

# From Resettlement to Belonging

Opportunities for Refugee Leadership and Civic Participation



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*In 2016, in response to a growing refugee crisis in the Middle East and Europe, the Obama Administration agreed to increase the number of refugees admitted to the US. But refugees were facing an increasingly hostile environment, and there were few efforts at the time to organize refugees or to support them in their long-term resettlement. Unbound Philanthropy saw an urgent need—and an opportunity—for engaging refugees in leadership development, civic engagement, and media training to share their stories. We have since invested in different types of trainings across the country. We have seen that giving refugees the tools and opportunities to realize their potential cultivates a sense of belonging and agency over their lives—and contributes to positive changes that benefit all of us.*

*The number and scale of refugee leadership and civic participation programs have grown tremendously over the last five years, with thousands of refugees having gone through them. And today, there are resources and support available for organizations new to this area, including, for example, a curriculum by Church World Service that they have developed, tested, and shared; and a network, We are All America, for organizations to share promising practices, coordinate their work, and talk to peers. And increasingly, programs and trainings—and the movement itself—are being developed and led by refugees themselves. Yet this field holds significant potential for growth and is ripe for philanthropic investment to expand civic participation as more refugees enter the US.*

*Unbound has been inspired by the power of refugee leadership and the myriad ways in which refugees are invigorating our communities and our democracy. We have written this report to share what we have learned and the impact we have seen, and we invite our philanthropic colleagues to explore this important funding opportunity. We have featured Unbound grantee partners, as well as other organizations doing outstanding work in this field.*

*If you are a funder who works locally in supporting services for refugees, investing in their leadership and civic engagement could be a natural extension of your grantmaking. For funders—both national and local—already committed to leadership development, civic participation, organizing, and advocacy, we invite you to consider integrating refugees into your portfolios. We also invite you to consider how refugees may be connected to many aspects of your broader portfolio, for example health, education, economic justice, racial justice, and gender equity.*

*We hope you will find this report both useful and inspiring. Our team is here as a resource should you have questions or wish to learn more about our experience. And we are eager for you to share your insights and experiences with us as well.*

*Taryn Higashi  
Executive Director  
Unbound Philanthropy  
June 2021*

# Executive Summary

Refugees fleeing violence or persecution in their countries of origin must employ remarkable courage and resourcefulness to survive a long and harrowing journey to safety. They must navigate the protracted and complex process of gaining refugee status, setting up new lives in a new country, and learning a new language. Many were leaders in their home countries or in refugee camps, yet their leadership skills and lived experiences often go largely unnoticed and untapped.

In recent years, a growing number of organizations across the US have begun investing in refugee leadership. As a result of these programs, refugee leaders are gaining the skills and confidence to speak out in their own voices; they are advocating on issues that impact their lives; they are registering to vote and encouraging others to do so; they are starting businesses or social entrepreneurship projects; and they are running for office. By asserting their voice and leadership, they are also educating the public about who refugees are, debunking myths and misunderstanding, and helping to shift the broader narrative about refugees and immigration in our country. When refugees speak out in their own voices and stand in their own power, they not only reap benefits for themselves and their families but they also strengthen our communities, democracy, and society.

This report summarizes various models of refugee leadership development and civic participation programs, identifies keys to success, and uplifts the stories of diverse training components with refugee leaders and their impact, both within the refugee community and in the broader society.

This report is written for a variety of funders, including those who work locally in supporting resettlement services for refugees, as well as those who work at the national level in supporting organizing and civic engagement. Funders who currently support resettlement services can leverage the impact of their funding by investing in leadership and civic participation efforts. And those who fund leadership, civic participation, organizing, and advocacy can diversify their grantmaking strategy and magnify their overall impact by adding refugees to their portfolios. Funders can also examine how refugees are connected to their broader portfolios, including health, education, economic justice, racial justice, and gender equity. In tapping this funding opportunity, philanthropy can support refugee leaders across the country to project their own voices and stand in their own power.

