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# **CITY OF BUFFALO**

## **New Americans Study**

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A strategic action plan  
to advance immigrant and  
refugee integration and success

February 2016

Building a city  
of opportunity



Byron W. Brown  
Mayor

# **NEW AMERICANS STUDY**

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## MAYOR'S MESSAGE

Buffalo has always benefited from the contributions of recent arrivals. Between 2006 and 2013, the foreign-born population in Buffalo increased by 95 percent, and the most recent American Community Survey reports that the city is home to over 22,000 foreign-born residents. The *New Americans Study* was undertaken to ensure that the city remains an attractive destination for immigrants and refugees.

The study reflects a fundamental commitment to our newest residents and sends a strong message: we value and understand the contributions, and will work with our immigrant and refugee communities to address the unique challenges they face.

This effort has been guided by a talented and committed Steering Committee consisting of representatives from Ethnic Community-Based Organizations, resettlement agencies, service providers, and neighborhood groups.

A consultant team prepared the report, based on information shared via focus groups with key immigrant communities, interviews with over 60 stakeholders, and reviews of best practices from dozens of places.



Mayor Brown is joined by leaders of the Karen Society of Buffalo, Burmese Community Services, and Burmese Community Support Center at the Karen Wrist Tying Ceremony in August 2015.

As Buffalo continues to experience a significant building boom, with over \$5.5 billion in new economic development spurring increased investment and employment growth, it's imperative that we nurture new sources of job creation by tapping into the potential that immigrants bring to our city.

The strategies outlined in this study are designed to attract and retain the wealth of talent that is arriving from other countries, facilitate the creation and expansion of economic opportunities, and ensure that the city continues to support its newest residents.

So let's continue to work together and move forward. With the benefit of this study, I am confident we have a roadmap that recognizes Buffalo's newest arrivals as essential and valued partners in its future.

## **WE BUILT THIS CITY**

Buffalo has experienced waves of immigration throughout its history, since the first settlers began arriving from New England. Completion of the Erie Canal and railroads led to trade and commerce that initially attracted German and Irish immigrants; and as the city grew into an industrial center, Poles, Italians, and others came seeking employment. Between World Wars I and II, African-Americans started migrating here from the South, closely followed by Puerto Ricans.

Today the city continues to serve as a destination. Buffalo's foreign-born population has been rising steadily, mainly due to the 10,000 refugees who have been resettled here since 2001. New York State is the fourth largest recipient of refugees in the nation, and almost a third of these new arrivals settle in Erie County. According to the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement, Buffalo is a "preferred community" that provides excellent opportunities for newcomers to achieve early employment and sustained economic independence. The region has also proven to be a magnet for international college students, ranking among the top 15 metro areas for students arriving with F-1 visas.

Changes are being felt in many ways. Buffalo Public Schools are now educating 4,300 English language learners, twice as many as they did just seven years ago. Refugees and immigrants are reshaping city neighborhoods, renovating houses, opening stores and restaurants, and adding new vitality. They offer the potential for positive growth and change, but face many challenges upon arrival – learning English, securing safe and affordable housing, and obtaining employment.

The city has a key role to play in assisting refugees and other immigrants with these challenges, and this study represents one of many initiatives being undertaken to address those needs.

## **THE RESETTLEMENT EXPERIENCE**

New arrivals come from a variety of circumstances: immigrants come by choice, while refugees have been forced to leave their homelands, and secondary migrants arrive in Buffalo after having initially settled somewhere else. Because the majority of newcomers are currently refugees, this study largely focuses on their unique needs; yet all of these groups will benefit from the strategies that are being proposed.

The U.S. Department of State has cooperative agreements with nine agencies to resettle refugees. These agreements outline the services that resettlement agencies must provide to each refugee. All together, these agencies place refugees in about 190 communities across the nation. Each uses local affiliates to monitor the resources that are provided, such as interpreters who speak various languages, the size and features of housing, the availability of schools with special services, medical care, English language classes, and employment services.

The cooperative agreement requires the resettlement agency to meet refugees upon arrival in the United States. New arrivals are taken to their apartment, which has been supplied with appliances, basic furnishings, appropriate clothing, and food typical of the refugee's culture. After settling in, refugees are assisted with applying for a Social Security card, enrolling children in school, learning where and how to shop, arranging medical appointments, and obtaining necessary services.

