



# The CWS Refugee and Immigrant Leadership for Social Change Program

Program Report: 10 Years of Influence and Reflections



# ABOUT

Church World Service (CWS) is a faith-based organization that is transforming communities around the globe through just and sustainable responses to hunger, poverty, displacement and disaster. It works in more than 31 countries in support of refugees, immigrants and seekers of asylum.

Since 1946, CWS has uplifted the need for impacted people and communities — those forcibly displaced from their countries of origin — to be represented at all tables of influence and power, to ensure that the United States is a place of welcome and inclusiveness.

## About This Report

In 2015, CWS' longstanding role as a refugee resettlement agency enabled it to amplify its advocacy impact with the launch of the Refugee and Immigrant Leadership for Social Change Program (RILSC), which engages and supports impacted refugee and immigrant leaders in changing narratives, organizing their communities and influencing policy at the local, state and national levels.

Looking back on the first ten years of the RILSC Program, this report offers an effective leadership and organizing model that shows when refugees, immigrants and asylum seekers tell their stories, build community power and become civically engaged, they can better influence the policies that affect their lives. The report narrative focuses on examples of their work in action, showcasing what success has looked like in practice.

This reflection will also shine a light on the path forward for the next ten years as CWS, impacted leaders and movement partners continue to grow this work and overcome obstacles to a more welcoming, inclusive and democratic society.

## Acknowledgments

Thank you to the leaders and community organizers who shared their stories for this report, to all participants in the RILSC Program and to CWS staff who have supported this work over the past decade.

*Pathways to*  
**BELONGING**  
*Building a welcoming future. Together.*  
CWS

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# RESPONDING TO GLOBAL DISPLACEMENT AND MIGRATION

## Introduction

Forced displacement, precipitated by violence, persecution, human rights violations and other serious events, affects more than 117 million people around the world — or one in every 69 people — with rapid increases each year over the last decade.<sup>1</sup> Compounding this, climate change is contributing to forced migration and is projected to displace hundreds of millions of others around the world by 2050.<sup>2</sup> Receiving communities, which may one day be at risk themselves, must be resourced with best practices to adapt to this new reality.

In the United States (U.S.), the Refugee and Immigrant Leadership for Social Change (RILSC) Program, a project of Church World Service (CWS), has proven an important and emerging best practice over the past decade. The RILSC Program offers an integrated leadership and organizing model ensuring that those who have experienced forced displacement are represented at tables of influence that directly impact their wellbeing in their new communities.



**The need to elevate the voices, representation and power of those who have been displaced has never been greater.** Anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies have increased exponentially in the past ten years, while the movements to respond have not been adequately centered on refugee voices or experiences. The RILSC Program is a direct response to that gap, developing a diverse network of movement partners, public investment and impact-led leadership that sets the tone for a more representative, intersectional and robust resettlement framework nationwide.

## Who Are Impacted Leaders?

CWS believes in **centering and building the leadership of those who have directly experienced forced displacement**, including:

### **Asylum Seekers:**

Those who have fled their country of origin but have not yet been legally granted protection.

### **Refugees:**

Those who have fled conflict, violence, or persecution and are recognized as having the right to international protection.

Once in the United States, all might be broadly described as immigrants, newcomers and, ultimately, citizens. Many choose to describe themselves as refugees, immigrants or newcomers — terms this report uses in alignment with their preference. All are uniquely positioned to lead in their new communities as powerful voices for those with experiences of displacement. RILSC invests in their leadership.



Since its inception in 2015, the RILSC Program has built a leader and partner network, identifying the issues affecting impacted populations and setting the groundwork for impact. Now, ten years since its inception, it is entering a growth phase of enhancing skill building and moving leaders along the leadership development journey. It is expanding its geographic reach to engage developing leaders to lead teams of immigrants and refugees and coordinate with CWS community organizers in more communities. It is also creating peer networking opportunities for impacted leaders in local public office and deepening the capacity to develop and execute on an intersectional strategy that recognizes the multiple identities and experiences of refugees, forming cross-issue coalitions to build, exercise and expand community voice and power.

# INTEGRATED LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZING MODEL

## RILSC Program Overview

The RILSC Program paves the way for refugee and immigrant leaders to equitably access and participate in civic life. Supported by community organizing, policy and advocacy staff who have lived experiences as forcibly displaced persons, the program has equipped thousands of refugees, immigrants and asylum seekers to tell their stories, develop community organizing skills and deepen their participation along the civic engagement spectrum. Community Organizing is a strategy to building collective power to win real, immediate concrete improvement in people's lives while giving impacted communities a sense of their own power and altering the relationships of power. Many RILSC alumni go on to represent newcomer communities on civic structures like boards and commissions and run for public office and other positions of leadership.

This innovative leadership model, through which campaigns are being led and won by impacted leaders themselves, has gained attention for its effective combination of narrative, organizing and advocacy strategies to affect system change.

The RILSC Program has three primary components:

### 1. Narrative Strategy

Using storytelling, media and communications to influence the public narrative and affirm the dignity and humanity of immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

## RILSC Program Timeline

2014

### Identifying the Opportunity

CWS and partners noticed that the voices of those with lived experience were missing from decision-making spaces across the country. CWS and partner agencies began to pilot community organizing with refugees in Georgia and Ohio.

2015

### Laying the Groundwork

CWS petitioned for refugee leadership to be a national priority for successful advocacy at the Tri-Agencies Conference in New York and launched the RILSC program that year.