**“We expanded our funding of RefugeeOne’s legal services to encompass training of refugee advocates, who talked with US-born community members and elected officials about their experiences and why US refugee policy that is generous and welcoming is so important. This is part of our commitment to supporting leadership of those directly affected by policy.”**

— Alice Cottingham  
Manager, Illinois Immigration  
Funder Collaborative

RefugeeOne is the largest  
resettlement agency in Illinois



## A Growing Movement to Support Refugees

Under federal contracts, refugee resettlement agencies and other refugee-serving organizations focus primarily on meeting the basic needs of refugees during their first six months in the US, connecting them to food, healthcare, schools, language, and job training.

Refugee mutual aid organizations and immigrant rights coalitions in well-established refugee resettlement regions have long moved beyond basic needs to support refugee leadership and civic engagement. In recent years, a growing number of other organizations, in both longstanding and newer refugee destinations, have also developed trainings and programs to help refugees gain a sense of belonging, naturalize and vote, and become active participants and changemakers in their communities.

Some programs have been developed by resettlement agencies, and [Church World Service](#) has led the way, creating an exemplary model and working in collaboration with other organizations. Church World Service's Refugee Leadership for Social Change program and trainings, which launched in 2015, is modeled after the program that helped undocumented youth so successfully tell their stories. Today, several other resettlement agencies and refugee rights organizations have adopted similar strategies to support the civic integration of refugees.

Some organizations, like the [Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition](#) and the [Florida Immigrant Coalition](#), have developed these programs because refugees, just like

### Who is a refugee?

A refugee is a person forced to flee their country because of war, violence, conflict, or persecution. The persecution must be based on the person's race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. A refugee is recognized under the 1951 Refugee Convention by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and is entitled to certain human rights protections. Recognized refugees, after extensive vetting, may be resettled in the US and other countries that agree to accept them.

This report focuses on leadership among refugees, but it's important to note the connections—and similar needs and opportunities—for engaging asylum-seekers: people who, after fleeing their home country, file an application with government authorities in another country in order to receive protection from persecution.

undocumented immigrants or other constituents, are part of their community and have a desire to engage in advocacy. And then there are networks like [We Are All America](#) and its campaign [Opportunity for All](#) that are connecting and building power among refugee leaders across the country. For the first time, these networks are engaging refugee leaders themselves to develop trainings, share best practices, and organize their peers. Finally, some programs—like [Unite Oregon](#) and [Partnership for the Advancement of New Americans](#) in Southern California—have been founded and led by refugees themselves.

“ We knew we needed to think beyond the first six months when we’re resettling people. We want to think about the whole journey of the integration process, what it means to be engaged in your community, and how being a changemaker is part of that process.”

- Rev. Noel Anderson  
Director of Grassroots Organizing  
Church World Service

## US Resettlement

The United States has been a world leader on refugee resettlement and asylum for decades, and it has historically received broad bipartisan support. In the past decade, however, new nativist attacks against refugees began to emerge, vilifying their religious beliefs, mischaracterizing them as a drain on public resources, and demonizing them as terrorists. Then came policies such as the Muslim and African Travel Bans and a presidential executive order (ultimately enjoined by courts) that, for the first time, required individual states and localities to give their consent to resettle refugees in their state.

Since the refugee resettlement program began in 1980, the US has resettled roughly 3.1 million refugees, many of whom have become US citizens and/or have US-born family members. But refugee resettlement was sharply cut between 2017 and 2020, with an all-time low of less than 12,000 refugees resettled in 2020, compared to nearly 85,000 refugees in 2016.

With the politicization of refugee resettlement and asylum in the last several years, both these programs have come under serious threats, to the point that they could have been dismantled all together, impacting the entire global system of humanitarian protection as we know it.

The current administration has committed to raising the refugee cap substantially and rebuilding the resettlement system. This commitment could not be more timely or urgent: As of mid-2020, more than 80 million people have been forcibly displaced from their homes due to conflict, persecution, climate change, the pandemic, and other political and economic factors. Of these, 26.3 million have been officially designated as refugees, making them eligible for resettlement.

# The Power of Refugee Leadership and Civic Participation

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Promoting refugee leadership and civic engagement not only benefits refugees and their families, it also strengthens our communities, democracy, and society as a whole. For refugees themselves, it helps establish a sense of belonging in and connection to their new communities, gain agency over their lives and build the knowledge and skills to become active community members and changemakers.

