



**Local Toolkit to Advocate for Refugee & Newcomer  
Housing Policy Solutions:**

How National, State, and Local Policy Makers Can Expand Access to  
Affordable Housing for Refugees and Newcomers

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## Housing Challenges & Building Blocks to Advocate for Change

**Background:** Safe, stable, healthy, and affordable housing for all people builds stronger communities. However, the United States is facing a housing affordability crisis; at present, excessive rent burdens, and the ultimate consequences of these burdens, such as financial hardship, eviction, and even homelessness are daily realities for more than ten million households - U.S. citizens and new Americans alike - across the country. The refugee community affirms the need to work alongside efforts to house individuals who are currently houseless and experiencing housing challenges.

Resettlement agencies - and their affiliates and offices - have reported ongoing and significant housing challenges for arriving refugees, particularly as housing prices rise and affordable, safe, and stable housing availability decreases. Research completed by the National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC) produced staggering data that identified a shortage of [over 7 million affordable homes](#) for low-income renters. The figures will only continue to grow and endanger more individuals in their ability to secure and stabilize housing for their families.

In multiple gatherings with resettlement agency directors and staff, the resources to support refugee populations are secure, yet the strain of securing housing is ever changing. While competition with local community members and universities continues to unfold, anti-immigrant sentiment equally unfurls and local landlords grow weary of renting to newcomer populations. When renting centrally becomes expensive and increasingly difficult, rental opportunities exist on the outskirts of cities where public transportation decreases in availability. These are few among the many challenges refugees face in securing housing.

National, state, and local policies can - together - correct long-standing racial inequities and economic injustices by ensuring quality housing. We call on Congress to recognize refugees' acute needs, particularly as the United States faces a substantial housing crisis. We offer the following recommendations to strengthen our nation's response to strengthening access to housing and upholding our commitment to welcome displaced populations with confidence.

**Purpose and Impact of Advocacy Meetings:** Advocacy can lead to systemic, lasting, positive changes that help all people thrive in their communities.

Acknowledgement of the trying journey refugees and other newcomers face upon arriving to the United States is one of many reasons having a safe, stable, and permanent home is crucial. By stepping in and supporting effective advocacy, we can lift up the voices of refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants, and allies to change hearts and minds, including those of policy makers and people in power. Housing advocacy includes action like public education on the challenging housing market and identifying temporary or permanent housing that meets refugees' needs and resettlement agencies' contractual obligations with the federal government, relationship building with congressional, state, and local policy makers, community engagement, and media outreach.

Developing relationships with and educating policy makers is necessary to see creative housing policies and solutions that include refugees and newcomers' experiences and acute needs. It is important that policy makers understand that their constituents care about refugees and want to see them thrive in their new homes -- and that refugees are their constituents; they live, work, and contribute in their communities, obtain U.S. citizenship, and vote. Talk with policy makers about the way your community welcomes refugees and that in order for refugees to rebuild their lives, they must have secure and affordable housing. It is essential that we advocate to our national, state, and local policy makers immediate and long-term housing policy solutions that include all of our neighbors.

### How to Prepare for Advocacy Meetings:

1. **Identify the Issue:** This should always be done with ample input and collaboration from impacted communities. This is often done through taking surveys or holding listening sessions to find out what are the hardest pressing issues facing the community. Always take into account the political context. Choose a campaign that is winnable.
2. **Learn About your National, State, and Local Elected Officials:** Identify who your elected officials are depending on the level of government - are you planning to meet to discuss local and state housing policy or are you wanting to discuss national housing policy? If the latter, are your congressional Members in congressional leadership, the [Senate](#) or [House](#) Appropriations Subcommittees for Transportation, Housing and Urban Development; [House](#) Financial Services Committee or the [Senate](#) Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs? If so, they have jurisdiction over various aspects of housing efforts that could impact refugees and newcomers. Even if they aren't in leadership or on these committees, they can still be champions. To learn more about your governor, state legislators, mayor, and local officials, click [here](#). You must consider the following questions:
  - a. What have they done about housing challenges? Has the Member put out statements, authored op-eds, or been supportive of refugees? Or refugee/newcomer housing opportunities? If they have, be sure to thank them and their staff. If they have a record of not supporting refugees/immigrants or housing opportunities, find out why. Build your talking points to address those concerns.
  - b. What issues are of interest to them? Do they often speak out on certain issues? This can help you determine what approach to take when discussing refugees and their housing obstacles in your meeting. What did they do before they were elected to Congress? This can impact their perspective. It is your job as a successful advocate to discuss topics and frame issues in a way that will resonate with them.
3. **Assemble a Team:** An ideal team consists of refugees/newcomers, case workers, faith leaders, business leaders, and community leaders who can all share in the planning, outreach, and coordination of