The Department of State's Reception and Placement program provides resettlement agencies with a stipend to assist with meeting expenses during a refugee's first three months. Most of these funds go towards rent, furnishings, food, and clothing; in addition to assisting with staff salaries, office space, and other related ex-

penses that are not donated or provided by volunteers. After the initial three months, the Office of Refugee Resettlement in the Department of Health and Human Services works with the states and other nongovernmental organizations to provide longer-term cash and medical assistance, as well as language, employment, and social services.

Refugees receive employment authorization upon arrival and are encouraged to obtain jobs as soon as possible. Based on years of experience, the refugee resettlement program has found that newcomers learn English and begin to function comfortably much faster if they start work soon after arrival. Most refugees begin in entry-level jobs, even if they have high-level skills or education; although with time most are able to move ahead professionally and find both success and satisfaction.

## Local Resettlement Agencies

During the past decade, the growing stream of refugees has been assisted by four local affiliate agencies: Catholic Charities of Buffalo, International Institute of Buffalo, Jewish Family Service of Buffalo and Erie County, and Journey's End Refugee Services. These agencies provide all of the basic services required by the Department of State, and have developed a number of other key programs in response to unmet needs. In these challenging circumstances, refugees have consistently reported their satisfaction with the support they receive from these agencies.

**Catholic Charities** has provided services to immigrant and refugee populations since 1923, with the scope of the program adapting to changes in immigration policy and the needs of new arrivals. In addition to basic services, Catholic Charities also houses the Hospitality and Tourism Training Institute, a computer and technology lab, babysitting room, and library for use by refugees.

**International Institute** has been active since 1918. They have been instrumental in helping refugees to become qualified interpreters and translators, currently assisting governmental agencies and health, human service, and legal providers in over 90 languages. They also sponsor a Domestic Violence Victim Services program, and host the International Visitor Leadership Program to connect professionals and foster relationships across borders.

**Jewish Family Service** took the lead in helping to resettle refugees from the former Soviet Union in the 1980s. Today they provide a broad range of assistance to new arrivals from Burma, Iraq, Sudan, and other strife-torn areas of the world. They also manage the WNY Center for Survivors of Torture in partnership with Journey's End and UB Family Medicine.

**Journey's End** serves over 3,000 refugees and immigrants each year, providing them with the tools they need to become successful and contributing community members. Their expanded services include a clothing ministry, academic coaching for youth enrolled in Buffalo Public Schools, alternatives to high-school and ESL programs, an urban farm program, and a micro-enterprise in-home daycare program.

## Other Contributors

A number of local organizations assist resettlement agencies with these efforts, often by providing specialized services in health care, education, housing and employment. And as refugee populations grow over time, these communities often self-organize and begin to offer volunteer services to newly arrived members.

Local governments generally have a limited role in assisting refugees, as most services are funded at the federal, state, and county levels. For example, the federal government determines how many refugees will be admitted and where they will be resettled, and supports the resettlement agencies that provide initial services. New York State has an Office for New Americans to assist immigrants and refugees with developing job skills or starting businesses, and provides substantial resources to local school districts. And the county administers the majority of the social service benefits that many refugees rely upon until they can become self-sufficient. Yet there remains a clear role for the city to play in making sure that new arrivals feel welcome in Buffalo, and encouraging them to become long-term residents.

## **CHARTING A PATH**

To ensure that Buffalo remains a destination of choice, the city engaged Urban Information Associates of Baltimore to prepare an assessment of the issues faced by immigrants and refugees. The study team included members from Daemen College and the United Way of Buffalo & Erie County, who helped to lend a local perspective to the process.

The goal was to identify needs and develop policies to ease the transition for immigrants and refugees, and increase the city's attractiveness to these groups. A data collection process was designed to engage a wide variety of community stakeholders, including representatives from government, immigrant and refugee organizations, non-profit agencies, health and human service providers, businesses, and local residents. The process consisted of the following four steps:

### **Data Analysis**

In order to gain a better understanding of who the city's newest residents are, the study team analyzed census data on the foreign-born population, reports on refugee resettlements, and enrollment figures for higher education institutions. This data is summarized in a working paper.

### **Listening Sessions**

The study team then conducted focus groups, called "listening sessions," around seven clusters of nationalities: Burundians, Congolese, Rwandans, and Sierra Leoneans; Bhutanese; Burmese; Iraqis; Somali-Bantus; Yemeni; and Puerto Ricans and other Latinos. These sessions allowed over 185 participants in 11 sessions to express their concerns regarding their arrival and resettlement experiences, and offer suggestions for improvements. The feedback from the listening sessions is summarized in a working paper.