Refugees gain an appreciation for why storytelling is important, and they build the skills and the confidence to tell their story to elected officials, the media, and other audiences to increase understanding of the refugee experience. Through training programs, refugees from different countries and linguistic backgrounds have the opportunity to connect with each other, find common ground, and work together to tackle shared problems and achieve shared goals.

The training programs also spur refugee civic action—from filling out the Census and registering to vote, to meeting with elected officials, to joining non-partisan city or county commissions or even running for elected office. When refugee leaders learn the skills of community organizing, they are able to influence policymaking to benefit immigrants as well as broader communities. Some key policy victories in various states and localities include, for example, creating governmental offices that coordinate services for immigrants and refugees, or advancing reforms on workforce development, professional licenses, language access at local DMVs, welcoming resolutions at the state and local levels, and increased public funding for refugee agencies.

Training programs also bring refugee leaders together with new allies, such as faith and business communities, and they have positioned refugees to assert their voice and influence in local, state, and federal policy debates on a wide range of issues. Refugee leadership and civic engagement also helps shift the narrative about refugees, their hopes and aspirations and the role they play in strengthening our country—moving our society from othering to belonging.

“If there’s anything that can be taken from my experience from refugee to Oregon State Senator, it’s that we need to create the space and support for people to be successful. I am just one person, but I am an example of what is possible if we invest in refugee communities.”

- Kayse Jama  
Oregon State Senator



## Mustafa Nuur

Founder and Executive Director of Bridge

Mustafa Nuur was forced to flee Somalia at age 11 when terrorists killed his father. After spending nearly a decade in a refugee camp in Kenya, he resettled in Lancaster, Pennsylvania in 2014, along with his mother and seven siblings.

While refugees are generally welcome when they arrive in their new community, Mustafa notes that their inability to engage in their new communities creates a feeling of isolation. Mustafa himself sought to engage when he realized that “the refugee story was becoming politicized.” To gain the needed tools and experience, he joined a cohort of refugee leaders who participated in a training led by Adamou Mohamed, Community Organizing Coordinator at Church World Service. “That was the beginning of me finding the potential of what I can do.”

Mustafa began sharing his story publicly, writing op-eds, and arranging meetings with local representatives. Since the training, he has become outspoken on issues impacting his community, including testifying at a Congressional hearing about the importance of the refugee resettlement program. **“You have to be visible to be included in larger conversations and solutions,” he says.** His activism has gotten noticed. At the Mayor’s invitation, he became the first refugee to join the Lancaster City’s Human Relations Commission.

Among his many accomplishments, Mustafa is the founder of [Bridge](#), an organization that facilitates greater understanding between refugee families and other residents in Lancaster, some of whom may never have met a refugee before. **“When you include refugees in a larger conversation, in decision making, and the larger fabric of the community, that’s when resettlement becomes a positive thing,” he says.**



## Kayse Jama

Oregon State Senator

Senator Kayse Jama firmly believes that directly impacted people must take a leadership role in solving the issues affecting their lives. A refugee from Somalia who arrived in the US in 1999, he is living proof of what is possible when impacted people are given the opportunity—and the training and support—necessary to set them up for success. **“I was lucky enough to work with people who supported my leadership and allowed me to actualize my potential,” he reflects.**

Senator Jama honed his skills earlier in his career when he worked with African refugee youth as a case manager at Lutheran Community Service Northwest. Later, as a New Voices Fellow at Western States Center, he founded a project, now known as Unite Oregon, to build a unified intercultural movement for justice.

At Unite Oregon, Senator Jama also launched the Pan Immigrant Leadership and Organizing Project (PILOT) to address an urgent need. **“...[R]efugees didn’t have the opportunity to interact with each other, especially those civically minded,” he says. “They felt alone, culturally isolated, and didn’t have the support they needed. No one was providing organizing trainings.”** PILOT centers the knowledge and lived experiences of refugees in its leadership program, which annually trains 25-30 refugees representing more than 15 countries and sometimes a dozen different languages. Senator Jama credits creating spaces for people to work together long term as part of the program’s success; those trained 15 years ago are still collaborating together.

# Overview of Refugee Leadership and Civic Engagement Programs

While the programs that train and engage refugees in leadership and civic participation vary widely in their scale and approaches, they share several core components:

- Storytelling
- US system of government
- Civic engagement and advocacy
- Racial justice

## Storytelling

In all the programs, refugee leaders learn why storytelling is important and how to tell their story. This involves refugees understanding the power of being able to author their own stories.