advocacy actions and speak to the diversity of support for refugee resettlement and housing needs. Meet to discuss current relationships with policy makers, goals and ideas, and to plan for a successful meeting.

4. **Identify Strategy:** A campaign without a strategy is likely to be ineffective. It's imperative to work together in a collaborative way to build community support around a winning strategy. Check out these important components:
  - a. **Identify goals and vision:** Identify the shared goal and vision. Work toward a long term goal with attainable short term and medium term goals. Goals should always be winnable! Make sure to map out your goals first.
  - b. **Identify allies:** List potential partners and make an outreach plan.
  - c. **Identify targets:** List potential legislators; you need to consider potential supports as well as opponents.
  - d. **Identify other actions to strengthen your advocacy meetings:** Action alerts, media, and rallies etc.
  - e. **Prepare leave behind materials:** Access leave behind [here](#) which will include core materials like these [congressional policy asks](#), [state and local policy asks](#), and other [innovative policy solutions](#).
5. **Develop a plan for the meetings:**
  - i. *The Facilitator* will kick off the meeting by introducing your group, explaining the purpose for the meeting, and providing time for each person attending to briefly introduce themselves. Make sure each participant introduces the organization they represent or their connection to housing issues. The facilitator will also jump in if the meeting goes off-track and redirect the conversation.
  - ii. *The Personal Story* is key to every meeting. Someone should be present who is either an impacted person themselves or has worked closely with and been impacted. Telling this story will show how peoples' lives and communities are enriched through refugee resettlement. For more information, check out [NLHC's Storytelling Tips & Tricks](#).
  - iii. *Specific Issue Points* - It will be helpful to use both your prepared notes, resources such as this toolkit as well as leave behind materials to refer to during the meeting. Split the issue points between members of the group, preferably in the way it most impacts them/people they know.
  - iv. *The Ask* is the critical part when you ask "Will you be a champion refugee & newcomer housing solutions, such as [insert policy asks]?" Listen carefully and ask for clarification if their response is vague. Be sure to note their policy responses.
  - b. **Debrief with your group:** It's important to debrief after the meeting. As a group, ask: what did we hear? Did we get what we wanted? How did we work together as a team? What are the next steps? Share your reflections/questions with us! Contact Selena Sherzad at [ssherzad@cwsglobal.org](mailto:ssherzad@cwsglobal.org).
  - c. **Follow up:** Make sure to send a thank you email to the staff after the meeting with any information they asked for and any other relevant information you think would be helpful. Inviting the staff and/or Members to an upcoming event to meet with refugees/newcomers is an excellent next step!

#### How to Set Up Advocacy Meetings:

To set up a meeting, call your [Members of Congress](#), [state officials](#), or [local officials](#). Explain who you are, what organization you're with (if any), and that you would like to meet with the official (in person or virtually). You can also send a formal email requesting a meeting with the official and/or their staff (sample email below). Include in the request how the meeting will take place (in person at their offices? Virtual by phone, Zoom?). If you don't hear back in a few days, send a reminder email or call again. You can also use district staff for assistance, especially if there is someone in the office with whom you have a relationship. Remember, if the official(s) themselves are unavailable, always request to meet with the staff member who works on immigration and housing (sometimes multiple staff).

