

Strangers in a Strange Land: Finding Refuge in Hampton Roads



STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND: FINDING REFUGE IN HAMPTON ROADS

"Refugees are mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, children, with the same hopes and ambitions as us; except that a twist of fate has bound their lives to a global refugee crisis on an unprecedented scale."

Khaled Hosseini, Author and Global Ambassador for the
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2016

In 2022, a record-breaking 100 million people were forcibly displaced, fleeing war, persecution, and other forms of violence.¹ This humanitarian tragedy has been fueled by conflicts and crises far away from Hampton Roads — especially in Ukraine, Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Myanmar, the countries of origin that account for more than two-thirds of all displaced persons today.² Yet because of the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan that ended last year — as well as past and ongoing commitments in global hot spots such as Iraq, Syria, and Kosovo — many Hampton Roads residents have a firsthand connection to the affected populations. Others are helping the displaced find refuge right here in Hampton Roads.

The United States has traditionally been a global leader in the resettlement of refugees. Until recently, in fact, the U.S. offered refuge each year to more people than all other nations combined.³ The annual ceiling for refugee admissions, however, shifted significantly under President Trump's administration, falling from 85,000 in Fiscal Year (FY) 2016 to 18,000 in FY 2020. While President Biden's administration has increased the refugee admission ceiling to 125,000 in FY 2022 (the highest level since 1993), the number of actual admissions has continued to fall, in part due to lingering impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the defunding of the organizational infrastructure during the previous administration.⁴

The refugee resettlement environment has undoubtedly undergone dramatic shifts over the last 18 months, shifts that will impact the Hampton Roads region.

The collapse of the Afghan government and U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 led to the initiation of Operation Allies Welcome on August 29, 2021. This program has brought more than 78,000 Afghan nationals to the United States through humanitarian parole or the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) process, special categories of admission that rely on much of the same institutional infrastructure as traditional refugee resettlement.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 sparked the fastest-growing refugee crisis anywhere since the end of World War II. In response, the Biden administration announced that it will allow up to 100,000 displaced Ukrainians to take refuge in the United States. More than 12 million Ukrainians have been internally and externally displaced, a number that may continue to climb in the coming months if Russia's invasion grinds into 2023.

1 UNHCR: Ukraine, other conflicts push forcibly displaced total over 100 million for first time. Available at <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/press/2022/5/628a389e4/unhcr-ukraine-other-conflicts-push-forcibly-displaced-total-100-million.html>

2 UNHCR Figures at a Glance, at <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>

3 <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/10/07/key-facts-about-refugees-to-the-u-s/>

4 Migration Policy Institute (2021). "U.S. Annual Refugee Resettlement Ceilings and Number of Refugees Admitted, 1980-Present," at <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/us-annual-refugee-resettlement-ceilings-and-number-refugees-admitted-united>

Mohammad, Sediqa and their two young children came to the U.S. from Afghanistan in the fall of 2021. They initially stayed with family in Northern Virginia before opting to settle in Newport News. The city's lower cost of living was a driving factor behind their decision. With the assistance of Commonwealth Catholic Charities, they moved into their own apartment in the Denbigh neighborhood around Warwick Boulevard, which is now home to an Afghan restaurant and several international grocery stores. Because Mohammad had served as an interpreter for the U.S. military, he is already fluent in English. Aware of the importance of being able to drive in the United States, he began to study the rules of the road before even leaving Afghanistan. Both Mohammad and Sediqa have since earned their Virginia driver's licenses, and the family has purchased a secondhand car. Mohammad is receiving additional training to drive a commercial vehicle; he intends to pursue a career in trucking. Sediqa is attending English as a Second Language classes twice a week, and their children are enrolled in Newport News Public Schools. They told us that they have been surprised by some of the more arduous aspects of day-to-day life here — having to drive miles to shop for basic items, paperwork and bureaucratic procedures that can be difficult to negotiate, and the number of resources they will ultimately need to attain financial stability. Despite these obstacles, both are grateful for the opportunity to build a new life and stand on their own in the United States. "Here you can achieve anything," Mohammad told us.

