

LESSONS FROM THE FRONT LINES: KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM PRACTITIONERS SERVING ASYLUM SEEKERS

Cities benefit when immigrants successfully settle and integrate into the fabric of their new community. A successful immigrant settlement program supports families and individuals to gain traction as they transition to life in a new city. Types of support include work authorization assistance and access to employment opportunities, English language classes, access to public benefits and legal services, and help locating affordable housing. By investing in these supports, cities can shorten the time it takes new arrivals to become independent members of society.

On May 28, Educational Alliance hosted a forum to discuss New York City's current response to the recent influx of asylum seekers with an on-the-ground lens. At the event, practitioners in community development, housing, workforce, language instruction, and human services gathered to share successful practices and identify challenges to further scaling their work.

Through the course of a lively panel discussion, moderated by Educational Alliance's President and CEO Rich Baum, the group identified several takeaways across six areas of service delivery: job training, language acquisition, community building, housing and resettlement, the role of houses of worship, and completing government forms. As articulated by exceptional practitioners in their respective fields, the following key points can inform decision-making about funding and delivering programs that serve asylum seekers and new arrivals:

Job Training (Leslie Abbey, Hot Bread Kitchen: [Culinary Pathways For New New Yorkers](#))

- To be effective, training programs should include wrap-around services tailored to the asylum seeker population, including child care, ESOL, assistance with benefits, and emergency funds.
- The Hot Bread Kitchen model (bilingual job training connected to wrap around services and potential employers) could be replicated with additional funding and RFPs that create the appropriately structured programs in various industries.

Language Acquisition (Giovanna Perciballi, CUNY NYC College Of Technology: [Language Immersion Program And ESOL](#))

- Traditional ESOL classes – which extend for months and over multiple semesters - are not well-suited to the needs of the asylum seeker population.
- Because asylum seekers' lives are often disrupted by the need to relocate frequently and generally under enormous pressure, classes of shorter duration (e.g. 4 weeks) that help with essential communication in New York City are most beneficial; these classes can effectively help people get started with the basics of English.
- Unfortunately, funding for language instruction is typically linked to traditional ESOL programs, with required reporting on attendance levels over the course of 12-week courses or longer. New, increased funding streams should allow for flexible and innovative programs such as English Express, which CUNY currently teaches at Educational Alliance.

Fostering Host Communities for Asylum Seekers (Jesús Aguais, [Aid for Life](#))

- Among the current wave of immigrants in New York City today, Venezuelan asylum-seekers face unique challenges in two important areas: 1) their government has no consulate in the U.S. and 2) there is not yet an established 'host' community in New York to provide stability and assistance in resettlement. These factors are a major disadvantage and different from many other new arrivals of various nationalities.
- Resources could help establish a host community organization equipped to serve the unique needs of Venezuelan migrants while also contributing support for existing organizations serving arrivals from other countries.

Resettlement Outside of New York City (Laura Newman, [Neighbors Link: MRAP Housing Program](#))

- New York State's Migrant Relocation Assistance Program (MRAP) funds select non-profits to identify available housing and relocate asylum seekers in communities outside of New York City. The program pays for a year of rent and provides additional wrap-around services to assist with employment and other needs.
- While promising and useful to those who participate, the program has been hard to scale-up in Westchester for several reasons: minimal supply of available housing in suburban counties, rent that is too high to be affordable for asylum seekers once their year of state support ends, and lack of public transportation and child care.



The Role of Houses of Worship (Chloe Breyer, [Interfaith Center of New York](#))

- To effectively engage houses of worship in the response to asylum seekers' needs, the goal should be to empower faith communities to do what they do best: welcoming, hospitality, individual attention, and commitment.
- With modest amounts of funding, houses of worship could partner with shelters or other short-term housing providers and provide valuable direct assistance to asylum seekers by identifying and addressing immediate needs of individual families. As an example, houses of worship have played a powerful, impactful role in aiding the resettlement of some families in Westchester MRAP Program (mentioned directly above).
- Additionally, houses of worship could be instrumental in calming neighborhood concerns.

Government Forms (Ann Cheng, CUNY: Formerly [NYC Asylum Application Help Center](#))

- The process of completing government forms to apply for asylum and work authorization is too difficult. With some specific changes to these forms, more new arrivals could begin to legally work in the U.S. while awaiting determination about their immigration status. New York City has had some success working with the federal government to streamline the process, but further opportunities for improvement remain.