2016

### Amplifying From the Start

CWS onboarded community organizers with lived experience who developed community-specific practices and curriculum for RILSC.

2017

### Empowering Participation

CWS and its partners hold the first in-person refugee leadership development training in five states. CWS Community Organizers and leaders step out to educate their communities on the impacts of anti-immigrant and anti-refugee Executive Orders. For many leaders, this was the first time their voices were heard in public spaces.

2018-2019

### From Community Members to Community Organizers

Refugee leaders took RILSC training to the next level by mobilizing their communities across the United States to educate around the implications of Executive Order 13888.  
(see pg. 16 for more details and outcomes)



## 2. Community Organizing and Civic Engagement

Developing impacted leaders to organize their own communities, build power and gain representation in local and state government offices.

## 3. Policy Advocacy

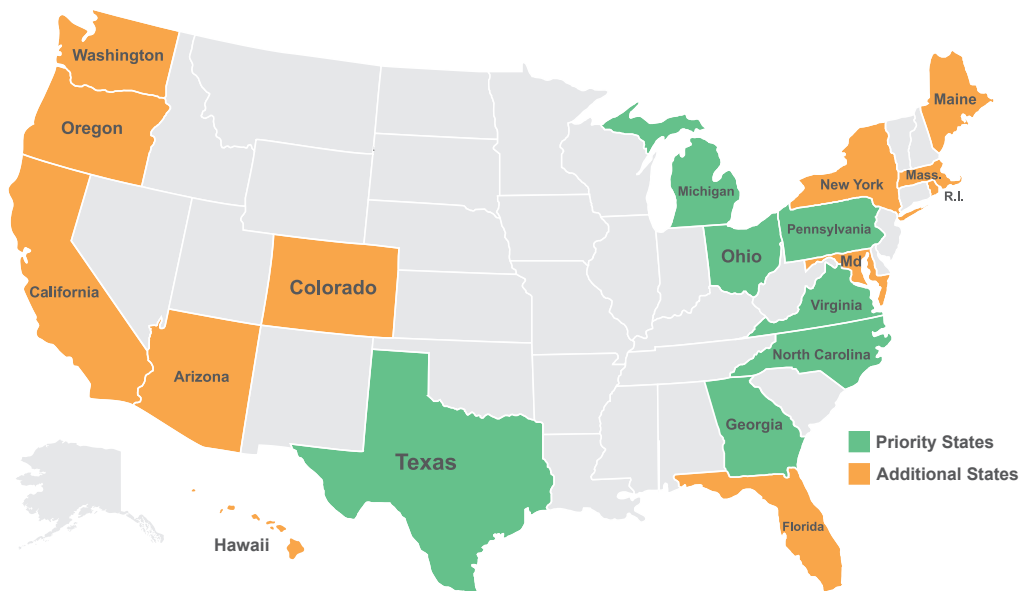
Using input from impacted leaders and their communities to advance local, state and national policy proposals that support more inclusive practices and systems within the United States.

The program's focus on the power of personal stories has helped shift the national conversation around immigrant and refugee rights and contributions to a vibrant society. Community organizing and issue advocacy have helped advance administrative and legislative policies, including workforce development priorities such as professional licensing, education and language access that will increase economic security for newcomers and their families and communities.

## From Arrival to Advocacy

People are the heart of this program. CWS places trained Community Organizers with local refugee resettlement offices who, through the service provision work of those offices, build relationships with refugee leaders and support them on a customized leadership journey.

In just ten years, CWS has directly trained over 5,300 leaders in fifteen cities across seven key states (highlighted in Green in the map below). Through ecosystem partners (Appendix A), the RILSC Program has extended its reach to indirectly empower thousands of immigrant community members across almost every U.S. state through its impact-led curriculum, trainings, culturally relevant resources and shared best practices.



Priority states (GREEN) are selected based on four criteria: 1) they have a robust network of refugee and immigrant leaders, partners, and/or CWS personnel for cross-cutting programmatic implementation; 2) they have strong access to intersectional refugee communities; 3) they can maintain a full-time organizer; and 4) they have proposed anti-refugee legislation that threatens the wellbeing of their communities.

## 2019-2020

### Leaders Become Decision Makers

CWS sees a new trend: alumni from RILSC are, for the first time, getting elected or nominated into public office.

## 2021-2023

### Informing State Policy

Through issue identification workshops, communities mobilize in new ways around local opportunities for change.

see pg. 15 for more details

## 2024

### Integrating Leadership in Policy and Practice

CWS partnered with Refugee Council USA (RCUSA) to host the largest ever in-person refugee Advocacy Days event in Washington, D.C. Over 300 immigrant community members attended leadership and advocacy trainings, and 34 state delegations met with congressional offices to advocate for legislation and funding in support of refugees and asylum seekers.



This investment has helped impacted immigrant and refugee leaders build their capacity to organize their communities, tell their stories in impactful ways, develop campaign ideas and advocate for key policy priorities and resource allocations. The civic engagement efforts have helped thousands of new Americans register to vote and feel informed about voter issues.

## National and State Hybrid Strategy

CWS' national and state-based presence gives it a unique ability to equip local community organizers with resources and technical assistance to advance the policy goals that come out of a community-based, impact-led issue identification and agenda setting process. At the same time, embedding Community Organizers in local resettlement agencies enables CWS to build on decades of experience and connections with local ethnic-based communities and the trust that working together has built over time.