When you contact the office to request a *virtual* visit by telephone or video conference, you can ask if they have a conference line, or set up your own conference line for everyone to use. Some offices are very comfortable with videoconferencing technology, but others are not. Keep that in mind when making your request, and make sure the office knows that you are available to connect in whatever way they prefer. Options for holding a remote meeting include setting up an account with [freeconferencecall.com](#), [Zoom](#), [Google Hangouts](#), [Apple Facetime](#), or any platform with which you are familiar.

#### Sample Email to Request Appointment:

Dear [Name],

My name is [name] and I am from [City, State]. As a constituent of [the official's name], I would like to request an appointment with you and the [official's name] on [DATE, TIME] to talk about ways we can expand housing opportunities for refugees and other newcomers. [Insert preference around in person or virtual visit, and if virtual, indicate which platform you'll use to conduct this meeting]. I expect to be joined by [insert number] people.

Please feel free to contact me at [phone number and email] should you have any questions. I look forward to this visit!

Thank you,  
[Name]

## Five Key Approaches to Advocate for Refugee and Newcomer Housing Solutions

Here are five key approaches you can take to build relationships with decision makers and support the needs of your communities. These are helpful venues for advancing refugee and newcomer housing policies (detailed below).

1. **Developing Healthy Housing Partnerships:** Meeting with elected officials, state and local [Housing and Urban Development \(HUD\)](#) offices, and [Public Housing Authority \(PHA\)](#) - and advocating for refugee and newcomer populations and their acute housing challenges will increase awareness of constituent needs. By reaching out and setting up meetings with your government offices, you can create a healthy housing partnership and advocate for the necessary housing policies for refugees.
2. **Reinforcing Supplemental Funding:** A needed measure to secure safe and affordable housing for refugees and other newcomers is certainty of funding. Though there are dedicated funds granted to refugees upon arrival, it runs short of the extent required to be approved by standard rental criteria and the first few months of rent. Creative solutions like establishing a guarantor fund, refugee renter's assistance (e.g. [Columbus, OH](#)), homeowner deposit assistance, and the protection of source of income will encourage the financial stability necessary in solving housing obstacles.
3. **Creating Refugee Task Forces:** Local and statewide efforts to decrease competition and rally support for refugee housing has blossomed as a response to ongoing challenges (e.g. [Georgia's The Welcome Co-Op](#) and [Omaha's Metro Housing Collaborative](#)). These pop up efforts have proven to encourage community support for the newcomer population and combated the housing crisis with specialized task forces to support the housing search for their refugee neighbors. Creating a refugee task force in all states could positively change the straining process of securing housing for the newcomer population as the housing market continues to remain limited, as well as promote refugee advocacy and combat anti-immigrant sentiment.
4. **Installing Landlord Incentives for Refugee Rentals:** Maintaining active landlord participation in the refugee housing search is essential in securing housing. While the housing market remains competitive and limited, arranging incentives for landlords to consider renting with refugees and newcomers has proven to be a useful measure (e.g. [Omaha Monetary Incentives](#)). HUD assistance with sign up bonuses, security deposits, and damage repairs are among a few items that can be covered or reimbursed through the incentive program.
5. **Supporting Zoning Reform:** The need for alternative solutions to expand the housing market is dire. One method that could encourage housing availability is [reforming zoning laws](#) that have been notoriously restrictive and indirectly increased housing costs that have widened racial and economic disparities. By reforming zoning and land-use laws, the possibility of promoting larger buildings through height or density could increase the housing supply that is in high demand. Cities like [Fairfax](#) and [Minneapolis](#) are among the few that have already accomplished efforts of expanding the housing supply which has produced large scale housing benefits for their communities.

## National, State, and Local Policy Asks and Talking Points

### Congressional Policy Asks

1. Ensure robust funding for affordable housing and refugee resettlement in fiscal year 2024.
2. Conduct oversight over the administration's implementation of access to housing programs and the operations of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program.
3. Support inclusive and refugee-focused legislation to strengthen access to housing.

For our comprehensive congressional policy asks, please [click here](#). Oversight recommendations (congressional policy ask #2) on housing programs are available [here](#) (March 2023) and [here](#) (March 2022). For more information about inclusive housing-related legislation that impacts all community members, check out the NLIHC's [Advancing Housing Justice in the 118th Congress](#).