This chapter explores how all of these developments are affecting Hampton Roads, which has received more than 300 Afghans and other political refugees over the past 18 months. We'll begin with a short introduction to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, and then take a closer look at resettlement in our region, discussing its economic impact and the role of Hampton Roads landlords and employers in integrating refugees. Finally, we'll point to ways that our region can continue to welcome this vulnerable but dynamic population.



A Short Primer on Refugee Policy in the United States

In order to understand how and why persons from all over the world come to find refuge in Hampton Roads, some definitions are helpful. To begin, not all migrants or displaced persons are considered refugees. The contemporary understanding of “refugee” emerged in the aftermath of World War II, as the global community grappled with (then) record numbers of persons who lacked state protection. A landmark United Nations Convention of 1951 defined a refugee as “a person who is outside his or her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of being persecuted because of his or her race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail him- or herself of the protection of the country, or to return there, for fear of persecution.”⁵ This definition still guides international policy today.

According to the terms of the convention, refugees have the right not to be returned to a country where their life and freedom are endangered. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established to protect and seek durable solutions for members of this group, including — as a last resort — resettlement in a third country. By acceding to the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol, states agree to cooperate with the UNHCR and share responsibility for protecting refugees.

The United States made this commitment in 1968. The Refugee Act of 1980 incorporated the convention’s definitions into U.S. law and provides the basis for the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. The U.S. president determines the overall cap and regional ceilings for refugee admissions each year, based on humanitarian concern and priorities set by the U.S. Department of State.⁶

⁵ UNHCR, “The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 protocol” (September 2011), at <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/about-us/background/4ec262df9/1951-convention-relating-status-refugees-its-1967-protocol.html>

⁶ See Refugee Admissions by Region since 1975 as of September 30, 2021, at <https://www.wrapsnet.org/archives/>

Graph 1 displays the annual ceiling on admissions and the actual number of admissions to the United States from FY 1980 to FY 2021. The first decade of U.S. refugee admissions was dominated by peoples from East Asia (Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, and Hmong) who were displaced in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. The late 1980s and 1990s brought an influx of refugees from the Soviet Union and its successor states, as well as Bosnians, Kosovars, and others fleeing the violent breakup of Yugoslavia. The annual ceiling fluctuated somewhat during the first decade of the 2000s but generally remained between 70,000 and 80,000 refugees. In FY 2016, the final year of President Obama’s administration, the annual ceiling was 85,000. During President Trump’s administration, a stated preference was to reduce refugee admissions. The annual ceiling fell to 50,000 in FY 2017, then to 30,000 in FY 2019, and finally to 18,000 in FY 2020. On September 30, 2020, the Trump administration notified Congress that the FY 2021 annual ceiling would again be further reduced to 15,000 admissions.⁷

The initial FY 2021 ceiling of 15,000 was increased to 62,500 in the initial months of President Biden’s administration, however, admissions fell to a low of 11,411, due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic. In FY 2022, the initial ceiling rose to 125,000 (Table 1). However, because the admissions system has been overwhelmed by the large number of Afghans and Ukrainians who were quickly admitted on humanitarian parole, the proposed allocation of refugees from other parts of the world will certainly not be met.

Candidates for resettlement usually undergo an initial screening by the UNHCR, followed by a long series of interviews and background checks by multiple U.S. government agencies — a process that occurs entirely outside of our country’s borders and typically takes several years. If and when refugees are finally approved for resettlement, they must agree to repay the U.S. government for the cost of their travel. They may eventually apply to become lawful permanent residents, and then U.S. citizens, but they do not receive this status automatically. We note that Afghans and Ukrainians who enter the U.S. on humanitarian parole have, thus far, not been granted a similar path toward permanent residency.

⁷ Nick Miroff, “Trump cuts refugee cap to lowest level ever, depicts them on campaign trail as a threat and burden” (1 October 2020), at https://www.washingtonpost.com/immigration/trump-cuts-refugee-cap/2020/10/01/a5113b62-03ed-11eb-8879-7663b816bfa5_story.html

Refugees' legal status is different from asylum seekers, who travel on their own to a country where they desire protection; this scenario describes many of the thousands of migrants who cross the U.S.-Mexico border each year. Although asylum seekers' experiences of persecution may be no less dire, they face a very different legal process upon entering the United States. Likewise, persons fleeing their home countries for any other reason than political, ethnic, racial, or religious persecution (such as economic hardship or climate change) are not currently entitled to protection as refugees under international law.

