

# Reimagining Resettlement

## **Alaska Housing Finance Corporation**

Special Needs Housing: Combating Homelessness

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*“There are still good people...they are in Alaska.”  
Divine Nganga, 2024 Alaska Resettlement Conference*

In April of 2024, Alaska Housing Finance Corporation (AHFC) participated in the first-ever Alaska Refugee Resettlement Conference to speak on the program we are about to share with you, but more importantly as listeners. The opening plenary remarks emphasized refugee voices on their journey to belonging. Their first impression of Alaska was unexpected: everyone *smiled*. The simple act of strangers smiling at them is what helped them start to feel a sense of belonging, and ultimately what allowed them to claim Alaska as their home.

### **An Important State Housing Need**

The [top four most diverse](#) neighborhoods in America are all in Anchorage, Alaska’s only urban area. Approximately 8% of Alaska’s total population is foreign-born. Alaska is home to **904** active refugees, from 22 countries, who speak 17 languages. Refugees flee their home country as a result of war, conflict, and/or persecution and often are forced to leave loved ones and all of their possessions behind. With this in mind, AHFC took the opportunity to show up for our neighbors and become part of their recovery journey.

Resettlement into a new country brings numerous obstacles varying from complex trauma, difficulty obtaining employment, learning a new language and culture, and maintaining housing. Among other barriers for successful integration and overall wellbeing, refugees are required to live in the United States for five years before applying for citizenship. AHFC programs are experienced in serving our diverse Alaskan communities as demonstrated by numerous non-profit and Tribal partnerships. In 2022, AHFC expanded using Emergency Rental Assistance funding to directly address the traumatic resettlement process of newly arriving refugees. Through partnerships, AHFC has provided life-changing services and stable housing to **763** refugees, almost half of which are children displaced by war.

### **Innovation: Reimagining Resettlement**

The post-pandemic housing and rental market impacted many facets of daily life for Alaskans, including those resettling in the state. With flexible Treasury funding, AHFC adapted our successful stabilization program to include refugees and it is now a program that involves two statewide partners who have prevented homelessness for almost 1,000 new neighbors.

*AHFC’s Refugee Program is more than signing a lease: it is a new lease on life.*

This program views refugees holistically; as individuals with complex barriers who require more than just a new address. How it works: refugee navigators always ensure there is a welcoming committee to greet newcomers at the airport and immediately place them in safe housing in either host or sponsor homes. Refugees then find independent housing when they are ready. From there, navigators work with the households to develop a plan to fit their future goals. Clients are able to breathe and make plans for their future as AHFC covers their housing for up to 15 months.

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The success of this program relies heavily on the flexible supportive services allowed with this funding. In addition to covering housing, refugees have access to supports that are tailored to individual goals and include: necessities such as furniture and food, work clothes, bus passes, legal assistance, help enrolling children into school, obtaining health insurance, documentation support, obtaining driver's licenses, applying to benefits, employment assistance, educational supports such as English language classes, and more.

One Ukrainian family would share a single sausage link for dinner and confided that they could never dream of the opportunities they now have. AHFC's Refugee Stabilization Program and the community it built inspired several families to change their minds about returning to their home country and instead are continuing to set roots in Alaska.

### **Success in Partnerships**

AHFC partnered with New Chance, Inc., and Catholic Social Services to address these unique barriers and provide holistic care for refugees. These organizations were selected as partners due to their capacity to grow, experience in navigating resettlement processes, skills in addressing language barriers, and their abilities to connect new refugees to Alaskan communities. When refugees are resettled in Alaska, they are not alone. From the warm greetings at the airport, access to a phone app to connect with other refugees, and to the frequent invites to join group activities such as hiking and soccer teams, AHFC's partners help them find their community.

New Chance started as a group of volunteers fundraising for a charter plane to bring Ukrainians to Alaska from Poland when the war in Ukraine first emerged. This plan did not go through, which ended up an enormous blessing as the funds were repurposed and instead helped over twice as many Ukrainians flee to Alaska through the [Uniting for Ukraine](#) initiative. When the war continued, New Chance established themselves as a non-profit and housed well over 200 Ukrainian families in partnership with AHFC.

