

How Public Housing Authorities Can Support Newcomers

A GUIDE TO RESETTLEMENT AND HOUSING ACCESS



Introduction

Public Housing Authorities (PHAs) play a pivotal role in ensuring housing stability for refugees and other newcomers to the United States (U.S.). Newcomers include asylees, Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders, humanitarian parolees, and trafficking survivors. These individuals often face unique challenges in securing affordable, stable housing, from navigating unfamiliar systems to overcoming language barriers and lack of rental histories. By adopting newcomer-friendly practices and collaborating with resettlement agencies, sponsors, and community-based organizations, PHAs can create more equitable access to U.S. government housing programs. This guide provides actionable steps, resources, and strategies to help PHAs align their policies and practices with the needs of diverse newcomers, thereby fostering integration and long-term stability for them.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Understanding Refugee Resettlement and Building Effective Partnerships	2
The Refugee Resettlement Ecosystem	2
How PHAs Can Build Partnerships	2
Eligibility for HUD Housing Programs	3
Becoming a Newcomer Friendly PHA: Policy Recommendations	3
1. Update Administrative Plans to Address Newcomer Needs	3
2. Enhance Language Accessibility and Cultural Competency	3
3. Remove Systemic Barriers to Entry	3
4. Proactively Market Housing Opportunities to Newcomers	4
Conclusion	4
Tools and Resources	4

Understanding Refugee Resettlement and Building Effective Partnerships

PHAs have a unique opportunity to help address the housing needs of refugees and other newcomers. Refugees, asylees, and other eligible individuals and groups are resettled in the U.S. through a coordinated effort involving federal, state, and local partners. Navigating this system can be complex, and PHAs are key players in ensuring that newcomer individuals and families can access stable, affordable housing.

The Refugee Resettlement Ecosystem

Newcomers arrive in the U.S. through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) or other legal pathways, through which they are assigned to local resettlement agencies for initial support. These agencies provide critical initial services, including immediate housing, employment assistance, and social service case management. Coordination between PHAs and resettlement agencies can bridge the gap between newcomers' immediate housing needs and long-term stability.

Key partners in this ecosystem include:

- **State Refugee Coordinators (SRCs):** Oversee statewide refugee resettlement efforts and serve as liaisons between federal, state, and local entities. They are instrumental in understanding regional resettlement trends and connecting PHAs with local resettlement agencies.
- **Local Resettlement Agencies:** These nonprofit organizations work directly with newcomers to secure housing, offer employment services, and provide cultural orientation and other essential services, like access to health clinics and schools.
- **Sponsors and Community-Based Organizations (CBOs):** Sponsors, often individuals or faith-based groups, support newcomers with temporary housing and other welcome and integration services. CBOs may provide culturally specific services or advocacy for specific ethnic or national newcomer groups, including enhancing housing access for refugees.

How PHAs Can Build Partnerships

Collaboration between PHAs and resettlement stakeholders advances mutual goals, such as Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing (AFFH) and providing meaningful access for Limited English Proficiency (LEP) populations. Resettlement agencies bring a deep understanding of resettlement processes, provide access to underserved newcomer groups, and are expert at supporting all stakeholders in developing cross-cultural competencies. PHAs, in turn, guide resettlement agencies on application processes, inclusive policies, and alert the community when opportunities for program enrollment become available.

Action Steps to Partner with Resettlement Stakeholders

- **Identify Resettlement Stakeholders:** Use directories like the State Refugee Coordinators Directory or the PRM Affiliate Directory to locate find resettlement partners.
- **Establish Collaborative Protocols:** Engage SRCs to understand statewide trends and needs and meet with local resettlement agencies to discuss mutual goals, such as streamlining the voucher application process or facilitating leasing for refugees and other newcomers.
- **Support Staff to Develop Cultural Competency:** Provide information and education (training) about different newcomer groups' eligibility for housing programs as well as the unique challenges newcomers face in finding dignified housing. This can include sessions on Fair Housing requirements and how to provide meaningful access for Limited English Proficiency (LEP) populations. Resettlement agency staff can be partners in this.