PHOTO: NORTH CAROLINA  
COMMUNITY ORGANIZERS AND  
IMPACTED LEADERS MEETING  
WITH US SENATOR TED BUDD

CWS' commitment to elevating impacted leaders' voices in policymaking, in public events and in the media is inspired by the community organizing and storytelling training used in the civil rights and immigrant rights movements. Drawing from social change public narrative techniques<sup>3</sup> and media skills training, CWS prepares refugee leaders to be spokespersons in their communities. Those with little U.S. media experience learn new skills and gain confidence in telling their story, while the more experienced grow their storytelling skills and their understanding of different advocacy strategies such as meeting with elected officials. CWS creates opportunities for impacted leaders to meet directly with policymakers and mobilizes hundreds each year to amplify their stories to decision makers and the public through articles, letters, op-eds, videos and social media.

There have been growing opportunities in the last ten years to build narrative capacity and lift the voices of impacted leaders and communities through public events such as Advocacy Days and World Refugee Day commemorations. Early on, these were attended largely by faith leaders, resettlement staff and community advocates. With the launch of RILSC, CWS laid the groundwork for more participation by refugee leaders themselves, in part through the incorporation of public narrative trainings. Beginning in 2018, Advocacy Days saw a marked increase in attendance by refugee leaders representing their own narratives.

**"If we don't have people who are directly affected by the systems that be and the powers that be on the front lines converging with those who currently hold power, then we leave it up to the media and other entities to take control of who we are... and how we live in this country and in this world."**

- CWS Community Organizer, 2022  
(at CWS' Together We Welcome conference)

## Spotlight

### Advocacy Days - Mustafa

**Mustafa Nuur**, a former refugee from Somalia who participated in Advocacy Days in 2019 urging Congress to increase refugee resettlement numbers, articulates the importance of storytelling for advocacy and for holding leaders accountable.

**"There are so many Mustafas out there in the world who are stuck in a refugee camp like I was because of the resettlement process. I share my story because the more people know about you, the less likely they are to hate you. I'm here**



because I want to be a voice for my friends, and I hope members of Congress increase the resettlement numbers or at least meet the numbers they said they would.”

## World Refugee Day

Annual World Refugee Day commemorations and resolutions, at both the national and local levels, are important vehicles for collectively acknowledging the contributions of refugees to our communities and for reaffirming commitments to welcome and inclusion. CWS provides input on congressional resolutions, mobilizes community action to advocate for their passage and spread awareness and offers resources encouraging the adoption of resolutions in local communities.

### World Refugee Day in Houston, TX

In 2023, just one year after RILSC expanded to Houston, ten refugee leaders participated in the city’s World Refugee Day, four of whom gave testimony at the City Council meeting. This was the first time anyone on the team had attended an event like this. It was a transformative success, both for the participants and for the city’s vision for welcome. RILSC leaders’ stories connected the councilmembers to Houston’s vibrant refugee and immigrant community and opened the door for further outreach and relationship building.

In the voice of one councilmember: “We want to encourage you to continue to engage with our office, ways that we can help with any programs or services, ways in which we can benefit the refugee community....We’re going to lean on your leadership in that effort as well.” Organizer-led workshops on narrative/storytelling and civic engagement were critical to the success of this event, and the participating refugee leaders said they felt empowered and energized for future actions.



**Mustafa Nuur** was thirteen when he and his family fled violence in Somalia. He now lives in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where he is a spokesman for the Somali refugee community. With a background in marketing at a multinational web development company, Mustafa founded Bridge, a social enterprise platform that lets users book cross-cultural conversations with refugees in the community, promoting dialogue and understanding. With skills honed through RILSC training, Mustafa actively engages with local representatives, organizes in the community, has met with congressional and world leaders and has been featured on National Public Radio.

## Voice in Media

RILSC program participants have successfully impacted the public narrative by telling their stories and earning media attention at local, state and national levels. Leaders have been featured by CNN, Newsweek and other major outlets, participated in high-profile national events such as the Women's March on Washington and write op-eds and stories for local media.

### Storytelling - Deborah Jane

**Deborah Jane** is a refugee leader who was featured in the 2020 Netflix Docuseries "Immigration Nation."<sup>4</sup>

Deborah resettled in Ohio in 2016 after surviving a near-fatal acid attack in her home country of Uganda. She expected her four young children to soon follow, but their admission was delayed by a Trump-era executive

order and administrative and systemic obstacles.<sup>5</sup> In 2019, Deborah participated in Advocacy Days in Washington, D.C. She credits the ability to share her story with documentary filmmakers to churches like the United Church of Christ that co-sponsor and advocate for refugees and to the Office of Refugee Resettlement for helping her make her family whole.<sup>6</sup>



**"Meeting Jackie, the Columbus Refugee Organizer, has made my dream come true. The only hope I had was my petition for my children. Getting to learn that if I sit back and not tell my story, no one will. Although I knew what I was going through, not knowing how to tell my story was a stumbling block. Learning how to tell my story from CWS training and coaching has given me confidence to come out and share my experience with decision-makers."**

CWS has intentionally worked to shift the type of public narrative refugee leaders share, focusing not on the traditional "savior" trope but on stories of empowerment and resilience rooted in the broader context of making social change to benefit whole communities. This has gone hand-in-hand with shifting immigration narratives from individuals winning a pathway to citizenship toward a broader recognition that the same discriminatory mindsets and policies put all newcomers under attack and that immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers must unite to defend their rights, their opportunities, and their futures





# ORGANIZING AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: ENSURING A VIBRANT DEMOCRACY

PHOTO: NEW AMERICANS  
OUTSIDE OF THE GUILFORD  
COUNTY BOARD OF ELECTIONS  
GREENSBORO, NC, DURING A  
CWS ORGANIZED GOTV EVENT  
- NOV. 2ND

## Impact-Led Organizing

Community organizing is built in throughout the RILSC Program. From the beginning, Community Organizers hold one-on-one relational meetings with impacted leaders and offer trainings on public narrative, civic engagement, Know Your Rights and other timely or emerging topics. They also engage participants in leadership teams and public input sessions to identify priority issues, develop campaign strategies and draft policy proposals relevant to their communities.