### State and Local Policy Asks

1. Infuse state & local funds for affordable housing and refugee resettlement.
2. Establish a newcomer housing voucher program.
3. Increase affordable housing stock for refugees and newcomers.
4. Prevent and end discrimination against refugees and newcomers.
5. Integrate refugee and newcomer experience into affordable housing programs.
6. Amplify needed congressional action & hold the Biden administration accountable.

Our comprehensive state and local policy asks are [available here](#). A state-by-state guide of housing needs can be found [here](#). A leave behind folder to share resources with congressional, state, and local elected officials can be found [here](#).

### Housing Programs

It can be helpful to have background on housing programs and policies that impact U.S. born and new Americans alike. Here are some examples:

- [Treasury Emergency Rental Assistance](#) (ERA 1 & ERA 2)
- [Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program \(LIHEAP\)](#)
- [Housing Choice Voucher program](#)
- [National Housing Trust Fund \(HTF\)](#)
- [Low-Income Housing Tax Credit \(LIHTC\)](#)

*This list is not intended to be comprehensive.* For more information about affordable housing programs and policies, [click here](#). A comprehensive guide by the NLIHC about these and other programs is [available here for download](#).

### Talking Points

- **Refugee resettlement represents our nation's core values of compassion, hospitality, and welcome.** The U.S. resettlement program is a historically bipartisan, public-private partnership that resettles the most vulnerable refugees. Refugee resettlement advances our foreign policy priorities, national security objectives, and U.S. economic growth.
- **We are facing a worsening displacement crisis with more than 32 million refugees worldwide -- more than any other time in history.** Fewer than 1% of refugees will ever be resettled in a third country, and the United States is one of several resettlement countries. The United States also resettles certain Iraqis and Afghans who assisted the U.S. mission and troops overseas.
- **As the United States rebuilds and strengthens the U.S. resettlement program, we look to Congress to demonstrate bold leadership to help ensure our communities have the resources they need to welcome newcomers.** This includes establishing and funding programs that help meet refugees' basic needs, like housing, medical and mental health care, and legal representation.
- **Refugees and other immigrant newcomers face particularly acute challenges, and challenges securing housing is exacerbated under the current housing climate.** One of CWS's core services under the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) for integrating refugees and other newcomers into American society is securing safe, sanitary, and affordable housing, yet as the availability of housing is limited and rental prices increase with competition, the pool of housing opportunity is extremely tight. Data has shown that the US is currently 7 million homes short of where it needs to be for the lowest-income renters to secure housing.
- **We recognize that many Americans -- not only refugees and newcomers -- face challenges in accessing housing.** All persons deserve a place to call home to start and end their day, yet there is no state where an individual [working full time on minimum wage](#) can afford a two bedroom home. It is important to recognize the spectrum that constituents fall on and how Congress must take action in assisting its community members.
- **Refugees and immigrants drive economic growth in communities across the United States.** One of the main goals of the U.S. resettlement program is swift economic self-sufficiency. That is why resettlement agencies provide job training, English language class, cash and medical assistance, and other case management services. Resettlement agencies are required to secure and set up housing before refugees arrive in the United States, with limited resources. At times, refugees are placed in temporary housing before a permanent rental unit becomes available. This is particularly challenging for populations with large families, such as the recent Afghan evacuees.
- **Refugee and newcomer populations face acute needs.** The current housing climate has proven difficult for every American, yet the refugee community's obstacles to achieve housing in the US are extended upon their first weeks as they do not come with traditional housing criteria like a credit score, stable income, or rental history which can deter landlords from renting to them. With the support of a refugee housing voucher, landlords could identify financial assistance as well as the support of the US government in securing housing for this population.
- **Protecting and broadening robust funding for affordable housing is imperative for Fiscal Year 2024.** Insufficient housing stock that is affordable, safe, and permanent, as well as skyrocketing rental prices and difficulties in purchasing homes, are specific challenges that should be addressed for refugees and U.S.-born populations alike. While the country experiences an unforgiving housing climate that produces limited housing opportunity, it is imperative that Congress prioritizes funding affordable housing solutions that will provide relief.
  - A few ways that Congress can take action is by funding:
    - \$32.7 billion for the Tenant-Based Rental Assistance (TBRA) program to renew existing vouchers and to expand the program to an additional 200,000 households.
    - \$5.4 billion for public housing operations and \$5 billion for public housing repairs.
    - \$3.8 billion for HUD's Homeless Assistance Grants program.
    - \$100 million for legal assistance to prevent evictions.
    - \$3 billion for a permanent Emergency Rental Assistance program.
    - \$300 million for the competitive tribal housing grants, targeted to tribes with the greatest needs.
  - Also, Congress must continue to assist funding:
    - [Emergency and Overseas Response](#)
    - [Efficient Processing Systems like USCIS](#)
    - [Refugee Integration Programming](#)
    - [Bill/Report Language \(Oversight\)](#)
- **Congress must take responsibility in holding the administration accountable to rebuild and strengthen the U.S. resettlement program - including by expanding access to housing.** Investing in humanitarian programming saves lives by offering safety and vital resources to the displaced persons of the world that have fled war, famine, persecution, and violence. Newcomers whom the United States welcomes deserve a chance to have a safe home. Congress must hold the administration accountable to make sure it is possible.