Eligibility for HUD Housing Programs

Refugees and other non-citizen newcomers may be eligible for HUD housing programs, including public housing and Housing Choice Vouchers. Understanding and communicating these eligibility criteria ensures that PHAs can effectively connect newcomers to housing resources.

- **Resources for Eligibility:** Refugees, asylees, SIV holders, humanitarian parolees, and other newcomers. Refer to the [Federally Assisted Housing and Immigrant Eligibility Matrix](#) and [Federal Housing Program Eligibility for Newcomers](#) for a comprehensive list.

Becoming a Newcomer Friendly PHA: Policy Recommendations

To effectively support newcomers and foster more equitable housing access, Public Housing Authorities (PHAs) can implement targeted policy changes that address systemic barriers to access and also align with fair housing principles. These recommendations aim to create an inclusive housing environment while streamlining access for refugees and other eligible newcomers.

1. Update Administrative Plans to Address Newcomer Needs

Administrative plans serve as the backbone of PHA policies, outlining how housing programs are implemented. To better serve newcomers, PHAs can:

- **Adapt Documentation Requirements:** Refugees may not have traditional rental application documents, such as U.S. credit histories or conventional rental references. Adjusting policies to accept alternative documentation, such as resettlement agency letters, federal government-approved substitute documents, and/or international references, can significantly reduce barriers.
- **Simplify Leasing Processes:** Reducing complexity in the application and leasing stages, e.g., by using plain language or visuals, helps newcomers.
- **Explore Local Preferences for Refugees:** While some PHAs already establish preferences for populations such as veterans or seniors, adding a local preference for refugees (where allowed by law) prioritizes this group.

2. Enhance Language Accessibility and Cultural Competency

Ensuring meaningful access for Limited English Proficiency (LEP) populations is critical for compliance with federal guidelines and for fostering equity. Recommendations include these:

- **Provide Translation and Interpretation Services:** Offer materials in commonly spoken newcomer languages and ensure interpreters are available for key interactions, such as application support and voucher issuance. Leverage partnerships with resettlement agencies and immigrant-serving CBOs which likely have multi-lingual staff and experience translating for federal, state, and local programs.
- **Develop Multilingual Resources:** Create easy-to-follow guides on housing program eligibility, rights, and responsibilities in multiple languages.

3. Remove Systemic Barriers to Entry

Newcomers face unique obstacles that PHAs can address through thoughtful policies:

- **Forgo Credit and Background Checks Where Possible:** Many newcomers lack U.S. credit histories or rental records. PHAs can implement policies that waive or substitute traditional credit checks with letters of recommendation from resettlement agencies.

- **Allow Flexible Income Documentation:** Accept non-traditional proof of income, such as resettlement support letter or job offer letter, as valid verification for housing eligibility.

4. Proactively Market Housing Opportunities to Newcomers

PHAs can support equitable access by (i) ensuring that newcomers are aware of housing options and (ii) aligning with HUD Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing objectives by promoting inclusivity and preventing discrimination.

- **Publicize Waitlist Openings:** Notify local resettlement agencies and CBOs when waitlists open, ensuring timely and equitable access.
- **Promote Outreach Campaigns:** Use multilingual media to reach diverse audiences, emphasizing the PHA's commitment to inclusive housing.

Conclusion

Implementing these recommendations will allow PHAs to fulfill their mission of providing equitable housing while advancing the integration of refugees and other newcomers who are eligible for public housing. By prioritizing inclusivity and reducing systemic barriers, PHAs can create a supportive environment for all.

Tools and Resources

- [HUD Refugees & Newcomer Populations Resources](#)
 - [Questions and Answers Regarding Housing Assistance for Refugees Office of Public and Indian Housing](#)
- [Housing Counseling Limited English Proficiency \(LEP\) Toolkit](#)
- [AFFH Fact Sheet: Guidance for PHAs](#)
- [NHFHTA Forum: Empowering New Americans: Pursuing the American Dream & Fair Housing Together](#)
 - [Fair Housing for Immigrants Toolkit](#)



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