



Refugee Family Engagement

How Head Start Programs Can Engage Local Refugee Communities for Child Enrollment and Adult Employment Opportunities

The [National Head Start Association](#) (NHSA) and communications and research firm [Fors Marsh](#), a certified [B corporation](#), have teamed up to help local Head Start programs like yours establish meaningful connections with communities of people with refugee status. **The goals are simple:**

1. **Enroll more children from families with refugee status in Head Start**
2. **Employ more people with refugee status in Head Start programs**

To assist your program in achieving these two goals, NHSA and Fors Marsh have created this guide with suggested strategies for:

- **Making your program more responsive to the needs of the local refugee community**
- **Conducting effective outreach**

This guide also contains suggested talking points and a worksheet for conversations with refugee resettlement agencies and other potential partners.

Ways to be responsive to the needs of local refugee communities

Effective integration with the refugee community involves [practicing cultural humility, awareness, and competency](#).

That requires going beyond a mere appreciation and respect of other cultures to reflecting on and addressing the historic power imbalances between one's own culture and the cultures of others.¹ It's also important to be sensitive to the challenges and traumatic experiences that people with refugee status may have endured.

Successfully employing people with refugee status also requires fostering a workplace culture of inclusion.²

The good news is, [diversity, equity, inclusion, and multiculturalism](#) are already at the core of Head Start services. But there are other practical steps you can take at the management systems level (Figure 1) to be more responsive to the needs of your local refugee community.

Leadership and Governance. Consider establishing an advisory committee focused on engaging with your local refugee community or ensuring that a parent with connections to the refugee community participates on your parent committee. You might already have a family with refugee status enrolled in your program; people with refugee status may not self-identify as such for fear of stigmatization.

Program Planning and Service System Design. Engage people from your local refugee community in your program planning process. Consider applying extra points for refugee status in your program's selection criteria and include a way for applicants to indicate their refugee status on your application forms.³

¹ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1524839919884912#bibr17-1524839919884912>

² <https://www.tent.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Deloitte-Tent-A-new-home-at-work.pdf>

³ <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/FCD-Morland-FINAL.pdf>



Figure 1. Head Start Management Systems Wheel

The new [Head Start Program Performance Standards](#) released in November 2016 include a provision [§1302.15 (c)] allowing Head Start and Early Head Start programs to reserve one or more enrollment slots (up to 3% of the funded enrollment) for pregnant women and children experiencing homelessness in their service areas for a period of 30 days when a vacancy occurs.

Children with refugee status may be classified as experiencing homelessness if they meet the requirements of a federal law called the McKinney-Vento Homelessness Act. Staff at your Head Start center may wish to consider reserving enrollment slots for children experiencing homelessness under provision [§1302.15 (c)] so that children with refugee status who qualify as homeless can be placed in those slots for immediate enrollment.

Community and Self-Assessment/Data and Evaluation/Ongoing Monitoring and Continuous Improvement. Engage local refugee resettlement agencies in your [community assessments](#).¹ Include demographic measures of the refugee population in your community, such as languages spoken, countries of origin, and numbers of families with refugee status who have young children. States track refugee resettlements, often down to the county level. Local refugee resettlement agencies are also good sources of local demographic data. Community stakeholder meetings, focus groups, and intake conversations can be good sources of information.

Other data sources include:

- [Refugee Processing Center](#)
- [Office of Homeland Security Statistics](#)
- [American Community Survey Data](#)
- [Migration Policy Institute's Data Hub](#)
- [Urban Institute's Children of Immigrants Data Tool](#)

Share your preliminary analyses with state offices and local agencies for feedback on how well data reflect these populations and to share information.

Fiscal Management. Account for your refugee community outreach efforts in your budgeting process.

Facilities and Learning Environments. Ensure that your indoor and outdoor learning environments support the needs of children and families with refugee status, and staff. For example, consider dedicating space for private meditation or prayer.

