

Uniting for Ukraine- Alaska's Got Your Back

Alaska Housing Finance Corporation

Special Achievement

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Alaska is physically huge, but its heart is bigger.

When war fell on Ukraine last year, a network of Alaskans rallied to help families escape the violence and ultimately make their way here. Our new neighbors were greeted at the airport, stabilized by partners and moved into paid-for rental housing. A year later, we have collectively helped a lot of people who really needed it by doing something none of us could have done alone.

“To Lead is to Follow”

If a building is on fire, first responders don’t wait for replacement housing before rescuing people. But, “life after” for the rescued depends greatly on who (if anyone) follows the first responders.

Alaska Housing did not save the families from war or bring them to Alaska, the hearts of our neighbors did. But when those families got here, we followed through on their work and generosity to ensure they could find and maintain housing in their new State.

Respond to an Important State Need

Many Alaskans have connections to the Ukraine. So when [the biggest displacement since World War II](#) unfolded last year, Alaska’s employers, faith-based organizations and foundations joined to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars to fly Ukrainian families from Poland to Alaska¹. These families entered Alaska through the federal [Uniting for Ukraine](#) program that qualifies recipients for food stamps, Medicaid and a host of other benefits.

But a few things were missing: 1) an organization to provide peer support, counseling, translation services, etc. and a legion of other practical items needed to help people displaced by war to start life in a new country, and 2) housing assistance.

Initially, the lead partner ([New Chance, Inc.](#)) working with these families was operating out of a living room with volunteer staff. Hundreds of families were scheduled to arrive in Alaska. At the peak, 50 households / week were arriving from Poland. They would be safe and fed, but stability services and housing assistance were missing. And New Chance’s capacity was already stretched.

To use a nautical metaphor²: Our partners had gathered people in a vessel that was safe from war, but they needed a way to ferry them to self-sufficiency. We asked how we could help, then gave them a sail big enough to harvest the energy and goodwill at their backs for the journey.

1 Noteworthy Examples: One large employer anonymously paid for families of their employees to come to Alaska from Poland, in a separate case one of our largest Foundations held a special board meeting to allocate funds to help bring Ukrainian families to Alaska.

2 Fun fact, [Alaska has the largest coastline of any state in the Union](#) (by a lot)

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Innovative

Alaska Housing Finance Corporation’s (AHFC’s) awarded unused Rent Relief funds (\$5.4M) to help these families start a new life in Alaska. Housing status (i.e. homeless at the airport) was used as a fact-based proxy to enter the relief program where they received housing stability service funding, move-in and deposit funding, and 12 months of rental assistance. And we provided administrative funding to the all-volunteer organization that had been spearheading this initiative so they could move out of a living room and build the capacity needed to help everyone.

This flexible program was set up to be workable for partners with limited grant experience. New Chance simply needed to help the families, update data in our system and the software would handle the calculations. The mechanics of lease tracking, tax reporting, etc. and rent payments were all handled by a separate agency partner funded by AHFC.

The flexible funding met the families where they were: some were small, others were quite large (one family has 13 household members). If families needed more space than the rental assistance allowance could secure, layering other income sources with the rental assistance limit was allowed.

During the quarterly re-certifications for continued program assistance, goals were set for enrolled households:

- At the first three month check in: Obtaining some form of employment;
- At the second three month check-in: Families establish a household budget with the housing navigators for life after the program ends.

Households were provided a lot of support from New Chance:

- Job referrals;
- Help translating their prior work experience into context for the new job market;
- In person translation assistance during leasing, job interviews and job training;
- Networking opportunities to help learn the culture and interact with Alaskans;
- Stabilization services (transport, laundry equipment, necessities, etc.).

Our new neighbors received more than dollars. They received genuine community support to ensure they did more than just survive in Alaska. These families received a path to self-sufficiency and a network of supportive peers to help them thrive in their new home.

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Achieve Intended Results

The program worked because it grew organically from a passionate group of people that wanted to help. AHFC supercharged that passion with resources and capacity. One year in, the program has helped 563 Ukrainians transition to life as Alaskans. Roughly 40% of them are children. By the numbers:

- 80% of households served through this program have already found employment
- 95% of all households enrolled stayed with the program (i.e. attrition is roughly 5%)

By way of relative impact, Alaska has 350 populated communities. If all of 563 people served through this partnership gathered to form a new community, the new town’s population would be larger than 2/3rds of [the existing communities in our state](#). [Nationally, here’s how we compare](#):

Area	Population	Share of National Population	If the 271,000 refugees were settled by prorated Population	Ukrainian Refugees with Full Spectrum of Support Provided in Alaska?
United States	333,287,557	100.00%	271,000	?
California	39,029,342	11.71%	31,735	?
New York	19,677,151	5.90%	16,000	?
Florida	22,244,823	6.67%	18,088	?
Oregon	4,240,137	1.27%	3,448	?
Iowa	3,200,517	0.96%	2,602	?
Alaska	733,583	0.22%	596	563
Everywhere else	244,162,004	73.26%	198,531	?

But these are people, not numbers. Before coming here, one of the families now in Alaska shared a single sausage link for their evening meal. They (+others) now have a path to a stable life Alaska.

Provides Benefits that Outweigh Costs

We could have done nothing. The people were already coming to Alaska, but how would their story have ended without housing support? Perhaps it would have come eventually, but to how many and what would have happened to these families in-between. Could New Chance have provided the full range of support from a living room as an all-volunteer agency?

“...If you want to go far, go together.” African Proverb

The families needed a lot: transportation out of Poland, food, healthcare, legal status, housing, peer support, employment services... This list goes on. More than any one agency can handle. Our partners in the State carried a big part of that load. When it got to housing, we had their back. And 563 new Alaskans are starting life here on strong footing as a result.

The Need: Before and After War



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky (left) playing in a fountain with children in Mariupol (6/15/19).



The largest displacement in Europe since World War II (2022).

Getting People to Safety



The initial goal of the partnerships was just to help people escape the war.

Welcoming Our New Neighbors



The crowd size varies, but nobody arrives in Alaska without a welcome group that also ensures they're housed and stabilized.

Where Families have Settled in Alaska



For context, it takes over 2 days to drive from Vancouver, BC (lower right) to the locations in the middle of the map with flags.

Starting a New Life in Alaska



Left, Mariupol after the war. Right, Ketchikan where a family from Mariupol now lives with support from relief program.

The Path to Self-Sufficiency



80% of our
Ukrainian
neighbors
are already
EMPLOYED

1st Holiday Season in Alaska



In December of 2022, Ukrainians served through our program (aka our new neighbors) visited Alaska Housing and other partners to share the holiday spirit.

Video from the day of caroling is available here: [caroling](#)

Fun Fact: the popular holiday song Carol of the Bells is based on the Ukrainian song "Shchedryk"