### **Stakeholder Interviews**

After the listening sessions, the study team conducted a series of confidential interviews with key stakeholders representing organizations serving immigrant and refugee populations. These interviews focused on assessing needs, barriers, strengths, and opportunities. Over 60 interviews were conducted with representatives from 42 organizations, each lasting between 20 minutes and an hour. Interviews continued until the study team felt that few new perspectives or recommendations were being added to the discussion. The input from these interviews is summarized in a working paper.

## Research Review

The study team also examined more than 15 local and national studies on several topics identified during the listening sessions and stakeholder interviews – including health, public safety, language access, and community engagement. Information on over 25 community indicators and nearly 100 national, state, and local best practices was collected and assessed, with several briefly described in this report.

As a result of this outreach and research, the study team was able to provide a comprehensive picture of the needs and challenges faced by refugees and immigrants, and offer appropriate strategies for addressing them. At the conclusion of each step, the study team’s work was reviewed by a steering committee, which offered important feedback and tips to guide the process and strengthen the recommendations.

While this document represents the final refinement of the study, it is important to note that the city has already been moving forward to advance Buffalo’s capacity to welcome new arrivals. A key component of these efforts has been establishing an Office of New Americans in the city’s Law Department.

Mayor Brown has also led several other key initiatives, which include joining Welcoming America; becoming a partner in the Building Welcoming Communities Campaign; signing on to Cities United for Immigration Action; and participating in an Immigration Summit hosted by New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio.

## STRATEGIES

The findings of this study underscore the need for community leadership and strategic direction in addressing the concerns of immigrants and refugees. Mayor Brown has acted on this need by requesting funding and – with the unanimous support of Common Council – opening the Office of New Americans.

The creation of this office demonstrates the priority that Buffalo places on welcoming new arrivals. The city is prepared to engage with Ethnic Community-Based Organizations, non-profit agencies, educational institutions, foundations, faith and community groups, local businesses, and other stakeholders to implement these strategies, which are organized into the following categories:

**Welcoming** focuses on improving the initial experiences of immigrants and refugees related to the resettlement experience, acculturation, and community organization

**Settling In** addresses issues of housing, neighborhoods, and public safety

**Strengthening** describes the importance of social services, healthcare, education, and employment to providing a solid foundation from which to prosper

**Moving Forward** outlines actions that the city can take to further the integration of immigrants and refugees, improve access to existing city services, and develop initiatives where the city is uniquely positioned to make a difference

## Welcoming

### 1. Enhance post-resettlement services

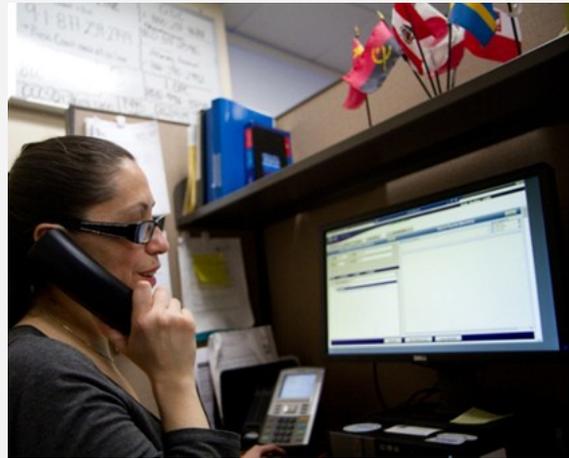
The initial resettlement period is just 90 days. Refugees have expressed a clear need for additional support beyond this period. This support includes assistance reading official correspondence; help navigating the community and securing services and resources; and the provision of interpretation assistance when attending appointments. Building relationships among resettlement agencies, Ethnic Community-Based Organizations, existing community centers, human service agencies, and academic institutions can enhance post-resettlement services.

*The Office of New Americans can identify cross-collaboration opportunities, encourage the development and adoption of state-of-the-art programming in Buffalo, and implement strategic models of integration that have helped empower refugee and immigrant communities on a local and national level.*

#### BEST PRACTICE

##### NYS Office for New Americans

The “New Americans Hotline” offered by the New York State Office for New Americans is now connected to Buffalo’s 311 system. When a caller has questions about immigration assistance, they are now transferred to the “New Americans Hotline,” where questions can be answered and referrals to local service providers made in over 200 languages.



### 2. Improve language access

To promote effective communication among government agencies and Limited English Proficient individuals, both the federal and state governments have issued executive orders concerning language access planning and implementation. Executive Order 13166 applies to all federal programs, while New York Executive Order 26 directs state agencies providing direct public services to offer language assistance services to LEP individuals. Buffalo is committed to helping monolingual and LEP individuals increase access to city services, programs, and timely information in languages other than English.