Technology and Information Systems. Consider working with local refugee resettlement agencies to identify useful information to include in the Head Start case management database. This will help your Head Start staff track services for families with refugee status, which can improve coordination and address gaps in services.¹

Training and Professional Development. Offer staff members training opportunities for them to acquire the knowledge, skills, and competencies needed to meet the needs of families with refugee status. Consider cross-training sessions with refugee resettlement agencies to learn more about one another and the needs of people with refugee status.¹

Communication. Don't let language be a barrier. [Free translation and interpreting services](#), as well as [smartphone apps](#), are available for people with refugee status. Ensure that written materials are translated into the languages of refugee communities and make these materials available to them. Also, having a dedicated Head Start liaison, cross-cultural team, or main contact that can connect Head Start with a refugee resettlement agency is vital, especially if this liaison speaks the same language as the people with refugee status.

As your program engages refugee communities, consider encouraging program staff to learn basic greetings, conversation starters, and phrases in the primary languages of those communities. Speaking with staff who have made the effort to learn some of their language can help build up trust and grow strong relationships between staff and people who are refugees.

Recordkeeping and Reporting. To help build and maintain trust, be transparent and up front with families with refugee status about the kinds of information you record and report to outside agencies.

Transportation. Transportation is a major challenge for many people with refugee status. Connect families with refugee status with reliable transportation to help them get to and from your Head Start program and other services in the community. Work with refugee resettlement agencies to prioritize placement of families with refugee status in neighborhoods with easy access to your program.¹

Human Resources. Be sensitive to the [employment challenges faced by people with refugee status, including in the application, hiring, and onboarding process](#). Fostering a culturally inclusive environment can help reduce the likelihood of attrition, which is typically highest for employees with refugee status during their first month at a new job.⁴ Ensure that your personal appearance/dress code policies are respectful of the community customs of people who are refugees. Find ways to be accommodating of the personal obligations, customs, and religious practices of people with refugee status.⁵

⁴ https://www.tent.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/How-to-create-a-culturally-inclusive-workplace-for-refugee-employees_FINAL.pdf

⁵ https://www.lirs.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Tent_Guidebook_FINAL.pdf

How to develop an outreach plan

Step 1. Determine your capacity to conduct outreach

Before committing your Head Start program to outreach efforts with local refugee communities, first consider your capacity to conduct outreach. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Are there enough children with refugee status and working-age adults in your area to warrant outreach efforts? Even if your area is not a primary resettlement location, you still might have a sizeable population of people with refugee status.
- What funding do you have or think you will need, including for printing marketing materials and for translation and interpretation services?
- Do your staff members have the time to conduct outreach, including to attend community events?
- Do your staff members possess the expertise necessary to conduct outreach with the refugee community?
- Is there someone on your staff who can lead (champion) outreach efforts?
- Do any of your staff members or parents have connections to the local refugee community?
- What marketing materials do you think you will need to effectively reach the refugee community?
- Will you be able to sustainably continue outreach efforts for years?

Step 2. Assign roles and responsibilities

Determine who on your staff will lead your outreach efforts, as well as who will support them.

A closer look at refugee resettlement agency employment assistance

Refugee resettlement agencies often assist employers in identifying potential employees and follow up to ensure mutual satisfaction. They also assist job applicants with paperwork and translation and interpretation needs—all free of charge.

Step 3. Set SMART objectives

SMART objectives are those that are **s**pecific, **m**easurable, **a**ttainable, **r**elevant, and **t**ime-bound. For example:

- Within the next 3 months, identify a point of contact at the local refugee resettlement agency and host a meeting to introduce them to Head Start services.
- Within the next 6 months, attend at least three community events to share Head Start information among families with refugee status.
- By the end of 2024, increase the number of children from families with refugee status enrolled in our program by X percent.
- By the end of 2024, increase the number of adults with refugee status who are employed with our program by X percent.

Related to setting objectives, make sure you have ways to [capture relevant information and data](#). For monitoring and evaluation purposes, you will want to document the tasks you will take to achieve your goals and objectives, the outcomes you expect, the final outcomes, and your data sources.