### Organizer Reflection

CWS prioritizes staffing the project with Community Organizers who come from refugee, immigrant and asylum seeker backgrounds, making them effective at building out leadership development curriculum and a robust network of intersectional refugee and newcomer leaders. One Community Organizer's reflections following an annual team retreat captures why this is so important to the work.

**"During our retreat, I realized how connected and passionate we all are. It was an opportunity to learn from each other, joke, share our stories and our 'why' behind our work...We are not only a team, but a family. Our personal stories inform our involvement in this work. We are refugees, immigrants, have immigrant family members or are driven to share the gospel of peace, love and charity...We were trained on several topics, and we practiced the ways we would identify community leaders, engage them and recruit them to join our common call for positive change. I felt engaged and encouraged as we navigate a time of important changes in America."** — Rodrigue Makelele,  
CWS Community Organizer, Harrisonburg, Virginia



THE CWS COMMUNITY ORGANIZERS TEAM RETREAT  
IN SEPTEMBER 2022



CWS and impacted leaders have successfully advocated at the state and local levels to advance welcoming resolutions, inclusive policies, budget allocations, refugee crisis response, the Office of New Americans State Network and more.

Passing Welcoming City resolutions and/or World Refugee Day proclamations is significant because it can lead to the ability to garner local and state funding for refugee integration services, language learning and accessibility resources and workforce development priorities like job training or professional licensing.

**Ahmed Ahmed**, a RILSC Program graduate and refugee leader, describes why welcoming is just the first step.



**Ahmed Ahmed** is a Chadian refugee who, as a child growing up in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, embraced his refugee background and became fascinated with the idea of welcoming people to the community. He studied immigration law at Howard University but had his sights set on community organizing. During a summer break, he canvassed for the Democratic Party and the work he did that summer made him realize community organizing was about putting in time on the ground; it was not something he could learn in school. In December 2022, Ahmed was appointed to fill a vacancy on the Lancaster City Council and was elected to complete his full term in a special election in 2023.

**“Welcoming refugees requires a lot more than just increasing the number of refugee arrivals. It means ensuring English as a second language, or ESL, classes are available; it means giving ample job training; it means getting people registered to vote; it means helping people buy their first home.”** - Ahmed Ahmed

Identifying and developing policy priorities and proposals is not “one size fits all,” but differs from state to state. Even when there are issues in common, the opportunities, resources, partners and obstacles in each state vary, leading to customized approaches. However, key policy issues tend to cluster in the following areas:

#### **Housing:**

Initiatives to increase housing access for newcomer populations include rental assistance programs, affordable housing efforts and increasing the capacity of housing departments. CWS leaders have participated in advancing such policies and programs in California, Maryland and elsewhere.

#### **Language:**

Improving language access for non-English speakers includes ESL programs and increasing accessibility of in-language materials for accessing everyday services like Departments of Motor Vehicles. CWS has observed or been involved in such efforts in North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Texas.

#### **Healthcare:**

Expanding access to health and behavioral health services includes efforts to eliminate waiting periods to access Medicaid coverage for resident children and pregnant women as well as increased mental health services. CWS has supported initiatives in Georgia and elsewhere.

#### **Offices for New Americans (ONAs):**

Serving as a single point of contact for immigrants and their advocates, ONAs develop and advance policies to attract immigrants to the state and help them build successful lives. ONAs play a key role in working with other agencies and departments across state government to ensure robust integration services. In the last decade, CWS has established ONAs in many states, including Arizona, California, Colorado, Georgia, Hawaii, Maryland, Oregon, Virginia and Pennsylvania.

#### **Funding:**

Impacted leaders organize and advocate for state and local funding supplements (alongside increased federal budgets) to support refugee resettlement services



as well as services for asylum seekers and immigrants. CWS has supported such efforts in Massachusetts, Oregon and Washington.

### Employment:

Workforce development initiatives range from increased access to education and training to inclusive policies for professional licenses and certifications earned outside of the United States. CWS leaders have engaged in workforce policy initiatives in Georgia, Michigan, New York, North Carolina and Virginia.

## Civic Engagement

RILSC Program leaders have become engaged within their communities' civic structures, including human rights commissions, Welcoming City initiatives and advisory committees. Several have advanced to serve as RCUSA delegates. Many impacted leaders who have gone through CWS trainings have been elected or appointed to serve in local government and/or gone on to form their own refugee service organizations.

### A Milestone in Representation on City Council

**Bhuwan Pyakurel** was evicted from his home country of Bhutan in 1990 because of the Nepali government's ethnic cleansing policy. He resettled to Colorado Springs, Colorado in 2009 after living as a refugee in Nepal for eighteen years.

He participated in the RILSC Program beginning in 2015 and became very actively engaged in his community, going to school board meetings as a voice for refugee parents, helping with translation in schools and hospitals and working with local law enforcement and city government to raise awareness about community safety, since many refugees are resettled in areas with high crime.

