

Revitalizing Housing in Rural Communities

Opportunities for USDA and
ORR-Eligible Populations



Introduction

Rural Housing Challenges and Emerging Opportunities

Across the United States, rural communities are navigating a range of housing and demographic challenges, including population decline, aging housing stock, limited rental availability, workforce shortages, and constrained resources for housing development and community services.

These challenges intersect with the housing needs of ORR-eligible populations, who often face significant challenges to finding safe, affordable, and stable housing upon their arrival in the United States. While larger metropolitan areas often have more established resettlement networks and services, high housing costs and limited affordable rental options can make long-term stability difficult. Rural communities may offer different opportunities, including available or underutilized housing and connections to local employers, but can also present difficulties such as limited transportation, fewer social services, and less community infrastructure.

This intersection raises an important question: **Could thoughtfully designed approaches to welcoming newcomers help rural communities address housing and population challenges while creating opportunities for ORR-eligible populations to establish long-term stability and belonging?**

Examples from the United States and abroad suggest that newcomer resettlement can contribute to rural revitalization when paired with intentional housing strategies, employment opportunities, community partnerships, and efforts to foster belonging. Experiences in Australia and Europe, along with emerging efforts in U.S. communities, offer lessons about what has worked and what has not. Successful rural revitalization requires considering the broader ecosystem that allows both newcomers and longtime residents to thrive.

This article explores examples from the United States, Canada, Australia, and countries across Europe to identify lessons for the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and other rural housing stakeholders. Rather than proposing a one-size-fits-all model, it considers how housing investments, community partnerships, and welcoming strategies can work together to support both newcomer integration and long-term rural community vitality.

Rural Communities and New Approaches to Housing and Population Growth

For decades, refugees and other newcomers have often settled in larger cities where established resettlement agencies, social services, and community networks are more readily available. These established metropolitan resettlement communities remain essential, but rising housing costs and limited affordable rental options can make long-term stability increasingly difficult for newcomers.

At the same time, many rural communities have characteristics that could make them viable and welcoming places for ORR-eligible populations, including more attainable housing, available or underutilized housing stock, strong community networks, and employers seeking workers. Communities experiencing population decline or workforce shortages may also see an opportunity to welcome newcomers as part of broader efforts to sustain local schools, businesses, and community institutions.

Rural communities do not need to replicate the infrastructure of large urban resettlement locations. Instead, they can build on existing local assets and partnerships among housing authorities, employers, schools, nonprofits, faith organizations, and local governments. However, successful rural resettlement requires more than available housing: transportation, language interpretation services, employment, education, health care, and community readiness are all important considerations.

Considering rural communities, in addition to traditional urban gateways, can expand housing and resettlement options for newcomers while supporting communities seeking new approaches to population growth and revitalization. The question is not simply whether rural communities have space for newcomers, but whether they have, or can build, the conditions that allow newcomers to establish stability, find belonging, and contribute to community life.



What Can We Learn from Rural Newcomer Revitalization Efforts Around the World?

International experience provides useful evidence that refugee resettlement does not have to be concentrated in major metropolitan areas. Several countries have experimented with regional and rural resettlement approaches, with varying degrees of success. While these models operate within different immigration and social service systems than the United States, they offer useful lessons about the conditions that can make rural resettlement sustainable.

AUSTRALIA

Regional Settlement as a Community Development Strategy

Australia offers perhaps the strongest comparison for the United States because it has deliberately explored how refugee resettlement can support communities outside major cities. Research from Settlement Services International (SSI) identifies several potential benefits of regional resettlement, including addressing population decline, filling labor shortages, supporting local economies, increasing school enrollment, and strengthening cultural diversity. At the same time, SSI cautions that simply placing newcomers in regional areas is not enough — long-term retention requires coordinated, place-based approaches.

Armidale, New South Wales provides a compelling example (SSI, 2023). Beginning in 2018, the city welcomed hundreds of Ezidi refugees. SSI and the University of New England took a community approach, combining resettlement services with community engagement, volunteer opportunities, arts and cultural activities, and connections with local organizations. Research tracking community attitudes found that concerns about refugee resettlement decreased over time while positive attitudes and interactions increased. SSI reported that a high proportion of refugees who settled in Armidale remained in the community, alongside positive social and economic outcomes for both newcomers and the broader community.