- **Congress should support and pass positive legislation that helps newcomers and expands access to housing.** For example, Congress should consider establishing a **Newcomer Housing Voucher program**. This will encourage resettlement agencies' efforts in securing housing for our newcomer population during their first days arriving in the United States. Other opportunities include **authorizing the Office of Refugee Resettlement to provide housing assistance for all ORR eligible populations** (not just certain Afghans and Ukrainians).
- Ultimately, the **housing crisis in the United States is solvable**, and we are capable of expanding our capacity to welcome refugees and newcomers, and address housing challenges for all.

### Additional Resources

This toolkit can be found at the following short link: <https://bit.ly/RefugeeHousingAdvocacyToolkit>.

#### World Refugee Day 2023 Advocacy Materials:

- [Church World Service Action Alert \(World Refugee Day\)](#)
- [2023 UNHCR World Refugee Day Toolkit](#)
- [2023 We Are All America World Refugee Day Toolkit](#)
- [RCUSA Priorities for the 118th Congress](#)
- [Refugee Resettlement 101](#)
- FY 2024 Funding Backgrounders for Refugee Accounts ([LHHS](#), [SFOPS](#), and [USCIS](#))
- [One Pager on Office of Refugee Resettlement](#)

#### Refugee and Inclusive Policy and Program Priorities:

- CWS: [Congressional Housing Policy Recommendations](#)
- CWS: [State and Local Housing Policy Recommendations](#)
- CWS: [Innovative National & State Policy Solutions to Support Refugees and Newcomers](#)
- CWS: [Leave Behind Folder](#) (for meetings with elected officials)
- CWS: [Housing Policy Recommendations for the Biden Administration](#) (March 2023)
- CWS: [Housing Policy Recommendations for the Biden Administration](#) (March 2022)
- Refugee Housing Solutions: [Resource Library](#)

#### National Low Income Housing Coalition Resources:

- [Advocacy Toolkit: "Oppose Dramatic Cuts to Federal Investments in Affordable Housing"](#)
- [Eviction Record Sealing and Expungement Protections](#)
- [HUD Secretary Fudge Testifies before House and Senate THUD Appropriations Subcommittees on President Biden's FY24 Budget Request \(April 2023\)](#)
- [NLIHC Joins National Rural Housing Coalition in Letter to Congress Urging Increases to Funding for Rural Housing](#)
- [Storytelling Tips & Tricks](#)

#### U.S. Resettlement Program:

- [Refugee Housing Solutions](#)
- [Resettlement 101](#)
- [Resettlement Process: Steps of the US Refugee Admissions Program](#)
- [Refugee Integration & Economic Contributions to the United States](#)
- [Refugee Resettlement Advances National Security](#)
- [RCUSA State Profiles on Refugee Resettlement](#)