Bhuwan was hired as the Columbus Refugee Community Organizer at Community Refugee and Immigration Services (CRIS) in 2016, where he led civic engagement workshops and voter engagement activities. He started attending City Council meetings speaking about refugee communities and the issues they face. He has also participated in multiple Advocacy Days events in Washington, D.C.

In 2019, Bhuwan made history as the first Bhutanese American to be elected to public office in the United States when he was elected to the Reynoldsburg City Council.



**"CWS community organizing training helped empower me with the knowledge and skills to tell my story and engage my Bhutanese community. After recently becoming the first Bhutanese American to hold elected office in the country by winning a City Council seat in Reynoldsburg, Ohio, I hope to help build the capacity of other former refugees to lift up their voices and increase their civic engagement."** — Bhuwan Pyakure

## At the Helm of Welcome in Baton Rouge

**Dauda Sesay** fled Sierra Leone at age sixteen due to a brutal war in which his father and younger sister were killed and he himself was seriously injured. While in a refugee camp in Gambia, he worked with other refugees to advocate for better living conditions. He resettled to Baton Rouge, Louisiana in 2009 and pursued his education and that of his family. He reflects on his participation in a 2017 CWS training.

**"I vividly remember being in that room surrounded by other refugee leaders in Columbus, Ohio...That training didn't just equip me with knowledge; it gave me a renewed sense of purpose and belonging. The space you created for us to share, learn and lead was transformational. It allowed me to see that my story — and the stories of so many refugees like me — were not only worth telling, but worth fighting for."**



Today, Dauda works with refugee families, coordinates help to new Americans during times of natural disasters, connects communities, amplifies refugee voices and builds bridges as the National Network Director for African Communities Together (ACT). He is also the founding member and President of Louisiana Organization for Refugees and Immigrants. Dauda serves as Vice-Chair of the Refugee Congress Board of Directors for Refugee Congress. He is also a member of a mayoral commission created to make the City of Baton Rouge more inclusive and welcoming. Dauda was the first ever refugee advisor to serve on the US Delegation at the UNHCR High-Level Officials Meeting on the Global Compact on Refugees in 2021, and currently serves on the US Refugee Advisory Board.

**"The impact of the CWS and Refugee Congress collaboration continues to ripple through my life and the lives of those I serve. It gave me the tools, the courage and the platform to amplify my voice and the voices of countless refugees, turning our lived experiences into powerful advocacy."** — Dauda Sesay

Bhuwan and Dauda are just two of many in the CWS network who have progressed in their own leadership journeys and become part of the infrastructure for more inclusive decision-making in their respective communities. This demonstrates the longer-term, extended impact of the RILSC Program.

## Voter Education and Representation

Although RILSC was still a new program leading up to the 2020 election, it was clear that it could play an important role in voter education within newcomer communities, and participating leaders were interested in bringing this information to their communities. Prolonged displacement often means that many refugees have not been able to exercise the right to vote for years, if not decades. The U.S. system can be incredibly complex for newcomers, and in 2020, COVID-19 created an even more opaque process. COVID-19 disrupted polling practices and shifted information across the nation, further isolating people from democratic processes. The 2020 presidential elections also saw a significant uptick in anti-immigrant rhetoric. For refugees who fled their home countries due to political persecution, this rhetoric surfaced real fears around democratic participation.



CWS leaders played an important role in bridging the gap and working with community-based organizations, faith and interfaith institutions and community centers to bring voter education to over 80,000 immigrants and refugees through videos, virtual trainings, texts and phone calls and events. Materials and resources were translated in underrepresented languages, and leaders voluntarily produced videos for their communities that, for some, were the first time they had ever seen a voice or experience like theirs represented in Get Out the Vote (GOTV) messaging.



## 2024 Election

FORMER REFUGEES GOTV CAMPAIGN IN COLUMBUS, OH

In 2024, CWS mobilized an even stronger network of voter education, connecting more than 10,000 new Americans through 1:1 touchpoints with important information about their civic rights. CWS partnered with the Voter Activation Network to expand its reach to thousands more voters in the key states of North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Virginia.

Ahead of the election, CWS launched a civic engagement page that resourced leaders, newcomers and service providers alike. The page included translated voter education and mobilization resources<sup>7</sup> as well as naturalization tools, first time voter stories and additional resources on key electoral issues and what was at stake in the election. CWS produced 34 multilingual videos of first-time voters; both their experience and language representation were unique motivators for New Americans. These efforts amplified the vital narrative of new Americans as participants in the democratic process. CWS is grateful to share the voice of King Rukiranya, a first-time voter from Durham, NC, as an example of how empowering this work can be:

### Empowerment Through the Ballot Box

**King Rukiranya's** journey began in the Democratic Republic of Congo. After fleeing conflict in 2005, he spent four years in Burundi before moving to Kenya in 2010, where he was granted asylum through the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and resettled to Durham, North Carolina in 2015 via CWS. This year marks a special milestone for Rukiranya. Having never voted in his home country, he recently cast his first-ever vote in the 2024 U.S. presidential election. He had taken the time to learn about the voting process, and while he had the option to vote absentee, Rukiranya was excited to cast his ballot in person this November.