AHFC's newest partner, Refugee Assistance & Immigration Services (RAIS), is operated through Catholic Social Services who serves as Alaska's Office for Refugees. Through a focus on economic self-sufficiency, community integration and respect for unique cultures, histories, and traditions, RAIS creates an environment of compassion and encouragement. Prior to 2022, RAIS typically served around 150 individuals. In 2022, the war in Ukraine and other international factors more than doubled that number. In 2023, RAIS served 582 new arrivals. With their increasing numbers RAIS partnered with AHFC. They are expected to enroll a minimum of 25 new refugee families from countries all over the world by June of 2024.

### **Measurable Benefits**

AHFC awarded our refugee service providers approximately \$8 million in ERA funding and is dedicated to continuing to meet the needs of new arrivals. Household sizes vary, and often include up to 10 individual family members. AHFC's program has housed **763** individual refugees, with **40%** under the age of 18. AHFC's partners are expected to serve an additional 45 families by June of this year (a projected total of **898** refugees safely housed through this program).

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In partnership with Alaska Housing's own Public Housing department, AHFC was able to provide 400 statewide set-aside housing vouchers for Stabilization clients. Just under 100 refugees were placed on the waitlist for long-term housing assistance through the New Start Voucher program. Typically, denials are not celebrated, but in this case AHFC is happy to report that at least a quarter of the refugees who were placed on the waitlist are no longer in need of the assistance. Despite experiencing significant trauma and loss, refugees supported by AHFC's program partners are thriving and are now considered "over-income" for further assistance.

Since 2022, as a result of the opportunities from this program there have been:

- 710 job placements or job upgrades
- 392 Christmas wish lists fulfilled
- 256 households resettled in independent housing
- 22 babies born
- 20 new businesses opened
- 12 career trainings
- 12 students enrolled in university
- 6 marriages
- 2 week-long summer camps for children
- 1 soccer team

### **Benefits that Outweigh Costs**

AHFC's Refugee Housing Program has stabilized 763 refugees with \$2.1 million dollars, or just \$2,800 per person on average. Once they are stabilized, a year of rental assistance is covered with an additional \$13,200. The human cost of surviving the horrors of war far surpasses any dollar amount. It is difficult to put a price on the act of restoring humanity for a group of people who have been wrongfully denied it, but AHFC is dedicated to embracing this once-in-a-lifetime funding and to use it efficiently to help as many new refugees arriving in the state as possible.

AHFC's program innovatively approached resettlement and achieved overwhelmingly positive results in just 15 months. The program participants are not just alive, they are thriving. Refugees in our program opened businesses, started families, pursued college, and reclaimed their sense of belonging in new communities. They found gainful employment with top Alaska employers including school districts, oil companies, construction, test labs, hospitals, and bakeries.

Refugees were violently torn from their homes and forced to start over in a completely foreign place where they face many barriers including housing instability. What AHFC was able to do through the refugee program was to give back what has been taken from them, which involves much more than just a roof over their heads.

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## Visual Aids:

### Visual Aid 1: How Our Refugee Program Works



AHFC's refugee program is more than signing a lease: it is a new lease on life.



Step 1: Client identification and travel to Alaska.

Step 2: Immediate placement in stable housing upon arrival for up to 3 months. Clients have access to \$8,000 in support services and \$3,000 in move-in funds.

Step 3: Navigators set up support service plan based on client need and their future goals.



Step 4. Clients are moved into long-term housing worry-free for 12 months while receiving education, employment assistance, and any additional needed services.