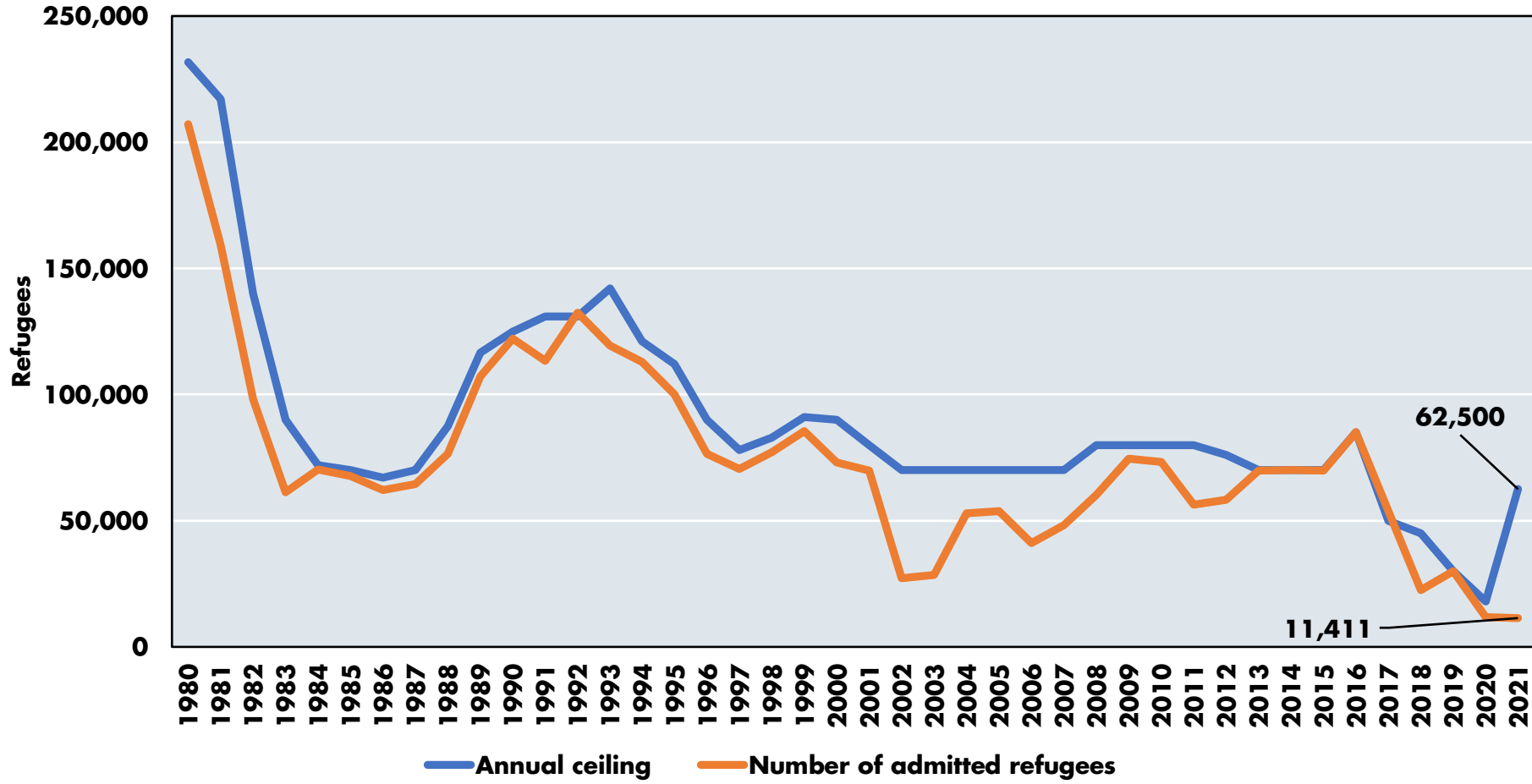


TABLE 1
UNITED STATES REFUGEE ADMISSIONS*
FY 2021 AND FY 2022

| Region | FY 2021 Revised Ceiling | FY 2021 Projected Arrivals | FY 2022 Proposed Allocations |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Africa | 22,000 | 8,000 | 40,000 |
| East Asia | 6,000 | 1,000 | 15,000 |
| Europe and Central Asia | 4,000 | 1,000 | 10,000 |
| Latin America/ Caribbean | 5,000 | 500 | 15,000 |
| Near East/South Asia | 13,000 | 2,000 | 35,000 |
| Regional Subtotal | 50,000 | 12,500 | 115,000 |
| Unallocated Reserve | 12,500 | 0 | 10,000 |
| Total | 62,500 | 12,500 | 125,000 |