**"My parents are in Australia, and they're citizens there. I have a brother voting here in the U.S. alongside me, and another in Canada. This is the immigrant story,"** he reflects. **"We cross borders for safety, work hard to become naturalized and contribute to the democracies of the countries we call home."**



# POLICY ADVOCACY: MOBILIZING A NETWORK FOR POLICY AND SYSTEMS CHANGE

PHOTO: REFUGEES AND IMMIGRANTS HOLD A PRESS CONFERENCE DURING THE FIRST PENNSYLVANIA REFUGEE ADVOCACY DAY ON OCTOBER 1ST AT THE PA GENERAL ASSEMBLY IN SUPPORT OF THE INTRODUCTION OF A BILL CREATING AN OFFICE OF NEW PENNSYLVANIANS AT THE PA STATE LEGISLATURE.

The U.S. policy context impacting immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers is constantly shifting. Over the past decade, hostile political rhetoric and public sentiment has intensified, as reflected in exclusionary Executive Orders, dehumanizing border policies and precipitous cuts in Presidential Determinations governing refugee admissions. Despite these challenges, participants of the RILSC Program have made important headway in this time by sharing their stories with policymakers, organizing in their communities and engaging and building relationships with elected leaders.

## State and Local Policy

It is often through state and local efforts that many impacted leaders can best see their victories first-hand, understand how organizing can translate to concrete wins and gain a sense of their collective power to make social change.

### Advocacy and Policy Change in Virginia

In Virginia in 2020-2021, during community issue identification workshops with refugee leaders, participants emphasized that their professional skills, licensures and credentials were being chronically underutilized across the state — a dynamic that was exacerbated by escalating unemployment during COVID-19. This pain point was elevated as a priority for statewide mobilization, bolstered by CWS' national resourcing.

In 2022, CWS Community Organizers and impacted leaders launched the inaugural Virginia Virtual Refugee Advocacy Day, centering employment as a major issue. Specifically, advocates highlighted a bill to extend provisional teaching licenses as one that, if passed, could help address the educator shortage while creating pathways for refugees and immigrants with licenses from their countries of origin to work in their chosen field and lend more representation to the sector. CWS state-based staff coordinated a press event with Virginia House Delegate Kathy Tran, a refugee leader, a faith leader and resettlement staff, as well as sixteen virtual legislative visits. CWS' national staff provided training and extensive resource materials for participants, as well as a leave-behind folder for elected officials.



As a result of these combined efforts, it took only a matter of weeks following the Advocacy Day for the provisional teacher licensure bill to make its way to the House floor. Ultimately, the licensing reform bill for new American teachers passed both chambers and was signed into law in April of 2022— a huge step forward on the issue identified by Virginia’s impacted leaders themselves.

## National Policy

In the past ten years, impacted leaders have mobilized against anti-immigrant and anti-refugee Executive Orders and other policies, and they have engaged with Congress around its own role in exercising oversight and funding appropriations.

### Responding to Restrictions on Resettlement in 2019

In September 2019, the government issued Executive Order (EO) 13888 “Enhancing State and Local Involvement in Refugee Resettlement,” which required affirmative consent from states and localities to continue resettlement and in practice could have drastically reduced, if not entirely stopped, the resettlement of refugees. In response, CWS and other refugee service organizations filed suit challenging its legality and won a preliminary injunction in U.S. District Court in January 2020. The injunction was held up until EO 13888 was revoked in February 2021.

CWS also supported partners who led nationwide, bipartisan efforts to get state and local officials to publicly declare welcome for refugees. It developed action alerts, state-specific listservs, talking points, letter templates and toolkits for organizing meetings with state and local officials. Through these efforts, CWS and its partners garnered an overwhelmingly favorable response towards welcome in nearly every state: 43 governors (including 19 Republicans) affirmed that resettlement could continue in their states.

It is meaningful that through many of these efforts, impacted leaders have generated bipartisan support in a political climate where this has become increasingly difficult.

### Working to Rebuild a Robust Refugee Resettlement Program

In 2019, refugee leader **Nga Vương-Sandoval** joined a delegation of faith leaders supported by CWS and Refugee Congress. As constituents of Rep. Ken Buck’s (R-CO) congressional district, they advocated for allowing more refugees into the country after Trump cut the Presidential Determination (which sets the national admission level and regional allocations for all refugees each fiscal year) to 30,000. In D.C., Vương-Sandoval spoke about her own experience to help convey to Buck (then ranking Member on the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration and Citizenship) that “there are almost 26 million of me and my family going through the same experience right now, who only need a chance.” As a result, Buck led sixteen other Republican Representatives in issuing a letter to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo arguing for a more robust refugee admissions goal.