*The Office of New Americans can work to implement a Language Access Plan, identify hiring opportunities for bilingual individuals, and extend language access resources to city departments that provide services to residents.*

#### BEST PRACTICE

##### Expanded Language Line Access

Buffalo’s 311 system offers “Language Line,” so callers can be served in their native language. This access has been extended to the Traffic Violations Agency, and the city’s Office of New Americans is working to expand it to other departments such as Civil Service, Permit and Inspection Services, and the City Clerk.

### 3. Promote information on essential services

Information on city services is transmitted by resettlement agencies, websites, printed materials, and word of mouth; but it generally has not been gathered and consolidated, and there are no consistent guidelines regarding what materials should be translated. As a result,

new arrivals face challenges in accessing key services, and are less likely to know if they qualify for programs that could assist them and their families.

*The Office of New Americans can work with city departments, service providers, and Ethnic Community-Based Organizations to create and promote an online portal that connects new arrivals with needed resources, translated into the most common foreign languages.*

#### **BEST PRACTICE**

##### **Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians**

Philadelphia's "Welcoming Center" offers a comprehensive range of services for immigrants, such as help with finding a job, starting a business, accessing legal advice, learning English, or locating resources. The Center partners with the Office of Immigrants and Multicultural Affairs to focus on language access within city departments, including the use of "I SPEAK" language access cards.

#### **4. Facilitate cultural exchanges**

Refugees report being harassed on the street and in public places, and perceive that they are often discriminated against in employment and other settings. Such challenges associated with acculturation can lead to increased family conflicts, and subsequent involvement with the law enforcement and court systems.

Cultural exchanges – where professionals such as child protection workers, police officers, and judges meet face-to-face with refugees to learn about their culture and explain American systems and expectations – have proven effective at increasing understanding on both sides and addressing the challenges associated with adjusting to a new culture. Several local groups currently conduct training for health care, education, social work, and law enforcement professionals.

*The Office of New Americans can support efforts to broaden cultural exchanges and develop a curriculum to educate the general public about the benefits of Buffalo's growing diversity. These programs could then be shared with local businesses, non-profit and civic organizations, educational institutions, foundations, faith and community groups, and other stakeholders.*

#### **BEST PRACTICE**

##### **Family Court Collaborative**

Erie County Family Court, the Universal School, the International Institute of Buffalo, and the Muslim Public Affairs Council organized the Family Court Collaborative to address issues of abuse and neglect cases among refugees and immigrants. It started at a local mosque with a training session in cultural competency for Child Protective Services case workers, social service agencies, and attorneys. Additional sessions have educated Iraqi and Somali leaders about the child protective service and public safety systems, increasing community awareness.



## 5. Encourage community engagement

Community engagement requires maintaining positive relationships with refugees and other newcomers throughout the year – whether celebrating with them on national holidays and ethnic festivals, acknowledging their triumphs, or providing comfort during times of grief and loss. Opportunities for residents to engage with refugees and other newcomers in meaningful ways should be promoted. This could include World Refugee Day in June, where the experiences and contributions of refugee groups are acknowledged; or an International Day at a school, where students are able to share their unique cultures through the arts, performance, and food.

*The Office of New Americans can post a schedule of both local and national ethnic festivals and celebrations for Buffalo's communities on its web site; and provide official proclamations and private communications noting special achievements within the city's diverse communities.*

## 6. Promote civic participation

Participation in civic institutions is an excellent way for refugees to interact with a broad range of residents, learn about local government, and successfully integrate into the larger community. Refugees are generally underrepresented in civic organizations: first-generation immigrants are only half as likely to participate as are second-generation immigrants. New arrivals can work with seniors, join parent-teacher organizations, and volunteer at a range of non-profits. By increasing their involvement, they will build deeper ties to local communities and strengthen institutions, while these organizations gain a deeper appreciation of the unique interests and concerns of immigrants and refugees.

*The Office of New Americans can promote civic participation by connecting government, block clubs, non-profits, schools, and other civic-minded organizations to refugees, immigrants, and resettlement agencies.*

### BEST PRACTICE

#### Citizens' Participation Academy

Started in September 2006 by Mayor Brown, this program provides an interactive public forum for residents on the structure and management of city government. Participants are joined by elected and appointed officials to learn about economic development, community services, and public safety through a series of 10 presentations, case studies, and site tours. Upon completion, graduates are encouraged to continue their community involvement through a variety of volunteer opportunities.