Many storytelling trainings utilize Marshall Ganz's leadership development framework: the Story of Self, the Story of Us, and the Story of Now. The Story of Self is a personal story that shows "why you were called to what you have been called to." The Story of Us focuses on shared values, shared experience, and joining together in community. And the Story of Now focuses on action, which should be strategic, feasible, and focused. The trainings explain what a public narrative is and how to tell a story in a way that moves people to take action.

Trainings teach leaders how to tell their stories effectively to different audiences and on different platforms, including with elected officials, policy-makers, or community leaders, and in public forums such as a religious congregation. The trainings also teach leaders how to write their story for the media, for instance in the form of an op-ed or for digital storytelling platforms, and how to talk to the media.



**“Our truth. Our lived experiences. Our narratives. As refugees, it’s crucial that we raise our voices to amplify these aspects and dispel false and harmful rhetoric about refugees. These are key components to humanize who we are. Only then can we change the hearts and minds of others toward impactful change.**

*- Nga Vương-Sandoval  
Vietnamese refugee*



### Deborah Jane Baliraine

Caterer and Public Speaker

Deborah Jane Baliraine fled Uganda after her husband, along with other men in her community, violently attacked her with acid—in her own home and in front of her children. Once she had received urgent medical treatment and began building a new life in Columbus, Ohio, Church World Service worked with Deborah to tell her story.

Deborah was uncertain at first, but Church World Service supported and guided her. She said the trainings helped her learn how to tell her story in ways that people would understand. She began sharing her story with churches and other community members, eventually joining a speaker's bureau. She says that people frequently are stunned by the traumas that refugees experience in their journey. **“This is a free country, where people will listen as long as you speak,” she says. “If you do not speak, nobody will know.”**

In Uganda, Deborah had a successful catering business, and the support she received gave her the encouragement and tools to continue her work. “The trainings teach you that you can still be successful, just like you were in your own country. That you can stand by yourself and advocate for yourself.” Deborah was recently profiled in the Netflix series, [Immigration Nation](#).



### Nga Vương-Sandoval

Investigator, Colorado Attorney General's Office,  
Refugee Congress Delegate for Colorado

In 2019, Church World Service invited refugee leader, Nga Vương-Sandoval, to share her story with Rep. Ken Buck, the Ranking Member on the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration and Citizenship, in DC. Beforehand, Church World Service provided Nga with a short advocacy and storytelling training. Nga described her family's experience when they fled Việt Nam when she was three years old; the welcome they received upon arriving in the US; and the contributions that refugees make. Nga works as an Investigator for the Colorado Attorney General's Office, and previously worked in counterterrorism and counterintelligence, and is the Colorado delegate to Refugee Congress.

Nga's story had a major impact. After the meeting, Rep. Buck said, “I was glad to be able to meet with Ms. Nga Vương-Sandoval and learn about her story. It is important that we as a nation offer safety to those suffering persecution around the world. It is also important that we provide them the services and opportunities to flourish as Americans.” The meeting convinced him to write a letter with 17 other Republicans to the Trump administration about accepting more refugees.

**“Nga, like many refugees, is a natural leader and storyteller,” says Rev. Noel Andersen, of Church World Service. “One of the key components to our work is tapping these amazing leaders and making sure we’re working to build power together with a common strategy to advance refugee’s rights. We do this through providing the opportunities to build the skills, the tools, education and the opportunities for advocacy and community organizing, and then create space to apply that learning.”**

Nga's story, activism, and early 2021 meeting with First Lady Jill Biden, were recently featured on [CBS Denver](#).

## US Systems of Government

Trainings educate refugee leaders about the US systems of government; how the different branches of government work and impact people's lives; the different roles that local, state, and federal governments play; and how constituents can influence and hold their elected officials accountable. This training component is critical to helping participants understand how they can influence policymaking from national to local issues.