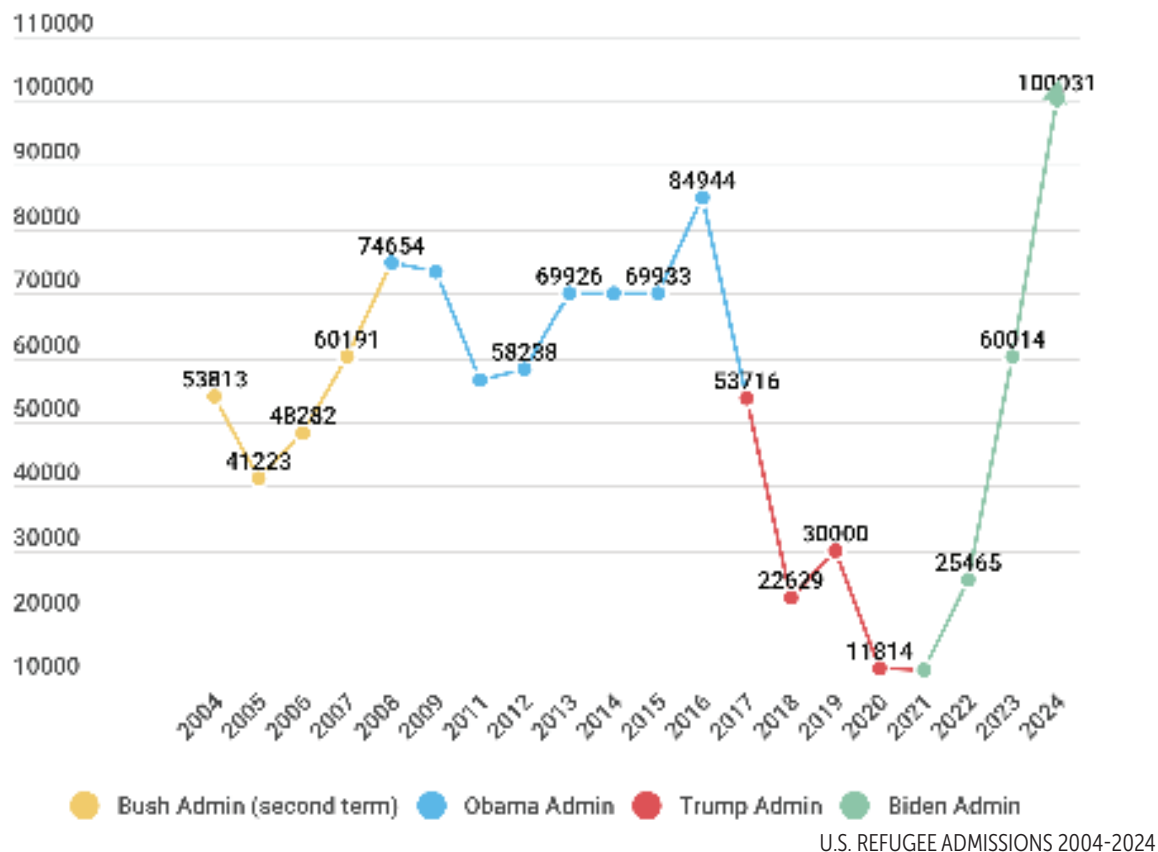
**Nga Vương-Sandoval** a Vietnamese refugee, leads the groundbreaking program for the Colorado Judicial Department—the nation’s first initiative dedicated to diversifying the bench. She is the founder and Executive Director of Refugees + Immigrants United, an organization powered by refugees and immigrants.

As a prominent advocate for human rights, policies, and issues affecting forcibly displaced and underrepresented communities, she has been recognized for her advocacy and has received numerous accolades, including the Colorado Attorney General’s Outstanding Community Service Award, ADL Civil Rights Award, and University of Colorado Denver Mack Easton Award.

Nga was instrumental in leading and securing Lunar New Year as an observed state holiday in Colorado and named one of Denver Westword’s “Ten People to Watch. She was honored with a mural by artist Thomas “Detour” Evans and the Denver Nuggets with the game’s “First Shot” of the game. Her refugee journey and human rights work have been featured globally and nationally by media outlets like Business Insider, Colorado Public Radio, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, USA for UNHCR.

Vương-Sandoval's visit and Buck's subsequent letter were covered by CBS News and Chicago Public Radio, and Vương-Sandoval continued to advocate for resettlement and call out the administration on what — each year, for three consecutive years — would become the lowest refugee admissions goals in U.S. history.

Just a few years after the refugee program resettled a record low 11,411 in President Biden's first year in office, refugee resettlement has been reborn (see chart below). The United States resettled over 100,000 refugees in FY 2024, the highest annual total in thirty years. Resettlement sites have successfully reopened across the country, and innovations and progress in processing overseas have made the program more efficient and more resilient than ever before.



The numbers here represent more than just highs and lows; they represent families reunifying, survivors of persecution finding safety and an important response to global crises. Ultimately, they represent hope and resilience.

There is still much work to do. Anti-immigration policies at the state levels have continued to leave their mark, as has the lack of meaningful immigration reforms at the national level and the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. After a long and successful rebuild of national resettlement infrastructure, the time has come once again to protect and preserve the program.





FIRST EVER REFUGEE PARTICIPATION IN A FOURTH OF JULY PARADE, COLUMBUS, OHIO, 2016

# REALIZING THE COMMON DREAM OF AN INCLUSIVE DEMOCRACY

## Looking Ahead

In the first ten years of the RILSC Program, CWS developed a promising community organizing model of leadership development for social change that centers refugees and immigrants as a driving force for policy shifts at the state and local levels. This approach has the potential to create the foundation for a more diverse, representative and effective resettlement framework.

CWS and its partners rose to the challenge when resettlement numbers rebounded from historic lows in 2016-2020, rebuilding a resettlement program more in line with global need and leading to 100,000 refugees resettled in 2024, the most in three decades.

### **The need has never been greater.**

To date, the number of displaced persons around the world due to global conflict, human rights abuses and climate crises has doubled in the past ten years. Major contributors, which include the intensifying conflicts around the world, each taking its toll in

immeasurable human tragedy alongside examples of indomitable resolve and resilience.

The refugee admissions program survived the first four years of the Trump administration, in part through tenacious advocacy, litigation and rapid response to executive actions targeting refugees and newcomers. CWS and its partners then rose to the challenge when resettlement numbers rebounded from historic lows in 2016-2020, rebuilding a resettlement program more in line with global need and leading to 100,000 refugees resettled in 2024, the most in three decades.

