



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

Office of the Commissioner

James Hunter Williams
Commissioner

January 16, 2025

MEMORANDUM

TO: The Honorable Glenn Youngkin
Governor of Virginia

Members, Virginia General Assembly

FROM: James H. Williams *James Williams*

SUBJECT: Annual Report on Office of New Americans

The Office of New Americans was created under § 63.2-209.1 as an office to assist immigrant integration within the Commonwealth on an economic, social, and cultural level. This report is submitted in compliance with related Item 324.F. of the 2024 Appropriation Act, which states:

F. The Department of Social Services shall provide an annual report on the activities of the Office of New Americans by December 1 of each year.

Please contact me with questions at (804) 726-7011.

JW:kc

cc: The Honorable Janet V. Kelly, Secretary of Health Human Resources



Office of New Americans: Activities in 2024

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OFFICE OF NEW AMERICANS: ACTIVITIES IN 2024

A Report for the Virginia General Assembly

December 1, 2024

REPORT MANDATE

[Item F of the 2022 Virginia State Budget, Bill HB30, Item 340 F](#)

The Department of Social Services shall provide an annual report on the activities of the Office of New Americans by December 1 of each year.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In FY2024, the Office of New Americans (ONA) made significant strides in enhancing support for immigrants and refugees across Virginia. The launch of a statewide newsletter has improved communication and resource sharing, while ongoing community health fairs and educational initiatives helped connect refugees with essential services. ONA funded programs for Afghan students, supported refugee employment through job placement services, and initiated mental health support collaborations to address the unique challenges faced by these populations. The office also advanced efforts to protect immigrant rights, including hosting educational webinars on workers' rights and fraud prevention. Through these efforts, ONA continues to strengthen integration, promote self-sufficiency, and ensure the well-being of immigrant communities across the Commonwealth.

About VDSS and ONA

The Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS) partners with local departments of social services and community organizations, to promote the well-being of children and families across the Commonwealth. We proudly serve alongside nearly 13,000 state and local human services professionals throughout the Social Services System, who ensure that thousands of Virginia's most vulnerable citizens have access to the best services and benefits available to them.

Together, we work each day to serve, empower, and create opportunities for brighter futures.

The Office of New Americans (ONA) promotes the economic and civic success of Virginia's diverse immigrant communities. ONA is responsible for the implementation of a statewide strategy to provide immigrants with comprehensive assistance related to employment, housing, healthcare, education, citizenship and other services for which they may be eligible.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The Office of New Americans (ONA) supports the successful integration of immigrants and refugees into Virginia's communities by providing essential services and resources. ONA administers federally funded grants to support refugee resettlement, offers education and support programs, and works to enhance access to critical services for newcomers. Through collaboration with local organizations and state agencies, ONA promotes civic engagement and helps immigrants navigate the complexities of eligibility and benefits. The office ensures that all services are aligned with federal and state guidelines to achieve positive outcomes for new Virginians.

CONTACTS

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Office of New Americans: Activities in 2024

BACKGROUND

The Office of New Americans (ONA) was established by the Virginia General Assembly in 2020 within the Department of Social Services, to assist immigrant integration within the Commonwealth of Virginia on an economic, social, and cultural level. Comprised of an Immigrant Services Unit and Refugee Services Unit, ONA is charged with promoting the economic and civic success of Virginia's diverse immigrant communities.

In addition to these key functions, the ONA is responsible for the implementation of a statewide strategy to provide immigrants with comprehensive assistance for employment, housing, healthcare, education, citizenship, and other services for which they may be eligible.

This report highlights the four primary areas through which ONA fulfills its mission: Resources, Services, Protection, and Policy. Each category plays a crucial role in ensuring the successful integration of New Americans into Virginia's communities:

Resources: Providing New Americans with essential tools and materials to navigate their new environment and integrate more effectively into society.

Services: Offering a range of direct support services that address immediate needs such as healthcare, education, and housing.

Protection: Ensuring the safety and legal protection of immigrants, including safeguarding their rights and access to justice.

Policy: Shaping and advocating for policies that promote the well-being and integration of immigrants, while addressing challenges they may face.