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Designed by refugees for refugees!  
PART OF THE RCUSA ADVOCACY DAYS

March 21st

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Opportunity For All!  
NPNA NATIONAL PARTNERSHIP  
REFUGEE CONGRESS  
REFUGEE COUNCIL USA  
WE ALL ARE AMERICA

## Opportunity for All Campaign

The refugee-led [Opportunity for All Campaign](#) was launched in 2021 by the national network We Are All America. Its goals are to 1) shift social, political, and economic conditions, so that refugees can achieve their full potential and 2) to ensure that the US remains a nation of opportunity for those seeking freedom, safety, and refuge.

The Opportunity for All Campaign partnered with Church World Service, Refugee Congress, and Refugee Council USA to provide a leadership training series for [2021 Advocacy Days](#), taught by refugees for refugees, across a range of topics including government 101, storytelling, and best practices for meeting with elected officials. These training sessions provided timely opportunities to help new refugee advocates voice their support for refugee resettlement and the importance of keeping the promise to restore welcome.

As a result, refugee leaders are successfully holding the Biden Administration accountable to its promise to restore and rebuild the refugee resettlement program and increase the annual number of refugees accepted for resettlement. They are deploying a variety of organizing tactics, including a [social media campaign](#) that lifts up refugee voices and stories, and a letter-writing campaign involving 260 former refugees that garnered coverage in [CNN](#), the [AP](#), and elsewhere.

## Civic Engagement and Advocacy

Learning about civic engagement—such as voting, volunteering, advocating, and educating—is a core training component to position refugee leaders to advocate for themselves and their communities. The focus of civic engagement trainings vary by organization according to their interests, but they are all geared towards helping refugee leaders become more engaged in their communities.

Most trainings prepare refugees to address: 1) immigration-related advocacy, including advocacy on immigration issues that directly affect their families and communities; 2) advocacy around other local issues that affect their daily lives; 3) participation in campaigns to help local communities understand who refugees are—creating more welcoming communities; and 4) generally increasing refugees' civic engagement, for example through census participation and voting.

The trainings include discussions of real-life issues refugees face in their communities. Refugees learn how to identify issues and develop strategies for taking action to address them, and they gain hands-on experience engaging with local leaders. For example, the training may look at the intersecting issues of language access and transportation and engage trainees in a discussion about how to advocate for the transportation authority to provide information in multiple languages or extend bus routes into communities where refugees live. Others have focused on addressing adult or K-12 education issues, or municipal services or programs that can help immigrants settle in their new communities. Trainings also teach leaders how to recruit and develop other leaders and prepare them for action.

Leading up to the 2020 Presidential election, many organizations engaged refugees in voter education; for example, refugee leaders made videos in multiple languages to engage members of their communities to vote.



“Starting with the belief that impacted populations have the greatest insights and potential to change the root causes of inequity, we have invested in organizations like Unite Oregon, which have created a pipeline of people who have been supported with direct services, such as cash and rent assistance, and then go on to participate in leadership development and advocacy programs. These investments directly tie to our mission of creating a flourishing and equitable community for all.

- Dahnesha Medora, Building Community Portfolio Director  
Meyer Memorial Trust

“TIRRC has done an incredible job of fostering leadership in the immigrant and refugee community. That’s crucial because it provides the skills and abilities for immigrants and refugees to lead their own communities. TIRRC’s work has led to a better Nashville.”

- Corinne Bergeron  
Vice President for Programs  
Frist Foundation, Nashville, TN

## Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition

State-based organizations, like the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition (TIRRC), are adept at engaging refugee leaders in advocating and sharing their stories with the media and elected officials to defend the refugee resettlement program. In 2019, when then President Trump issued an executive order requiring individual localities to give consent to resettle refugees, TIRRC wanted to make sure that Governor Bill Lee, as well as other elected officials across the state, heard directly from refugees and understood how “refugees are Tennesseans.” TIRRC held refugee summits in Memphis and Knoxville and other cities across the state, leading trainings for refugees on how to hold a meeting with elected officials and tell their stories effectively. Empowered with new tools and skills, refugee leaders held dozens of meetings with elected officials across the state.

TIRRC also organized a letter-writing campaign from refugees. “Their stories were incredibly powerful and transformative,” says Lisa Sherman-Nikolaus, Executive Director of TIRRC, “not just for the Governor and his staff, but for the refugees themselves.” TIRRC arranged for close to 20 refugees to meet with a key member of the Governor’s staff. They spent over an hour talking with him about the refugee resettlement program and “the opportunity that the Governor had to really help set the tone and the rhetoric for the rest of the state,” says Lisa.

