ahmad had immediate family relations in San Diego County, who were able to help throughout the resettlement process. Ahmad Walid graduated from college with a bachelor's degree in Business Management from Afghanistan and speaks Dari and English fluently. His fluency in English enabled him to have easier access to American culture and the community he lives in at large.



Ahmad Walid lives with his U.S. family member on the outskirts of San Diego County, and the long commute to the IRC El Cajon office (about 90 minutes) made it difficult for him to receive services in person. In the first months after being resettled, Ahmad Walid was assigned an Employment Specialist to assist him with several of the challenges he was facing. The lack of transportation urged Ahmad to start studying for his driving permit, and he eventually got his driving license. Additionally, Ahmad Walid's legal documents, such as his Employment Authorization Document (EAD) and social security, were delayed due to institutional backlogs. This caused Ahmad to remain unemployed for an extended period of 4 months.

However, Ahmad worked with his caseworker and employment specialist to apply for public benefits and attend cultural orientation. He also attended IRC San Diego's Afghan Job Readiness Training (JRT) during this period. Through the training, Ahmad Walid learned how to update his resume, identify soft and hard skills needed in career development, set career goals, and understand the rights and responsibilities of employees. He also participated in a mock interview.

During his mock interview, Ahmad Walid practiced how to navigate both professional and personal questions that interviewers might pose and what appropriate behavior is accepted throughout any professional space. Due to the success of this training, Ahmad Walid found employment within a month of graduating from the Afghan JRT program. He got a full-time position at Postal Annex, a shipping and business service center. Ahmad has said that the new job has allowed him to be financially independent while also providing him security and stability. He additionally got a second job working as a delivery driver for Walmart and is an independent contractor working on the weekends. Now that Ahmad Walid is well acclimated to the American culture and work system, he is sure that he will continue working and providing for himself and his family.

Ahmad's story highlights several approaches to effective service delivery for diverse immigrant populations. Taking a strengths-based approach, his case managers worked with Ahmand to pitch his story to effectively answer personal and professional questions in an interview setting. They helped him to build community, despite living far outside of the city, by enrolling him in a job readiness class specifically for Afghans. Through this program Ahmad was able to connect with other Afghans who had evacuated the country during Operation Allies Welcome. They also supported him with obtaining his driver's license so that he could remain living with his family connection while also pursuing work and other support services.

Conclusion

As the number of immigrant youth and young adults being served by alternative education systems continues to rise, the importance of ensuring programs are responsive to the needs of these unique young people is of critical importance. A basic understanding of immigration status and common barriers immigrant youth face can help to shape programming to be impactful and effective. Youth service providers have the opportunity to thoughtfully consider the unique circumstances of a diverse immigrant population and tailor their work to meet these young people where they are in order to set them up for success in both education and their careers.

Resources

General

[Who is a Refugee, Asylum Seeker, or Humanitarian Parolee?](#) - Refugee Housing Solutions

[Discussing the Refugee Experience with Dignity and Resilience](#) - Switchboard

[Who are Refugees and How do They Come to the United States: Understanding the Refugee Resettlement Process](#) - Switchboard

[About Refugee Populations Webpage](#) – CORE (provides backgrounders on different refugee populations including histories, religions, languages, education levels and resettlement needs)

Video: [Understanding Newcomer Immigration Statuses](#)

Webpage: [Refugee Population Backgrounders](#)

[Employment Authorization Documentation – Reference Guide for Refugee Service Providers in the U.S.](#) - Switchboard

Special Populations

Webinar: [Understanding the Journey of Cuban Haitian Entrants](#)

Fact Sheet: [Benefits for Cuban Haitian Entrants](#)

Webinar: [Who are the Afghan Newcomers? Understanding the Background and Socio-cultural Strengths and Needs of Afghan Evacuees to the U.S.](#)

Webinar: [Educational Experiences of Afghans: Learning from Afghan Refugee Students & Families](#)

Webinar: [Hiring Afghan Humanitarian Parolees: What Service Providers and Employers Need to Know](#)

Webinar: [Strengthening Family Resilience Among Afghan Newcomers](#)

Toolkit: [Supporting Afghan Students in Schools & Youth Programs in the United States](#)

Webinar: [Cultural and Practical Considerations for Working with Ukrainian Clients](#)

Trauma-Informed Care

Webinar: [Trauma-informed Care in Case Management](#)

Guide: [Trauma-Informed Care: A Primer for Refugee Service Providers](#)

Strengths-Based Approach

Webinar: [Demystifying Strengths-Based Services to Foster Refugees' Resilience](#)

Centering Client Voices

Blog: [The Eight Stages of Co-creation: Tips for Refugee Service Providers on Using Inclusive Approaches in Their Work](#)

Linguistic and Cultural Accessibility

Guide: [Cultural Validation and Translation Review Toolkit: Developing Culturally Responsive and Linguistically Accurate Materials](#)

Tool: [Apps for Translation and Interpretation](#)