## Settling In

### 7. Expand resettlement into new neighborhoods

As the West Side housing market becomes increasingly saturated, there is a need to identify alternative locations for new arrivals. There has been growing interest among refugees in East Side neighborhoods, where rents are more affordable. Groups such as the Fillmore Corridor Neighborhood Coalition have already developed plans to incorporate refugees and immigrants into the community. These efforts offer the opportunity to approach resettlement in a more strategic manner, and to encourage both existing and new residents to become more invested in their neighborhoods through peer-to-peer engagement.

*The Buffalo Urban Renewal Agency can provide technical support in developing neighborhood plans that address the needs of refugees and other new arrivals, and integrate these into broader community strategies.*

## 8. Ensure adequate housing

Although resettlement agencies initially screen and approve properties, many new arrivals subsequently move out, only to face other challenges when they enter the housing market. In most cases, refugees do not understand their rights and are more likely to be taken advantage of by landlords. They also may not know where to turn for assistance with these issues, or lack transportation or an interpreter to access this help. Landlords also face challenges, as some tenants may need to be educated on issues such as food storage, trash and waste disposal, weatherization, and fire safety. Keeping refugees in adequate housing – while ensuring that the property is properly maintained by the tenants – provides benefits to all.

*The Buffalo Urban Renewal Agency can coordinate efforts among housing inspectors, non-profit providers, resettlement agencies, Ethnic Community-Based Organizations, and landlords to ensure that all are aware of property standards and how to work together to avoid landlord-tenant conflicts.*

## 9. Promote business districts

Immigrant- and refugee-owned businesses often create distinct commercial districts. The city has experienced this on Grant Street, where large numbers of new arrivals have settled. Yet these businesses typically draw customers from a very limited range. A marketing strategy has helped the West Side Bazaar attract outsiders to sample ethnic cuisine and purchase goods from a variety of vendors. Similar efforts to draw customers to commercial corridors featuring immigrant, African-American, and Latino businesses can help to stabilize these districts while strengthening the overall economy.

*The Buffalo Urban Renewal Agency can provide technical assistance and marketing support to immigrant business owners and commercial districts, including enterprises owned by local African-Americans and Latinos; and help to identify additional sources of support and funding.*

### BEST PRACTICE

#### Green and Healthy Homes Initiative

Aging and deteriorated housing, coupled with high poverty and unemployment, can force families to live in homes that are unhealthy, unsafe, and energy inefficient. GHHI is a public-private partnership that provides cost savings, develops career pathways to green jobs, and produces stable neighborhoods by increasing the quality of housing stock. GHHI coordinates funding sources and programs for weatherization, lead hazard abatement, asthma control, and other health and safety interventions. Heart of the City Neighborhoods, the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo, and Jericho Road Community Health Center lead a coalition of service providers that has provided comprehensive services to almost 400 families to date. In recent years, the program has expanded to include community health workers with the language and cultural skills needed to reach out to the Burmese and Nepali communities.

### BEST PRACTICE

#### Westminster Economic Development Initiative

WEDI helps immigrants and refugees develop and operate businesses by assisting with mentoring, micro-loans, and after-school education. In 2011, WEDI opened the West Side Bazaar in a small Grant Street storefront, offering incubator space to six entrepreneurs from Indonesia, Peru, Rwanda, and South Sudan. WEDI later acquired a larger building in the heart of the Grant-Ferry District, and expanded the Bazaar to accommodate 21 businesses. Over 15 of these have since graduated to their own spaces, but replacements have allowed the incubator to remain a destination where shoppers can find handcrafted gifts, clothing, jewelry, and ethnic cuisines from around the world.



## 10. Encourage participation in recreational programs

The city and its non-profit partners operate recreational facilities in many neighborhoods, which are open to all residents. Efforts to develop programming that will attract refugees and other new arrivals should be pursued, to provide youth with healthy alternatives after school and during the summer. Programs such as Soccer Without Borders offer youth an opportunity to play a sport while also receiving training and tutoring in English, and promote civic engagement and interactions with other young people from various cultural groups. All of these recreational programs help to decrease risky behavior and provide a productive outlet for young refugees.

*The Division of Parks & Recreation can work to increase participation in recreational programs among immigrant and refugee youth, and attempt to bring programs such as Soccer Without Borders to Buffalo.*

## 11. Establish a community space

A consistent request from refugees is to develop a multi-purpose space to house services for their community. Representatives from Ethnic Community-Based Organizations have indicated that they would be able to assume greater responsibility for providing assistance within their communities if such a facility were available.