RESOURCES

The Office of New Americans (ONA) plays a pivotal role in building bridges between immigrant and refugee communities and the organizations that serve them. In FY24, ONA conducted outreach with localities, community-based organizations, and service providers to share information about resources available to immigrants and refugees. This included educational webinars, training, conferences, and events. Through various communication channels such as monthly newsletters, daily emails, and phone outreach, ONA connected immigrant communities with state and local agencies, schools, and nonprofits.

To enhance communication and resource sharing, ONA launched a statewide newsletter in May 2024. This monthly publication serves as a vital link between ONA and community organizations by providing valuable information on immigrant resources, federal and local policies, grant opportunities, cultural events, and legal updates. The newsletter aims to promote cultural awareness, foster integration, and support the overall prosperity of Virginia's immigrant communities.

ONA also continues to organize community health and resource fairs that bring immigrants and service providers together, ensuring that they have access to essential services, including health and legal support.

EDUCATION AND SUPPORT PROGRAMS

ONA has been dedicated to supporting the educational and developmental needs of immigrant and refugee populations through various programs designed to foster integration and success. These initiatives include funding for Afghan students, providing mentorship for youth, and supporting the Virginia Refugee Student Achievement Project, which helps newly arrived refugee children navigate the educational system. ONA also supports adults with workforce development programs, job placement services, and vocational training, ensuring that immigrants and refugees have the tools needed for long-term success in Virginia. These education and support programs aim to create pathways for self-sufficiency, enrich the local communities, and ensure all new Virginians can thrive.

SCHOOL SUPPORT FOR AFGHAN STUDENTS ONA has allocated funding to 13 school divisions statewide under the School Support for Afghan Students program, which focuses on the integration and education of newly arrived Afghan youth and families. This program supports summer and after-school learning, school-based counseling, English Language Learner (ELL) supports, parent engagement, and professional development for school staff.

VIRGINIA REFUGEE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT PROJECT ONA also supports the Virginia Refugee Student Achievement Project, which, in FY24, provided critical assistance to 2,054 newly arrived refugee children and their families. Through 27 School Liaisons across the Commonwealth, the program ensured that refugee youth received the educational resources, technology, tutoring, and mentoring needed for success. The project also connected 152 children to early childhood education opportunities such as Head Start and the Virginia Pre-school Initiative.

MENTORING YOUTH IN VIRGINIA (MYVA) The MYVA program matched 126 youth between the ages of 15-24 with trained mentors to work toward educational, vocational, and social goals. These youth also engaged in community service, enhancing their civic and social participation.

UNACCOMPANIED REFUGEE MINOR (URM) PROGRAM The URM program provided culturally sensitive foster care and placement services to 77 unaccompanied refugee minors across Virginia. This program operated in partnership with Commonwealth Catholic Charities and Lutheran Social Services, ensuring youth received necessary care and support during their resettlement.

SERVICES

The Office of New Americans (ONA) offers a wide range of services designed to support the integration and well-being of immigrant and refugee communities in Virginia. Through partnerships with local organizations, ONA facilitates access to critical resources such as healthcare, employment, educational programs, and financial assistance. These services are designed to meet the diverse needs of new Americans, helping them build stable, self-sufficient lives in their new communities. By providing support in areas such as language access, legal assistance, and mental health services, ONA aims to ensure that immigrants and refugees can thrive in Virginia.

REFUGEE HEALTH EDUCATION AND OUTREACH

In FY24, 6,266 refugees received services through ONA's Refugee Health Education and Outreach Program. This included health orientations, medical case management services, mental health referrals, and refugee health screenings.

ONA has made significant strides in promoting health awareness among immigrant communities. This includes sharing information on the Affordable Care Act (ACA), Medicaid eligibility criteria, and mental health services. ONA has also designed programs in collaboration with the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS) to support Afghan veterans and other at-risk communities.

As part of its commitment to addressing health epidemics, including mental health challenges within refugee and immigrant populations, ONA continues to collaborate with local health departments and other organizations. ONA is planning three mental health conferences in FY24 and FY25 aimed at enhancing understanding and improving mental health care access for refugees and immigrants.

