

Housing Challenges & Solutions: How National, State, and Local Policy Makers Can Expand Access to Affordable Housing for Refugees

October 29, 2021

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, further exacerbated by the COVID pandemic. According to the Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard University, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, renters in the United States have been facing a housing affordability crisis. Nearly 25% of renter households in the U.S. were spending more than 50% of their incomes on rent each month, with little income left to cover other expenses. From 2012 to 2019, as the U.S. housing market recovered from the recession and grew, rents in the U.S. have continued to increase faster than general inflation. National, state, and local policies can - together - correct long-standing racial inequities and economic injustices by ensuring quality housing.

REFUGEE FEDERAL SOLUTIONS

Utilize federal government property as housing units.

- Designating available vacant federal government owned properties (e.g., GSA, military housing, FEMA emergency housing, etc.) as housing units for refugees - particularly in times of high arrivals.

Integrate the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) into solutions.

- Connecting resettlement agencies with HUD grantees and technical assistance providers on possible partnerships around the country.
- Issuing a HUD waiver or memo clarifying that landlords waiving or making flexible credit history, employment, and income requirements for Afghan arrivals and refugees would not violate Fair Housing rules.

Strengthen refugees' access to the Treasury Department's Emergency Rental Assistance (ERA).

- Sharing widely across national, state, and local stakeholders - including in relevant languages - the use of ERA1 and ERA2 funds for refugees, including Afghan arrivals.
- Working with states and localities to facilitate the release of remaining funding.¹ There are two programs, [ERA1](#) and [ERA2](#). ERA1 funds generally expire on September 30, 2022. The Treasury Department released [ERA1 reallocation guidance](#) in October 2021. See the National Low Income Housing Coalition ([NLIHC's fact sheet](#)) on ERA1 reallocation to learn more.

Fund permanent housing coordinator staff capacity at U.S. resettlement sites.

- Encouraging states to hire a housing coordinator, funding for which is administered by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).² Every effort should be made to expand collaboration with other community-based organizations to respond to housing challenges.
- Supporting resettlement agencies and their affiliates/sites to hire a devoted full-time staff person, in locations that do not already have an FTE, who can serve as a housing coordinator who develops relationships with new landlords, strengthens landlord-client relationships, facilitates escrow payments, conducts housing orientation with clients, among other responsibilities.

¹ Congress provided more than \$46 billion for emergency rental assistance through the Consolidated Appropriations Act enacted in December 2020 and the American Rescue Plan Act enacted in March 2021. The Treasury Department may recapture "excess funds" beginning on September 30, 2021, and re-obligate it to other grantees that have spent at least 65% of their funds.

² ORR PL 22-03 encourages states to consider hiring a housing coordinator.

Improve access to the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program for refugees and new Americans.

- Ensuring refugees, including Afghan humanitarian parole arrivals, benefit from the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), which assists eligible low-income households with their heating and cooling energy costs, bill payment assistance, energy crisis assistance, weatherization and energy-related home repairs. [Click here](#) for eligibility, how to apply, and further information, and [click here](#) for HHS's map of LIHEAP local agency locations.³

Share information in multiple languages that is tailored toward refugees, including Afghan arrivals.

- Integrating a section on the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) site for [mortgage and housing assistance](#) for [homeowners](#) and [renters](#) who are refugees, including Afghans with humanitarian parole.
- Translating such sections into multiple languages for new arrivals, such as Dari and Pashto, in collaboration with USAHello and resettlement agencies.
- Ensuring that local rental assistance programs ([by location](#)) have resources for refugees - particularly in areas with high concentrations of arrivals.
- Expanding the content of the [Housing Insecurity Media Toolkit](#) to equip states and localities, refugees, resettlement agencies, and other stakeholders that is tailored toward refugees and in multiple languages.

INCLUSIVE FEDERAL SOLUTIONS

Expand rental assistance for every income eligible household.

- Expanding the [Housing Choice Voucher program](#) to become an entitlement program, wherein every individual who qualifies for the program receives a voucher. Currently, only one in four eligible individuals receives rental assistance under the program. Congress should also work to pass legislation like the *Housing is Infrastructure Act* (funds the National Housing Trust Fund and public housing repair), *Ending Homelessness Act* (voucher guarantee), and *Family Stability and Opportunity Vouchers Act* (expands housing vouchers and enables housing agencies to engage new landlords in the voucher program).
- Establishing a [Mobility Voucher Program](#) that supports the moves of families with young children into low poverty neighborhoods. Research suggests that children under the age of 13 benefit most from such moves, with improvements in educational attainment and future earnings.
- Establishing a [Federal Renter's Tax Credit](#) that would reduce rents in certain designated housing developments to levels that individuals with the lowest incomes can afford. This would reduce rent burdens and allow households to spend additional money on necessities such as healthy food and medical care.

Expand the stock of housing affordable to vulnerable low-income households.

- Providing \$40 billion annually for the [National Housing Trust Fund \(HTF\)](#), which is designed to build, preserve, and rehabilitate housing for people with the lowest incomes.
- Adjusting the structure of the [Low-Income Housing Tax Credit \(LIHTC\)](#) program to incentivize development in low-poverty rather than high-poverty neighborhoods and accessibility for the lowest income households. At present, too many LIHTC projects have been built in high poverty neighborhoods and ultimately house individuals with incomes above the poverty line.
- Making substantive repairs to public housing that have been put off for decades. Across the country, a failure to address a backlog of needed repairs has resulted in widespread substandard conditions in public housing units. Federal investment is needed to make these units safe and livable for their residents.
- Establishing federal incentives for local governments to remove barriers to housing development and rehabilitation, with an eye toward creating affordable housing stock for low- and middle- income communities.