Source: Report to Congress on Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2022, at <https://www.state.gov/report-to-congress-on-proposed-refugee-admissions-for-fiscal-year-2022/>. *Does not include admissions of refugees from Afghanistan or Ukraine on humanitarian parole.

GRAPH 1
ANNUAL CEILING AND ACTUAL REFUGEE ADMISSIONS
UNITED STATES, FY 1980 – FY 2021



Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) analysis of WRAPS data from the State Department Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration. Available at www.wrapsnet.org/admissions-and-arrivals/www.wrapsnet.org/admissions-and-arrivals/.

How Resettlement Works: Public-Private Partnerships

There are nine nonprofit volunteer agencies (sometimes called “volags”) that coordinate with the U.S. State Department to resettle refugees. Six of these agencies are faith-based (Table 2). Each volunteer agency is connected to a network of local affiliates that perform the grassroots work of resettlement, and each local affiliate may serve clients within a 100-mile radius. Refugees in Hampton Roads are resettled through the Newport News office of Commonwealth Catholic Charities (CCC), which is an affiliate of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB).

Between September 2021 and February 2022, CCC helped to resettle 225 Afghans in Hampton Roads (Graph 2). The overwhelming majority put down roots in Newport News, while a smaller number moved to Hampton, Virginia Beach, Williamsburg, and Chesapeake. Nearly all arrived on humanitarian parole through Operation Allies Welcome. This surge of newcomers from a single country is unusual, and can be attributed to the U.S. State Department’s temporary freeze on all other refugee admissions in the fall of 2021.

More typically, CCC welcomes refugees from all over the world in any given month, although newcomers from Afghanistan have predominated for the last several years. Whenever possible, refugees are resettled in communities where they have existing family ties, which helps to explain why the source countries of Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Iraq have been particularly well represented in Hampton Roads (Table 3).