Step 4. Identify your audiences of interest

Who are you trying to reach out to?

- Start with local affiliates of refugee resettlement agencies in your community; finding work for people with refugee status and helping them enroll children in school are core services.⁶ The agency staff members you will want to contact to hire people with refugee status are the job developers or employment specialists. The agency staff members you will want to contact to enroll children with refugee status can vary depending on the practices of each refugee resettlement agency. For example, you may want to contact the case manager of the child you wish to enroll; or the refugee resettlement agency you are working with may have an enrollment coordinator or manager who can assist. The Office of Refugee Resettlement within the Administration for Children & Families maintains a [list of refugee resettlement agency affiliates](#) in each state. Some of the parent organizations offer ways to get connected specifically regarding employment services:
 - Church World Service has an [online form](#) to fill out to be connected with local employment specialists.
 - Global Refuge (formerly Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service) has a program for workplaces to become the preferred [employer of people with refugee status](#).
 - Ethiopian Community Development Council, Inc. has an [online form](#) to fill out for potential partnership opportunities.
- Also consider reaching out to other local organizations and service providers that work with refugee populations, such as local immigrant-focused [nonprofits](#), [community colleges](#), adult education centers, and [Refugee Careers Pathways grant recipients](#).
- Use the talking points and worksheet below in your conversations with potential partners.
- Consider sharing a memorandum of understanding to formalize a partnership.
- For assistance initiating contacts with local refugee resettlement agencies and others, it may be helpful to reach out to the [refugee coordinator](#) in your state, which most states have.

In addition to these refugee community gatekeepers, you will want to conduct direct outreach to families with refugee status.

Step 5. Develop your key messages

NHSA and Fors Marsh have done some of this work for you in creating this toolkit. However, you may think of other important messages you want to convey to your local refugee population. When developing messages, keep in mind:

- Different audiences need different messages. The information needs of a refugee resettlement agency and a refugee parent are not exactly the same. Also make sure you balance the message between what you want them to know and what you think they will want to know.
- You may need to use different communications methods to reach each audience. Many people with refugee status cannot read or write in their own language, so visual material is very helpful.
- Always include a call to action you want your audience to take, such as visit a website or call a phone number.

Step 6. Choose your communications methods

- As far as making initial contacts with refugee resettlement agencies, you may have to make multiple attempts and use different methods—phone, email, Web contact form, etc. Persistence pays off.
- Beyond that, determine how your audience prefers to receive communications. NHSA and Fors Marsh created a suite of materials for you to use, including fact sheets, posters, social media, and text messages.
- Successful engagement activities include Head Start staff meeting families with refugee status “where they are” by sharing Head Start information at events organized and hosted by local community organizations. Events may be hosted in faith-based locations, food pantries, community colleges, and housing developments where people with refugee status live.

⁶ https://www.lirs.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Tent_Guidebook_FINAL.pdf

Step 7. Execute your outreach plan

Once your program has established a partnership with, for example, a refugee resettlement agency, it is important to maintain the relationship:⁷

- Consider opportunities to continue supporting and enhancing the relationships between program and partner staff.
- Consider providing resources to Head Start staff to promote communication about the waitlist to partners.
- Make it easier for programs and partners to share information about families and their support needs.
- Attempt to engage with and recruit parents whom the partners support by leveraging existing events and creating new opportunities.
- Consider providing program and partner staff with shared training on specific topics that support continued collaboration.
- Attend to staffing challenges in Head Start programs and partner organizations that might be preventing them from meeting the needs of families.

Pro tip

One Head Start program administrator with experience engaging refugee communities suggests promoting Head Start at your local Social Security Administration office because it is one place people with refugee status are sure to visit.

Step 8. Evaluate your efforts toward meeting your SMART objectives

Continually [track progress](#) and course correct as needed if your data show that you are not meeting your objectives.

Step 9. Share your story

Share with other Head Start programs what went well and what did not go well in your attempts to enroll more children from families with refugee status and employ more people with refugee status. Be sure to get informed consent from anyone whose story or images you would like to use.