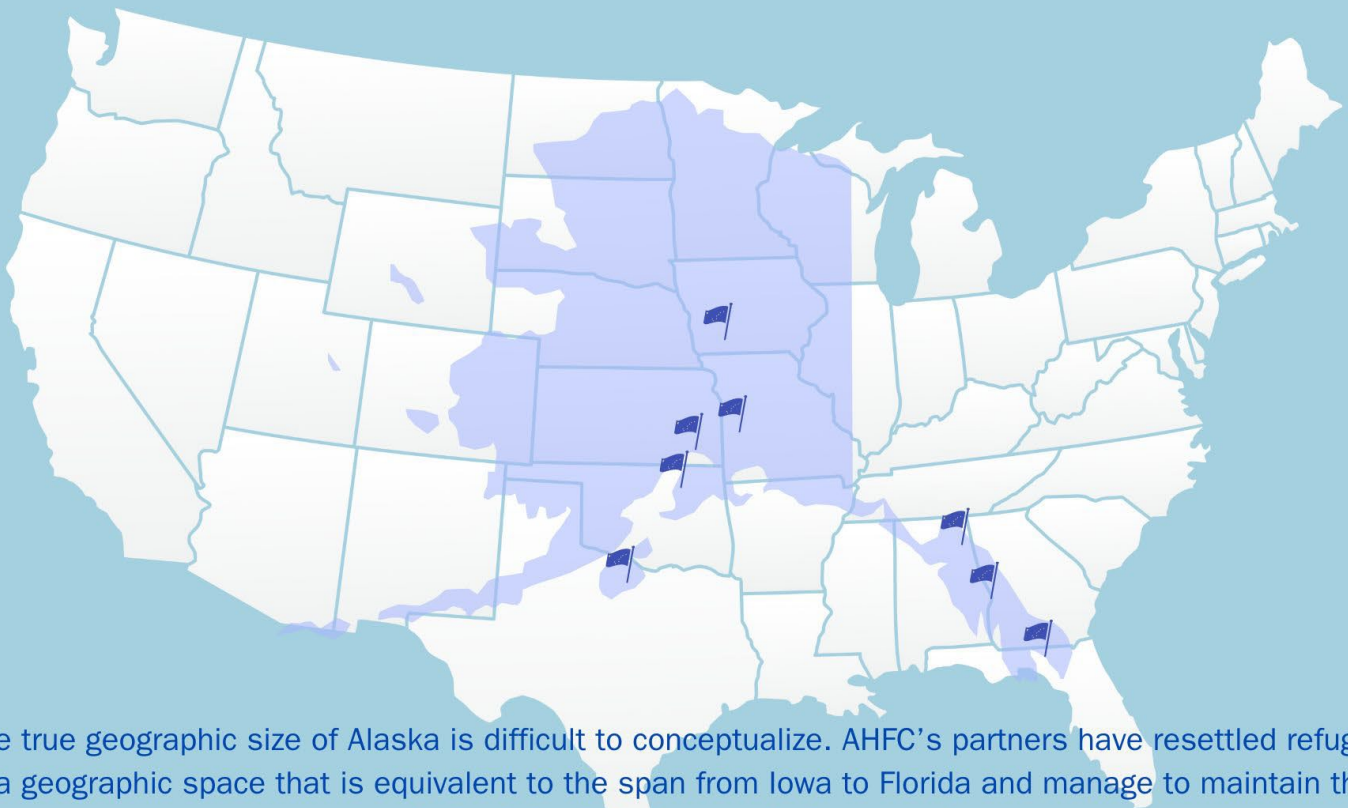


ALASKA  
HOUSING  
REFUGEE  
STABILIZATION  
PROGRAM

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## Visual Aid 2: Geographic Span of Resettlement with Stabilization

### Resettlement with Stabilization



The true geographic size of Alaska is difficult to conceptualize. AHFC's partners have resettled refugees in a geographic space that is equivalent to the span from Iowa to Florida and manage to maintain these relationships in each resettled community.

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### Visual Aid 3: Alaska Resettlement Conference



AHFC presenting at the 2024 Alaska Resettlement Conference hosted by our partner Catholic Social Services and pictured with New Chance Inc.

NEW CHANCE INC



UKRAINE RELIEF  
PROGRAM



“[AHFC’s Refugee Program] has not only provided shelter but has also fostered resilience and determination among those navigating the challenges of starting anew. From the depths of hardship, AHFC’s support has enabled these individuals to emerge triumphant, embodying the spirit of perseverance and hope.”

Zori Opanasevych, Director of New Chance Inc.

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### Visual Aid 4: First Holiday Season in Alaska



December 2022:  
Ukrainians served  
through the Refugee  
Stabilization  
program visited  
Alaska Housing to  
share their holiday  
spirit through song.

