



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES
Office of the Commissioner

S. Duke Storen
Commissioner

December 1, 2020

MEMORANDUM

TO: Honorable Ralph Northam
Governor of Virginia

Members, Virginia General Assembly

FROM: S. Duke Storen *S. Duke Storen*

SUBJECT: Annual Report on Office of New Americans

I am pleased to submit the Department of Social Services' first annual report on the work of the Office of New Americans, pursuant to § 2.2-2498 (5) of the Code of Virginia. If you have questions, please contact me.

SDS/kc

Virginia Department of Social Services
Report on Office of New Americans
December 2020

Background & Report Mandate

Nearly 13 percent of Virginia's population are foreign-born and one in four children live in immigrant households. Immigrants are a significant part of our economy, as Virginia is home to around 750,000 authorized immigrants, most of whom are not refugees or asylees and, therefore, ineligible to receive services through federally funded programs. Benefiting from an Office of New Americans are a diverse array of people of color, with half having emigrated to the United States from Asia, one-fourth emigrating from central or south America, and one in 10 emigrating from Africa.

In 2020, Acts of Assembly Chapters 1078 and 1079 created the Office of New Americans Advisory Board (Board) and the Office of New Americans. Specifically, § 2.2-2496, created the 18-member Office of New Americans Advisory Board. The purpose of the Board is to advise the Governor, cabinet members and General Assembly on strategies to improve state policies and programs to support the economic, linguistic, and civic integration of new Americans throughout the Commonwealth.

The legislation added § 63-299.1, creating within the Virginia Department of Social Services the "Office of New Americans." The Office of New Americans will assist immigrant integration within the Commonwealth on an economic, social, and cultural level.

Among the Board's powers and duties is the requirement to annually report by December 1 to the Governor and Generally Assembly on the activities of the Office of New Americans (§ 2.-2498 (5)).

Primary Powers and Duties

Among several powers and duties set out in § 2.2-2498, the Office of New Americans Advisory Board shall:

1. *Advise the Governor on ways to improve state policies and programs to support the economic, linguistic, and civic integration of new Americans throughout the Commonwealth.*
2. *Undertake studies, symposiums, research, and factual reports to gather information to formulate and present recommendations to the Governor related to issues of concern and importance to new Americans in the Commonwealth.*
3. *Advise the Governor as needed regarding any statutory, regulatory, or other issues of importance to new Americans in the Commonwealth.*
4. *Collaborate with the Department of Social Services and other public and private entities to recognize and call attention to the significant contributions of new Americans in the Commonwealth.*

Among several expectations set out in § 63.2-209.1, the Office of New Americans shall:

1. *Implement a statewide strategy the economic, linguistic, and civic integration of new Americans in the Commonwealth.*
2. *Work with localities to coordinate and support local efforts.*

3. *Provide advice and assistance to new Americans in the areas such as the citizenship application process and securing employment, housing and services.*
4. *Provide advice and assistance to state agencies regarding coordination of policies and dissemination of information.*

Accomplishments

The Department of Social Services anticipates the Board holding its first meeting in mid-November. Beginning in July 2020, the Department of Social Services developed a work plan to establish an internal infrastructure, connecting with local, state and national partners and exploring economic, linguistic, and integration needs across the Commonwealth. The Office of New Americans will include both immigrant and refugee services. Accomplishments to date include:

- Collaborated with the Commonwealth's Chief Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Officer's Office to secure a Senior Policy Fellowship. The Senior Policy position will work in collaboration with the Department of Social Services the Board across secretariats, state agencies, and relevant communities to coordinate interagency efforts to identify and remove systemic barriers preventing immigrants and refugees from fully participating in Virginia's workforce, educational systems, economy, and across other relevant sectors.
- Conducted several focus groups with Virginia immigrant stakeholders to identify unmet needs for immigrants and to develop an initial list of workforce barriers and opportunities. Included in the workforce challenges are: financial and transportation obstacles, need for English proficiency, time and prerequisites for further education, competition, scam certifications, disappointments when restarting a career, employers' unfamiliarity with foreign credentials and immigration status challenges.
- In conjunction with the World Education Services, National Governor's Association, National Conference of State Legislatures, and Council of State Governments, the Department of Social Services and Department of Health Professions are participating in an Internationally Trained Barrier Reduction Workgroup that is exploring licensing barriers that impact immigrants and refugees.
- Began conversations to address additional language access and 2-1-1 VIRGINIA.
- Developed resource lists and posted on the agency's website, which will be the beginning of a clearinghouse of information for immigration. Information such as immigrant data, list of service providers, health and mental health resources will provide a comprehensive source of information that is currently not available for the Commonwealth.