Talking points for conversations with refugee resettlement agencies, other potential partners

To achieve the twin goals of enrolling more children with refugee status and employing more adults with refugee status, local Head Start programs and refugee resettlement agencies must begin talking with each other. Head Start staff will need to work together with agency staff to create Memorandums of Understanding that outline partner services on offer for people with refugee status.

To get you started, here is some information you will want to convey in your conversations with the refugee resettlement agencies in your area.

The benefits of partnering with Head Start

- **We serve similar populations, and our missions are similar.** Partnering together can also lead to a larger network of partnerships because we

relationships with other organizations in the community.

- **Because of our focus on the whole family, not just children, we can help families with refugee status seamlessly transition off your case management.** Head Start supports the parents and families of enrolled children in achieving their own goals, such as housing stability, continued education, employment, and financial security.
- **We can serve as a job pipeline for people with refugee status.**
- **We regularly conduct needs assessments in the community we serve, and we can learn from one another.**

⁷ <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/partnering-reach-and-support-families-greatest-needs-lessons-head-start-reach-case>

Educational and employment opportunities for families with refugee status

- **Emphasize that Head Start and Early Head Start offer comprehensive services for families with refugee status.** Head Start and Early Head Start are free service programs for families who are from diverse cultural backgrounds and who speak different languages. [Research shows](#) that children who participate in Head Start are better prepared for kindergarten and grade school, are more likely to graduate high school and go to college, and do better on a host of other outcomes when compared to children who are eligible for Head Start but don't participate.
- **We want to encourage families with refugee status to apply for Head Start for their children.** While we sometimes receive more applications than we have space for, we have ways of prioritizing children with refugee status. For example, children with refugee status may qualify for immediate enrollment in Head Start if they meet the requirements of the McKinney-Vento Homelessness Act.
- **We often have job openings for a variety of positions.** We often need teachers, teachers' assistants, classroom aides, infant/toddler caregivers, bus/van/truck drivers, cooks/cafeteria workers, cleaning/maintenance workers, accountants, data entry technicians, and office assistants.

The benefits, information on available positions, and how to apply

A job at Head Start comes with several benefits. These include:

- **Flexibility**—Part-time, full-time, and volunteer jobs in and out of the classroom
- **Compensation**—Good pay and benefits (total benefits, such as health insurance, depend on the program location and whether the person works full- or part-time)
- **Comfort**—Safe, family-oriented, inclusive, and diverse work environments
- **Community**—The ability to meet other parents, professionals, and people in the community
- **Assistance**—Help with meeting the needs of the person's family
- **Convenience**—The ability to work in the same place the person's child learns
- **Skills building**—Build communications and other skills on the job, including learning English as a second language
- **Advancement**—Professional development to improve skills in serving children and families, increase earning potential, and meet degree or certification requirements
- **We currently have openings for [LIST JOBS FOR WHICH YOU ARE CURRENTLY HIRING].**
- **Contact [INSERT NAME] for information on enrolling children in our program.**
- **Contact [INSERT NAME] for information on employment opportunities.**

Worksheet: Overlaps and Gaps in Community Services

It can be helpful in your conversations with refugee resettlement agencies to identify areas of overlap and gaps in the services you both provide.

Services for Children and Families	What Head Start Provides	What the Refugee Resettlement Agency Provides	Timeframe for Refugee Resettlement	Person Responsible
Family case management				
Home visits				
Community assessment process				
Service coordination				
Family engagement				
Assistance with application for public benefits and services				
Health/mental health assessment for children, linking to services (immunizations, malnutrition, trauma)				
Enrollment				
Transition to public schools				
Services to parents (assist with economic security, housing, employment, and career development)				
High-quality early childhood education				
Child care while parents work				
Employment services geared to people with refugee status				
Deep relationships with ethnic community leaders to promote trust and family integration				
English as a second language training				
Access to less common languages for interpretation/translation				
Access to cultural expertise, consultations, and training about newly arrived populations				