Ultimately, the Governor provided his consent to resettle refugees, saying, “The United States and Tennessee have always been, since the very founding of our nation, a shining beacon of freedom and opportunity for the persecuted and oppressed, particularly those suffering religious persecution.” Governor Bill Lee was one among many governors across 40 states—including conservative states such as Arizona, West Virginia, and Iowa—who offered their consent to resettle refugees (the executive order was subsequently challenged in court and has been withdrawn by the current administration).



## Racial Justice

Following the murder of George Floyd in the summer of 2020 and the global uprising around racial justice, many refugee-serving organizations deepened their commitment to racial justice and addressing anti-Black racism in their work.

Some organizations are Black-led and already sit squarely at the intersection of racial justice and immigrant and refugee communities. For example, the Partnership for the Advancement of New Americans in Southern California works at the intersection of Muslim, Arab, and South Asia and Black immigrant communities impacted by racial/ethnic profiling, religious bias, increased government surveillance, and poverty.

For others, like TIRRC, the summer of 2020 crystallized the need to have a political space for Black immigrants and refugees to talk about the intersecting experiences of being Black and being an immigrant or refugee. TIRRC is creating a Black immigrant and refugee caucus dedicated to this work.

A large portion of Church World Service's organizers and engaged leaders are Black refugees and immigrants from various backgrounds. Across different nationalities, languages, and religious traditions they have found a way to join together with other refugees from across the globe to organize for immigrant and refugee justice. Church World Service is working to increase education, awareness, and opportunities for action around racial issues that affect both immigrants and refugees, and other BIPOC communities.

More and more, these organizations are thinking about their work with refugees as part of a broader movement for justice for immigrants and for all BIPOC communities. They are recognizing that if they want to build collective power, they can't just organize by sector or status.



## Black Youth Voices

JOINT STRUGGLE FOR LIBERATION

A SAFE SPACE FOR SAN DIEGO YOUTH TO  
DISCUSS CURRENT ISSUES, AND STEPS FOR THE  
BETTERMENT OF OUR FUTURE

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MOHTASEB, RODKU SMITH,  
AND FAIZA FROM UWEAST AS THE MODERATOR

JULY 1ST 6PM VIA ZOOM  
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# Keys to Success

## Building on Existing Leadership

Training programs can fast-track leadership development and civic participation when they focus on refugees who have some leadership experience, demonstrate strong leadership potential, and are engaged in their communities. Many refugee leaders are already helping their communities with language access or cultural festivals, for instance, but they don't yet have experience in organizing. Many also bring extensive leadership experience from their countries of origin, but they don't yet have the knowledge about how the US civic system works and how to engage with it to achieve their goals.

## Applied Leadership and Follow-Up Activities

The most successful training programs prepare refugees to participate in long-term campaign and advocacy work, helping them become involved in national campaigns, as well as leading campaigns in their local communities. These programs give refugees a ladder of engagement, as well as opportunities to apply and build their leadership skills, through activities such as registering to vote, taking advocacy actions on issues impacting their lives, meeting with local elected officials, becoming involved in a statewide Refugee Day, or learning to write an op-ed.

## Relationship Building

Building and nurturing relationships among refugees and with other communities are another key to success. Frequently, the trainings bring together refugee leaders from different ethnic communities who live in the same city but who often work within their own ethnic communities. Leaders recognize that they may have different cultures and languages, but in the end, the issues they're facing are similar. And if they work together and have some shared goals, they can accomplish more. Refugee leaders often form long-term bonds with one another through these trainings. Dauda Sesay, who trained with Church World Service and went on to co-found the Louisiana Organization for Refugees and Immigrants, describes the relationships formed with other leaders during a training as being "like family." These programs also help bring refugees together with other immigrant communities, as well as other allies in the faith communities and other communities of color.





### **Basma Alawee**

Campaign Manager, We Are All America  
Founder of Weavetales

Since the moment Basma Alawee arrived in the US as a refugee from Iraq in 2010, she has been helping to educate others about refugees, to improve the resettlement system, to lift up her own voice, and to help others lift up theirs.