*The Office of New Americans can bring Ethnic Community-Based Organizations together with existing community center operators to explore opportunities to provide greater access to these facilities.*

## 12. Engage with the Police Department

Increased trust between refugee communities and public safety officials is essential to building safe neighborhoods. Ensuring that police officers understand the needs and concerns of new arrivals will lead to stronger relationships and safer neighborhoods. Refugees are often hesitant to report crimes or help with investigations because they do not believe they will get the assistance they require. Some may have had bad experiences with corrupt officials in their native countries, and assume that all police are not trustworthy. Language barriers and a lack of understanding of police duties also limit meaningful engagement with police officers.

*The Police Department, in coordination with the Office of New Americans, can implement a Language Access Plan and continue to facilitate regular interaction and joint initiatives among Ethnic Community-Based Organizations and police officials; and form partnerships that include community policing efforts. These should be coordinated with the cultural sensitivity training proposed in the Welcoming section.*

### BEST PRACTICE

#### Westside Art Strategy Happenings

The WASH Project at Westside Value Laundromat is a place where people can come to play music, practice art, read books, learn languages, mingle with persons from other cultures, learn about a wide range of community services and cultural opportunities, and wash clothing.



## Strengthening

### 13. Increase language access for health and human service providers

Despite federal and state laws requiring access to interpretation services and translated materials, not all health and human service providers offer language assistance when rendering care, and few have written materials translated into high-demand languages. Providers often cite the expense and difficulty securing language services as the primary reason for this. Identifying opportunities to increase the availability of interpreters and translation services would enable these organizations to provide higher quality care to refugees.

*The Office of New Americans can engage Ethnic Community-Based Organizations, resettlement agencies, and educational institutions to identify potential volunteers; work to secure funding; and partner with successful efforts to improve health care outcomes.*

#### BEST PRACTICE

##### Jericho Road Community Health Center

Jericho Road provides culturally-sensitive care for refugees and immigrants, as well as a range of community services. Medical care includes maternity and child health, adult care (including diabetes care, mammograms, and programming for persons with chronic needs), and behavioral health care. Interpreters are available to assist with all visits and staff are specifically trained in cultural competency.



### 14. Provide specialized training for school personnel

Students need caring, knowledgeable, and involved teachers and administrators to succeed. The Buffalo Public Schools provide a wide range of supports to all students, but relatively few are specifically tailored to refugees. These students face many challenges – including the use of language immersion; age-based placement; harassment and bullying from classmates; and the stress and anxiety associated with testing – and school staff must be made aware of the best ways to offer support. Teachers, counselors, and school administrators can all benefit from learning more about these challenges, and the specific resources available to assist refugees and their families.

*The Office of New Americans can broker partnerships among the Buffalo Public Schools, the Department of Multilingual Education, and Ethnic Community-Based Organizations to support collaborative teaching models and provide appropriate training for school personnel.*

#### BEST PRACTICE

##### Hope Refugee Drop-In Center

Deaf refugees are highly marginalized due to the lack of American Sign Language training classes. Without ASL, deaf refugees are unable to utilize ASL interpreters in school, medical settings, or court. A pilot class has been developed at the Hope Refugee Drop-In Center, with a volunteer ASL teacher who is a deaf immigrant from Jamaica. Funding is being sought to hire an ASL teacher to provide language instruction equal to that of the Buffalo Public Schools, and a mentor to help integrate deaf refugees into the community.

## 15. Pursue opportunities for parental involvement

Schools strive to engage all parents, but many refugees need prompting to understand the role they are expected to play with regard to their child's education. Parents may avoid engaging with teachers and administrators because they lack experience with formal education systems, have different cultural expectations regarding the role of educators, or face language barriers. By increasing existing collaborations with resettlement agencies and Ethnic Community-Based Organizations, schools can expand opportunities to engage refugee parents, and bridge the language and trust gaps that often prevent them from reaching these families. Participating in these programs can also help parents serve as ambassadors within these communities, reaching out to provide important information and resources to other new arrivals.

*The Office of New Americans can take on the role of mediator for school officials, the Department of Multilingual Education, and Ethnic Community-Based Organizations to discuss these issues and set up effective collaborations for immigrant, African-American, and Latino families.*

## 16. Encourage participation in enrichment programs

Programs that provide educational experiences for younger students and build job skills for older ones help to counter the disruption in learning that occurs during summer and winter breaks. Students who do not participate in meaningful summer learning activities can lose over two months of grade level equivalency in math by fall, a loss that is typically much greater for foreign-born students. Enrichment programs improve educational outcomes, aid in the development of language and cultural awareness, and reduce the likelihood that students will engage in risky behaviors.