³ To be eligible for this benefit program, you must need financial assistance with home energy costs. A person who participates or has family members who participate in certain other benefit programs, such as SNAP, SSI, TANF, may be automatically eligible.

Stabilize households by providing emergency assistance to avert instability and homelessness.

- Establishing a federal [Emergency Assistance Fund](#) that would provide short term cash assistance and support services to families experiencing financial shocks that hinder their ability to pay their rent and stay housed. Too often, short term shocks have long term consequences which could be avoided if timely cash assistance was easily accessible.

REFUGEE STATE AND LOCAL SOLUTIONS

Allocate state and local dollars to support temporary and permanent housing support.

- Partnering with governors, relevant governors' offices (e.g., Offices of New Americans), and state legislatures to coordinate allocations of funds.
- Obligating a portion of state and/or local [Emergency Rental Assistance \(ERA\) program](#) funds to provide temporary and permanent housing support for new arrivals for a number of months.⁴ It is in states' and localities' best interest to obligate these federal dollars quickly to avoid them being reallocated. [According to the National Multifamily Housing Council](#), as of August 2021, less than 17% of the \$46 billion in rental assistance funds having been disbursed nationally. The status of spending of ERA funds by locality as of August 31, 2021 can be accessed [here](#).
- Piloting grant programs to purchase temporary and permanent housing units that arriving refugees could stay in and/or rent at a reduced rate.
- Investing in and implementing grant or incentive programs to increase production and preservation of affordable housing.
- Supporting the investment of small non-profit lenders who set up revolving loan funds or reserves to provide temporary, no-interest, no-fee loans to refugees to cover initial housing costs.

Utilize state and local government property as housing units.

- Designating available vacant state and local government owned properties (e.g., campus housing, summer/seasonal camp cabins, other publicly owned buildings, purchased hotels, etc.) as housing units for refugees.

Strengthen public-private partnerships and local stakeholders.

- Convening a public-private housing roundtable, such as housing authorities, continuum of care boards, landlords, property management companies, developers, affordable housing stakeholders, private sector, associations, corporate housing, etc. to workshop local temporary and permanent housing options and connections

INCLUSIVE STATE AND LOCAL SOLUTIONS

Remove development barriers and implement inclusionary practices to increase affordable supply.

- Removing regulatory and development process barriers for housing production.
- Using tax foreclosed properties and other public land for development of affordable housing.
- Implementing inclusionary zoning where feasible.
- Requiring affordable housing inclusion in market rate developments that receive or utilize government incentives.
- Using local tax incentives for the development and preservation of affordable housing (for example, property tax abatement, tax increment financing, etc.).
- Utilizing other applicable local funding solutions for affordable housing (public improvement district - PID, transfer development rights - TDR, etc.).
- Implementing development incentives for affordable housing production (such as density bonus, waiver or reduction of fees, adjustment of parking and design standards, streamlining/expedition of permitting process, transit-oriented development initiatives).
- Increasing funding to existing state and local housing trust funds and establishing housing trust funds in states and localities that do not have housing trust funds set up.
- Investing in universal basic income pilots for local and state communities.

⁴ ERA1 funds expire on September 30, 2022, and ERA2 funds expire on September 30, 2025.

BEST PRACTICES

States and localities have already taken steps to support short and medium-term solutions.

Michigan: The Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA) is providing \$500,000 to pay for emergency housing through hotel stays and AirBnBs. The Office of Global Michigan is also working on a proposal for a housing subsidy specifically for new arrivals to allow access to properties that are out of price range for newcomers. The Office of Global Michigan has created a host-family screening and training process and requirements. The Office of Global Michigan is also working closely with MSHDA's Chief Investment Officer and Director of Development to strengthen relationships with property managers, landlords, and asset groups. The Office of Global Michigan is further utilizing ORR's RSS funding for rental assistance and is exploring opportunities to pair that assistance with Community Development block grant funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Finally, the Office of Global Michigan plans to hire a community engagement specialist to manage local coordination, conduct trainings for landlords and housing stakeholders, and listen to local community needs.

Locally, Wayne County received ERA2 funds, a portion of which will be allocated toward rental assistance for certain refugee arrivals for up to a year, built "Freedom Village" (affordable condo units that refugee families can rent). The state is involved in replicating this model in other counties and working with housing coordinators within county governments.

Oregon: Resettlement agencies in Oregon propose the allocation of approx. nearly \$1 million for rental assistance for refugees, with \$1,000 per household per month and an expected average of one year of support for each household. Afghan families with a need for housing support for up to 18 months would not face the threat of eviction. The proposal offers that housing assistance could be modeled after the Salem for Refugees/Family Promise partnership. It also proposes a Refugee Resettlement Housing Coordinator within the Oregon Housing and Community Services (OHCS) to have a dedicated staff member to build deep partnerships with the landlord community, identify available housing units, and facilitate increased access to housing for Oregon refugees.

Washington: [King County](#) is providing an Extended Stay Hotel for refugee arrivals and invested \$500,000 for support services and interpretation and translation services. Washington's Governor is also fully supportive of welcoming Afghans - more information available [here](#).

Oklahoma: State of Oklahoma is using the emergency rental assistance (ERA) funding from the Treasury Department for Afghan resettlement efforts.

Short link to this document: <https://bit.ly/HousingRecommendations>