In Iraq, Basma worked as an engineer, and her husband worked as an interpreter helping American troops. She wanted to continue her career as an engineer in the US but encountered discriminatory hiring practices. She was surprised to learn that there was not a strong system to support refugees like herself in adapting their expertise and skill sets to careers in the US. **“I started speaking up, telling people that, well this is not right, these kinds of things need to be changed.”** And she began speaking out against the discrimination she was experiencing, based on “how I look, or how I speak.” Basma also learned that there is a great need for public education about who refugees are.

Basma attended several trainings to tell her story effectively and to build her advocacy and organizing skills. She began doing volunteer advocacy work while she worked as a teacher. She then became the Florida delegate to the Refugee Congress. In 2018, she began working with the Florida Immigrant Coalition as their lead refugee organizer; and in June 2021, she has taken the helm as the national Campaign Manager for We are All America.

Basma has also co-founded her own organization, Weavetales, which focuses on storytelling with refugees. Basma says, **“Without being an organizer, without understanding the importance of storytelling, I would never think I could found my own organization.”**

**“Now, I am not an advocate who goes to DC to share my story and to be the voice for the voiceless. Now, I’m an organizer who is going with others to advocate so there is no more voiceless; we all have a voice together and advocate together.”**

*- Basma Alawee*

# Steps to Consider

To support refugee leadership development and civic engagement

Philanthropy can support refugee leaders across the country to project their own voices and stand in their own power. While this field has grown significantly over the last few years, there is still much room for growth. This report shares models of refugee leadership development and civic participation programs, identifies keys to success, and uplifts the stories of diverse training components with refugee leaders and their impact.

## Recommendations:

- Take an intersectional approach to supporting refugees' leadership. Recognize that layered identities—of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, and economic, educational, and professional differences—can make people more vulnerable within the immigration system and society at large.
- Support cross-movement, solidarity work. For example, support work that strengthens connections between and among immigrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers; connections between Black people who were born in America and Black refugees; and between refugees and other community members who face similar challenges.
- Build connections between people who came to the US as refugees years ago, and have well-established lives here, with recent refugees. Support mentorship opportunities among newer leaders and those who are well established.
- Partner with other funders to leverage each other's strengths, to make your investments stronger.

These are a few ideas to get you started. If you are interested in learning more, we recommend you speak with refugee leaders to hear their input about what types of projects would be helpful to support.

## Funder Entry Points:

- **If you are a funder who works locally supporting services for refugees:** Consider how investing in refugees' leadership and civic engagement can be a natural extension of your grantmaking.
- **If you are a funder—national or local—committed to leadership development, civic participation, organizing, and advocacy:** Consider integrating refugees in your portfolios.
- **For all funders:** Consider how refugees can advance your broader portfolios, including health, education, economic justice, immigration, racial justice, or gender equity priorities.

## For more information:

For more information about the strategies shared in this document or to get in touch with individual organizations, please contact:

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## Images

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*Former refugees GOTV campaign in Columbus, OH. Noel Anderson, Church World Service.*

Page 4:

*@PANASanDiego hosts a rally to stand in solidarity with Muslim and Refugee communities to declare #NoMuslimBanEver. Partnership for the Advancement of New Americans - PANA.*

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*Mustafa Nurr. Mark Pontz Photography, [www.markpontz.photos](http://www.markpontz.photos)  
Kayse Jama.*

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*Sudanese woman sharing her story at a rally. Church World Service.*

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*Deborah Jane Baliraine.  
Nga Vuong-Sandaval. Photographer: Aleksei Kloesnikov.*

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*Refugee Matters series, refugee leadership trainings. Opportunity for All Campaign.*

Page 11:

*Nashville vigil in support of Syrian refugees after the 2015 attacks in Paris, France. TIRRC.*

Page 12:

*TIRRC refugee member, Minh and his daughters, stand in front of TIRRC's new home in Antioch, TN. Minh came to the US as a refugee from Vietnam in the 1980s. TIRRC.*

Page 13:

*@PANASanDiego launched the PANA Youth Congress to develop an engaged and effective youth base so that young people may dictate the direction of PANA's work and exercise their power. Partnership for the Advancement of New Americans - PANA*

Page 14:

*Refugee march to the polls. Church World Service.*

Page 15:

*Basma Alawee.*