This emphasis on belonging is also present in reflections from rural leaders (Welcoming Cities, 2024). Their reflections highlight how employment opportunities, lower costs of living, and strong social connections can make rural communities attractive to newcomers, while emphasizing the role of local leaders in creating opportunities for participation and belonging. For U.S. communities considering rural resettlement of ORR-eligible populations, Australia's experience suggests that housing and economic opportunity are strongest when paired with intentional community engagement and a culture of welcome.

CANADA

Building Refugee Settlement Capacity in Small Communities

Canada provides another useful example of how smaller communities can build capacity to welcome refugees outside of more common urban resettlement destinations. A 2016 study by Brandon University's Rural Development Institute examined five rural Manitoba communities and found that, despite limited resources, local stakeholders generally felt their communities had the capacity to resettle refugees. Strong partnerships among resettlement organizations, sponsorship groups, government agencies, and community stakeholders, as well as robust volunteer networks and available housing, were identified as key strengths. In some communities, refugee resettlement was also connected to broader population and workforce goals, demonstrating how welcoming newcomers can be considered alongside rural community development.

At the same time, the research highlights that rural capacity cannot be measured by housing availability alone. Communities identified limited public transportation, interpretation services, childcare, culturally responsive health care, and specialized resettlement services as significant challenges. The study also found substantial variation in capacity between communities, underscoring the importance of assessing local resources and partnerships before welcoming newcomers. In Winkler-Morden-Altona-Carman, for example, community organizations invested in childcare, intercultural training, coordination among schools and public health, and volunteer preparation to strengthen the community's readiness. For U.S. communities considering opportunities to welcome ORR-eligible populations, Manitoba's experience demonstrates both the potential of rural resettlement and the importance of building community capacity before — and alongside — newcomer arrivals.



EUROPE

Small Communities Integrating Refugee Settlement Into Local Development

A study examined refugee resettlement in small and rural communities across Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, and Sweden (Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2020). The research found that rural communities can offer newcomers more individualized support and opportunities to build close relationships with neighbors. For receiving communities, refugee resettlement can contribute to local business activity and social revitalization. However, these benefits are not automatic, particularly because rural communities often have fewer specialized services and resources.

One of the report's most significant findings is that refugee resettlement has the greatest potential when it is woven into existing local development strategies. Rather than creating an entirely separate system for newcomers, communities can connect resettlement with broader investments in housing, employment, infrastructure, and community services. The report also emphasizes preparing receiving communities before newcomers arrive and creating sustained opportunities for interaction between newcomers and longtime residents.

For U.S. communities considering rural resettlement of ORR-eligible populations, rural resettlement should not be approached as a standalone resettlement program. It can be more sustainable when it is incorporated into a community's existing housing, economic development, and population strategies.

What Does Successful Rural Newcomer Integration Look Like in the United States?

Rural communities across the United States are already demonstrating that newcomers can play an important role in sustaining and revitalizing smaller communities. Research has found that immigrants helped mitigate population decline in many rural areas, while contributing to local economies, filling workforce gaps, supporting schools and health care systems, and opening businesses (Center for American Progress, 2018). Among rural places that experienced population decline, the report found that population loss would have been substantially greater without growth in the foreign-born population. At the same time, the research emphasizes that these benefits are not automatic: communities that are proactive about integration and creating welcoming environments are better positioned to benefit from demographic change.

The report's examples also demonstrate that successful integration can take different forms. In St. James, Minnesota, local leaders responded to demographic change by investing in initiatives that built relationships between immigrant and U.S.-born residents, including integration training and community activities. These efforts contributed to reduced intergroup tensions and helped newcomers establish themselves in the community. The broader lesson is that rural communities can shape how newcomers are received through intentional planning, local leadership, language access, and opportunities for residents to build relationships across cultures.



LOOKING BEYOND INITIAL RESETTLEMENT

A complementary example comes from Vermont, where local researchers are examining what refugees need after the initial resettlement period. This work is particularly relevant to rural communities because it shifts the focus from simply helping newcomers arrive and become self-sufficient to understanding what enables them to remain, establish roots, and participate fully in community life over time. The research highlights the importance of investing in long-term stability, recognizing that successful integration extends beyond securing initial housing or employment.