The road ahead will not be easy. The November 2024 election was characterized by mis- and dis-information about newcomers and rising anti-immigrant, anti-refugee messaging. The incoming administration has stated plans to once again diminish the refugee admissions program, end crucial humanitarian pathways and separate families via mass deportation. CWS is clear-eyed about these threats, which only underline the importance of

uplifting refugee voices and leadership, civic education and engagement and the need to expand the work of the RILSC Program.

### **CWS is committed to ensuring that welcome is protected**

Ongoing political turbulence highlights the importance of building a resilient and sustainable refugee resettlement program that can weather the vacillations of our electoral cycles and effectively offer welcome, despite such transitions. As we have seen over the past ten years and anticipate in the future, refugee and immigrant leadership and representation is fundamental to community wellbeing and uplifting the value of humanitarian programs and refugee resettlement, particularly in the face of restrictive federal policies, the challenges of global climate change and other, potentially unforeseen, compounded crises. Refugee movement building takes time, and CWS is committed to ensuring that welcome is protected and that discrimination does not limit the country's capacity to grow vibrantly.

CWS will pursue efforts to:

- Promote and expand refugee and immigrant leadership in advancing the priorities of their communities and making their voices heard in the public narrative and with decision makers.
- Inoculate and protect the U.S. resettlement program, asylum protections and our capacity to welcome newcomers through national, state and local administrative and legislative solutions.
- Prepare and equip communities with tools and resources to support refugees and newcomers, including in response to changes in Congress, the administration and state legislatures.

CWS will do this by building on the RILSC Program model and expanding this work. This will include piloting innovations like compensated skill-building, new

opportunities for networking and peer support among impacted leaders who have elevated into civic positions and scaling organizing and advocacy work to reach more priority states and a broader network of partners.

CWS recognizes that refugees, immigrants and asylum seekers are not defined solely by these experiences but hold myriad identities. As it deepens its work, it will prioritize building collective power across these identities. Just as the movements for refugee and immigrant rights have become increasingly aligned, so too is there the potential to grow intersectional awareness and solidarity with LGBTQIAA+, racial justice, climate and environmental justice and other coalitions. CWS is eager to explore how to equip current leaders to build on their expertise while bringing in new leaders who are prepared to mobilize action on behalf of intersectional community needs and interests.

### **The movement for refugee, immigrant and asylum-seeker rights continues to grow stronger**

The movement for refugee, immigrant and asylum-seeker rights continues to grow stronger, and CWS believes one of its most important strength lies in centering and building the leadership of impacted individuals and communities. In the first ten years of the RILSC Program, CWS has learned what can be achieved with an integrated strategy of storytelling, community organizing and civic engagement and policy advocacy. This work is also bolstered by increasing recognition that the same discriminatory mindsets and policies put all newcomers under attack and that immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers must unite to defend their rights, their opportunities, and their futures. In the next ten years and beyond, CWS will continue learning, adapting and innovating together with impacted leaders and communities to make the United States a more welcoming place for all.



## Endnotes

- 1 "Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2023," Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-report-2023>
- 2 Clement, Viviane; Rigaud, Kanta Kumari; de Sherbinin, Alex; Jones, Bryan; Adamo, Susana; Schewe, Jacob; Sadiq, Nian; Shabhat, Elham. 2021. Groundswell Part 2: Acting on Internal Climate Migration. © World Bank, Washington, DC. <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/36248> License: CC BY 3.0 IGO."
- 3 Public narrative is a leadership-development practice developed by former United Farm Workers organizer and now Harvard professor Marshall Ganz. Narrative Arts: <https://narrativearts.org/article/public-narrative/>
- 4 "Immigration Nation" Resources: <https://www.immigrationnationcare.org/individuals>
- 5 "Trump Has Slowed Refugee Admissions to a Crawl," by Meredith Hoffman, Politico, February 26, 2018. <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/02/26/refugee-resettlement-confusion-executive-orders-217038/>
- 6 "Columbus Refugee Featured in Netflix Documentary 'Immigration Nation,'" by Danae King, The Columbus Dispatch, August 8, 2020. <https://www.dispatch.com/story/news/politics/2020/08/08/columbus-refugee-featured-in-netflix-documentary-immigration-nation/112901424/>
- 7 Civic Engagement: <https://cwsglobal.org/civic-engagement/>

# Appendix A

## Ecosystem Partners

### **Coalitions of which CWS is a founding member:**

- Interfaith Immigration Coalition
- Value Our Families
- We Are All America

### **Coalitions in which CWS is an active member:**

- Asylum Working Group
- Civic Engagement State Tables at the local level (NC, VA, OH, PA)
- Evacuate Our Allies
- Immigration Hub tables
- InterAction
- WAAA National Refugee and Immigrant Leadership Table (RILT)
- Refugee Advocacy Lab / Refugees International
- Refugee Council USA (RCUSA)
- RISE Coalition
- Shoulder to Shoulder
- Welcome With Dignity

### **Other organizational partners and coalitions:**

- ACLU
- America's Voice
- Black Alliance for Just Immigration
- Episcopal Migration Ministries
- Interagency Resettlement Working Group
- National Immigration Law Center
- National Partnership for New Americans
- Project Afghan Legal Assistance
- Refugee Advocacy Lab
- Refugee Congress
- Southern Poverty Law Center
- UC Strategy Group
- Unaccompanied Afghan Minors table
- United We Dream
- CWS Covenant Members
- National resettlement agencies

And many others



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Together, we are building a more equitable and resilient future. Thank you for being an integral part of this journey.



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**BELONGING**  
Building a welcoming future. Together  
 **CWS**