*The Office of New Americans can work to make the Mayor's Summer Youth Internship Program more accessible to refugee youth and foster expansion of positive enrichment opportunities in the city for immigrant, African-American, and Latino youth.*

### BEST PRACTICE

#### Mayor's Summer Youth Internship Program

This program provides six weeks of employment and work-readiness training for at-risk youth between the ages of 14 and 21. According to Mayor Brown, "It is critically important to ensure that our young people have productive options for summer activities that prepare them for the jobs of the future." Fifty openings were added in 2015, bringing the total number of internships to 1,450. The program has provided over 20,000 employment opportunities since 2006.



## 17. Improve access to adult education

Over 20 percent of the city's foreign-born adults have not obtained a high school diploma, which is more than double that of the native-born population. The Buffalo Public Schools Adult Education Division offers English as a Second Language and High School Equivalency programs to assist refugees with developing language skills and obtaining the educational credentials needed to secure stable employment. Access and awareness of both programs could be improved by partnering with Ethnic Community-Based Organizations that offer native language literacy classes to their members.

*The Office of New Americans can assist the Buffalo Public Schools to research and secure support for measures that can improve outcomes of adult education programs; and also partner with the Adult Education Division to facilitate awareness of new and available adult education programs.*

## 18. Develop effective vocational training

Refugees possessing a wide range of skills require a variety of services to successfully secure employment. Vocational training programs can provide pathways from English as a Second Language and High School Equivalency courses into jobs. Resettlement agencies and community colleges can work with employers to increase access to training and improve programs for working adults – including refugees, African-Americans, and Latinos.

*The Office of New Americans should help to link employers, working adults, and existing vocational training opportunities; and recommend new ones where gaps exist.*

### BEST PRACTICE

#### Placing Individuals in Vital Opportunity Training

The PIVOT Program, operated by the Erie County Department of Social Services, assists Temporary Assistance to Needy Families recipients to secure employment by paying the full-time wages of participants for six months during training. According to a report, approximately 400 TANF recipients had participated in PIVOT, and 85 percent were able to transition into a permanent job with their employer.

## 19. Expand employment programs

Subsidized employment programs such as the Placing Individuals in Vital Opportunity Training Program can cover full-time wages for six months while the participant receives on-the-job training. Health and human service providers and Ethnic Community-Based Organizations can then work with employers to provide a range of on-site services to refugee employees, including assistance in navigating the transportation and service systems, and help with official correspondence.

*The Office of New Americans can promote awareness of and recruitment of eligible newcomers with service providers and Ethnic Community-Based Organizations.*

### BEST PRACTICE

#### Journey's End Refugee Services

Journey's End recently completed an innovative two-year project to help refugee mothers transition from being home-bound and dependent on government aid by offering culturally sensitive, state-certified daycare programs in Arabic, Burmese, French, Karen, Nepali, and Swahili. Journey's End collaborated with the Erie County Department of Social Services to link recipients of public benefits to daycare; and the Childcare Resource Network provided technical support to the program.



## 20. Increase entrepreneurial efforts

Entrepreneurial refugees play an important role by creating jobs and contributing to the local economy. There are a number of success stories, yet resources to expand these efforts are limited – especially with respect to production activities.

*The Office of New Americans can work with economic development officials to raise awareness of the untapped potential of entrepreneurial refugees.*

## **21. Facilitate professional careers**

Many refugees who worked as doctors, nurses, engineers, or other professionals in their home countries are now employed in jobs that do not utilize these skills. The pool of highly-skilled workers critical to the region's economic growth can be expanded by facilitating the transition of refugees into professional careers.

*The Office of New Americans can assist local colleges and universities to develop plans to help professionals prepare for certification exams and pursue necessary licenses.*

## **22. Expand workforce opportunities**

Organizations providing training and employment-related assistance do not currently have direct access to refugees; and issues with family care, language barriers and transportation must be addressed before refugees can take advantage of these opportunities. As a result, refugees lack connections to both high demand positions and training programs. Expanding the reach of workforce training and support programs are clearly needed for refugees, as well as African-Americans and Latinos. In the case of refugees, this can be achieved by expanding collaboration with resettlement agencies and Ethnic Community-Based Organizations.