This longer-term perspective is important when considering rural resettlement opportunities for ORR-eligible populations. A community may successfully provide an initial housing placement, but sustainable integration requires continued access to employment, education, transportation, health care, social connections, and opportunities for civic and community participation. For rural communities, where these resources may be more limited or geographically dispersed, identifying gaps early and developing partnerships across local organizations can be especially important. Research from other resettlement contexts similarly finds that

communities with strategic integration plans and strong multi-agency partnerships are better positioned to address refugees' evolving needs.

WHAT THESE EXAMPLES SUGGEST

Taken together, these examples point to several characteristics of communities where rural newcomer integration is more likely to succeed:

- **Proactive community engagement:** Local leaders engage longtime residents and newcomers rather than waiting for tensions to emerge.
- **Strong local partnerships:** Housing providers, schools, employers, nonprofits, health care providers, and local governments coordinate their efforts.
- **Long-term thinking:** Integration is viewed as a multi-year process rather than something completed during the initial resettlement period.
- **Access to opportunity:** Housing is connected to employment, transportation, education, and other resources that allow newcomers to build stable lives.
- **Two-way integration:** Communities create opportunities for newcomers to participate in community life while also preparing longtime residents to engage with and understand their new neighbors.

Considering examples from both the United States and global context, these examples suggest that the most promising integration of newcomers in rural communities are not necessarily those with the most resources, but those that are intentional about identifying their existing assets, recognizing their gaps, and building the partnerships needed to welcome and retain newcomers. That distinction is particularly important for rural housing stakeholders: the question is not simply where housing exists, but where housing can be part of a broader ecosystem that supports long-term community belonging and stability.

The Rural Welcoming Initiative: A Model for Community Engagement

Welcoming America's **Rural Welcoming Initiative (RWI)** offers a useful model for thinking about how rural communities can prepare to welcome and retain immigrant and refugee newcomers. The initiative was created in recognition that rural communities can offer important advantages, including employment opportunities, lower costs of living, and strong social connections, but that newcomers are more likely to stay when communities intentionally create opportunities for engagement and belonging.

Rather than focusing solely on services for newcomers, RWI works with rural communities to strengthen the community infrastructure that makes welcoming possible. Participating communities receive coaching, technical assistance, peer-learning opportunities, and support to examine their existing policies and programs and align local inclusion efforts with the Welcoming Standard. The initiative also emphasizes relationships across sectors and between rural communities themselves, recognizing that local governments, nonprofits, employers, schools, faith organizations, and residents all have a role to play.

THE WELCOMING STANDARD



This approach is particularly relevant to rural housing stakeholders. Housing can create an opportunity for newcomers to establish roots in a community, but housing investments alone cannot create long-term belonging. When housing strategies are paired with intentional community engagement, language services, employment opportunities, and cross-sector partnerships, they can contribute to a broader ecosystem in which newcomers are able to participate, and communities are better positioned to retain them. Rural housing investments are therefore more likely to contribute to long-term community revitalization when they are paired with intentional strategies for belonging and inclusion.

For USDA and other rural housing stakeholders, RWI offers a useful lens: community readiness can be developed alongside housing capacity. Rather than waiting until newcomers arrive to identify gaps, rural communities can proactively assess their policies, partnerships, services, and engagement practices and determine what would be needed to become a place where ORR-eligible populations can successfully settle and thrive. This complements **RHS' previous work on the Welcoming Standard and creating welcoming communities**, while demonstrating how those principles can be applied specifically within rural housing and revitalization efforts (2025).

Conclusion

Rural communities across the country are navigating housing shortages, population changes, workforce needs, and limited community resources, while ORR-eligible populations continue to face significant challenges to finding safe, affordable, and stable housing. These challenges intersect in ways that may create opportunities for rural communities to welcome newcomers while strengthening their own housing and community infrastructure, but success depends on intentional planning and investment.

Examples from the United States and abroad demonstrate that successful rural newcomer integration is fundamentally a community development strategy, not simply a resettlement strategy. Housing can provide an important foundation, but lasting integration also depends on employment, transportation, services, community partnerships, and opportunities for newcomers to develop meaningful connections and a sense of belonging.

For USDA and other rural housing stakeholders, this presents an opportunity to think beyond individual housing units and consider how investments in housing preservation, economic development, infrastructure, and community capacity can work together. By considering ORR-eligible populations within broader rural revitalization efforts, communities can explore new approaches to making use of existing housing, welcoming new residents, and building communities where both newcomers and longtime residents can thrive.

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