Services for Older Refugees (SOR): The SOR program, available for refugees aged 60 and above, provides services such as transportation, translation, elder care, and home care, as well as assistance with applying for Social Security Income and navigating the naturalization process.

EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM

ONA's employment program is a cornerstone of the refugee resettlement initiative, providing vocational training, job placement services, job retention support, and career advancement opportunities. In FY24, 3,330 job placements were made, with the average wage for full-time jobs being \$18.72 per hour. Additionally, ONA partners with the Virginia Community Health Workers Association to promote healthcare training for Spanish-speaking immigrants, offering participants a pathway to a career in healthcare.

REFUGEE CASH ASSISTANCE (RCA)

The RCA program offers time-limited financial support to eligible refugees who meet the income criteria for TANF but do not meet other eligibility requirements. This support ensures refugees can meet their basic needs as they settle in Virginia.

VIRGINIA NEWCOMER INFORMATION SYSTEM (VNIS)

The Virginia Newcomer Information System (VNIS) plays a critical role in ONA's Refugee and Immigrant Services, specifically as it relates to the RCA program. Supporting the tracking and management of client data, including immigration status, country of origin, and program enrollment.

A two-year emergency agreement for FFY2025 and FFY2026, allows for the VDSS Information Security Risk Management (ISRM) and Virginia Information Technology Agency (VITA) to assess potential security risks associated with the system. VNIS enables ONA to efficiently monitor the services provided to Afghan and Ukrainian parolees, ensuring accurate data for funding allocation and program oversight. As part of its oversight responsibilities, ONA utilizes VNIS to track client progress, measure outcomes, and ensure compliance with federal and state guidelines.

PROTECTION

ONA is committed to ensuring the safety and rights of immigrants and refugees in Virginia. Through partnerships with legal service providers and community-based organizations, ONA connects victims of crime or abuse to resources that help them navigate public benefits challenges.

ONA also educates immigrants about their rights in the workplace. In collaboration with the Department of Labor, ONA will host a virtual session next year to inform the immigrant and refugee community about their workers' rights and protections.

ONA continues to host outreach initiatives and educational events to address human trafficking awareness, fraud prevention, and legal protections. Notably, ONA worked with the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to deliver a Spanish-language webinar on immigration fraud, health insurance fraud, and identity theft. These efforts are further reinforced through educational webinars, and community fairs.

POLICY

ONA plays an integral role in shaping and advising on policies affecting immigrant and refugee communities. It serves as the principal liaison for policy stakeholders and maintains a comprehensive platform for service providers to access up-to-date information on available resources. This clearinghouse also promotes collaboration and ensures that immigrant populations have access to essential services.

ONA continues to work internally within the VDSS to improve how the child welfare system serves immigrant families. The office also assists immigrant families by providing training on the Keeping Families Together USCIS program, offering information on navigating complex immigration processes.

Through the Virginia Community Capacity Initiative (VCCI), ONA facilitates dialogue between resettlement agencies and community stakeholders to discuss gaps in services and integration challenges. These quarterly meetings provide a platform for collaboration and problem-solving, further strengthening Virginia's support for its immigrant and refugee populations.

CONCLUSION

The accomplishments and activities of the ONA have promoted the linguistic, civic, and economic integration of immigrant and refugee populations in the Commonwealth. This has been done in the last year against a backdrop of unprecedented arrivals of Afghan and Ukrainian newcomers, and new resettlement models such as Virtual Reception and Placement, Remote Placement, and Welcome Corp. In partnership with stakeholders state-wide, including resettlement agencies, service providers, organizations large and small, university re-searchers, and immigrant communities themselves, ONA has built capacity, conducted out-reach, education, and research, administered federal funds, and promoted integration for New Americans across Virginia.

APPENDIX A: LEGISLATIVE MANDATE ITEM 324.F. OF THE 2024 APPROPRIATION ACT

The Department of Social Services shall provide an annual report on the activities of the Office of New Americans by December 1 of each year.