*The Office of New Americans can support the development of services that bridge gaps between organizations that provide training and refugees experiencing issues that affect their ability to take advantage of assistance.*

*The Office of Strategic Planning can assist by studying current transportation options, with an emphasis on reverse commuters and workers with non-standard hours; and identify improvements that will lead to better employment access for immigrants and other city residents without cars.*

### **BEST PRACTICE**

#### **BAK USA**

BAK USA came to Buffalo via Start-Up NY, a program that reduces taxes for qualifying companies partnered with a participating college or university. The company opened its world headquarters this year with 20 employees from Buffalo and a dozen other countries, kicking off its mission to bring affordable computer tablets and cellphones to developing nations in Africa.



## Moving Forward

### 23. Pass a welcoming city ordinance

The city should prepare and pass an ordinance affirming and expanding basic protections to ensure that all refugees and immigrants are welcomed and provided access to city services. Once approved, city employees will require training to understand and uphold the new rules.

*The Office of New Americans can communicate these requirements to all employees, while those with significant interactions with refugees and other newcomers are given additional training to help them uphold the ordinance. ONA can also work with outside partners to develop training programs for police, fire, emergency responders, 311 call center personnel, and other city staff.*

#### **BEST PRACTICE**

##### **Welcoming America**

The city has joined Welcoming America, a nationwide network of organizations and partners that works to promote an atmosphere in which foreign- and native-born residents can find common ground and shared prosperity. Welcoming America also offers training and technical assistance designed to foster more positive local climates for refugees and other newcomers.

### 24. Provide cultural sensitivity training

To build a welcoming environment, the city must ensure that employees are equipped to interact with refugees and other newcomers, where cultural misunderstandings often make it difficult to communicate effectively. Cultural sensitivity training will help front-line staff understand how to welcome and assist persons from diverse backgrounds, and in turn make refugees and other newcomers more willing to engage with service providers.

*The Office of New Americans can identify departments and services for which cultural sensitivity training will have the greatest impact, enlist partners to help develop the curriculum, and create a schedule. Training should cover immigration status, nationality, race, ethnicity, and religion, as well as the impacts of trauma, domestic violence, and child abuse.*

#### **BEST PRACTICE**

##### **Buffalo Police Department**

The BPD has held regular community workshops with the Bhutanese-Nepali, Karen, and Burmese populations to address issues surrounding emergency calls to 9-1-1, share safety tips, and more. Events have also been held at schools to educate students on how policing in the U.S. may differ from policing in their home countries. BPD officers have also received training to help them learn how to engage populations with varying degrees of English language proficiency, and to improve outreach coordination.

### 25. Expand Office of New Americans capacity

The Office of New Americans is in a unique position, having been established at a time of great interest, need, and energy towards effecting positive change in the lives of refugees and other new arrivals. To realize its full potential, ONA will have to form multiple partnerships that will allow it to expand its capacity.

*The Office of New Americans can continue to use the city's Urban Fellows Internship Program, which provides college students with hands-on experience in public service; and seek other partnership opportunities that allow it to expand its capacity.*

## **26. Establish a New Americans Advisory Council**

The Office of New Americans would benefit from the ongoing advice and counsel of a group such as the New Americans Study Steering Committee, which helped to guide this effort. It is recommended that the mayor establish a New Americans Advisory Council to assist the ONA in meeting its objectives and identifying new opportunities and directions.

## **27. Apply best practices**

Buffalo is not alone in receiving increasing numbers of refugees, or in recognizing their potential to contribute to its future prosperity. The city should continue to stay abreast of national and local efforts, as others bring forward valuable programming and practices that can be used to improve the experience of refugees in Buffalo.

## Steering Committee

Flor Aber	Hispanic Heritage Council
Denise Beehag	International Institute
Ann Brittain	Catholic Charities
Tulsi Dhimal	Bhutanese Community Group
Maggie Gibbons	Rediscover Riverside
Paul Harris	South Fillmore Block Club / Fillmore Corridor Neighborhood Coalition
Eva Hassett	International Institute
Anna Ireland	Jericho Road Community Health Center
Benoit Kabayiza	African Community Team
Ali Kadhum	Iraqi American Society / Buffalo Immigrant and Refugee Empowerment Coalition
Ba Zan Lin	Burmese Community Support Group
Joshua Mansaray	Sierra Leone Cultural Alliance
Meghann Perry	Journey's End Refugee Services
Khalid Qazi	Muslim Public Affairs Council
Sarahphine Sargent	African Community Team
Marlene Schillinger	Jewish Family Service
Allan Sesay	Sierra Leone Cultural Alliance
Saladi Shebule	Somali Bantu Community Organization
Marcus Stanfill	HEAL International