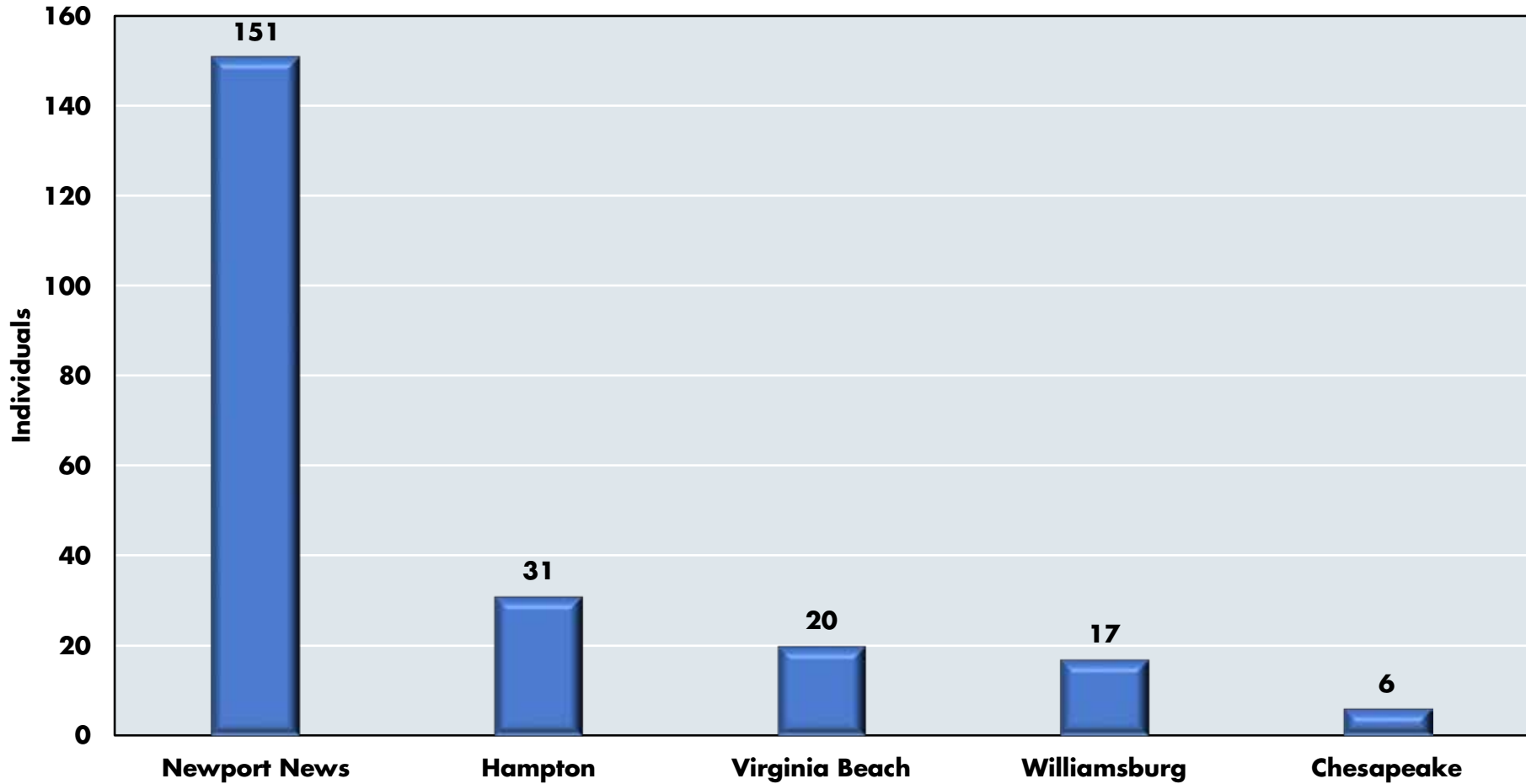
Kristen Larcher, director of operations for refugee and immigration services at CCC in Newport News, tells us that resettlement in Hampton Roads begins when the USCCB contacts her office with a request to accept new clients. Within weeks or even days, she and her staff must secure affordable housing for the incoming family, ensuring that an appropriate residence is furnished with a list of prescribed essentials. Refugees arrive in our community with almost no personal possessions.

| Agency | Faith Affiliation | Virginia Affiliate | Virginia Location |
|---|--------------------------|--|---|
| Church World Service (CWS) | Christian (ecumenical) | Church World Service | Harrisonburg Richmond |
| Ethiopian Community Development Council (ECDC) | None | Ethiopian Community Development Council | Arlington |
| Episcopal Migration Ministries (EMM) | Episcopal | None | |
| Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) | Jewish | None | |
| International Rescue Committee (IRC) | None | International Rescue Committee | Charlottesville Richmond |
| Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) | Lutheran | Lutheran Social Services of the National Capital Area | Fairfax Woodbridge/ Dale City |
| United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) | None | None | |
| United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) | Catholic | Catholic Charities Diocese of Arlington, Commonwealth Catholic Charities | Arlington Manassas/ Fredericksburg Newport News Richmond Roanoke |
| World Relief | Christian (ecumenical) | None | |

Source: Dragas Center for Economic Analysis and Policy, Old Dominion University.

GRAPH 2

**ARRIVALS FROM AFGHANISTAN TO HAMPTON ROADS
SEPTEMBER 2021-FEBRUARY 2022**



Source: Commonwealth Catholic Charities (2022). Refugee arrivals include humanitarian parolees and SIV holders.

TABLE 3
REFUGEE ARRIVALS IN HAMPTON ROADS
COMMONWEALTH CATHOLIC CHARITIES – NEWPORT NEWS
FY 2016–FY 2021

| Country | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | Total |
|------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
| Afghanistan | 102 | 180 | 37 | 45 | 63 | 13 | 440 |
| Burundi | 8 | | 4 | | | | 12 |
| Cuba | 7 | 4 | | | | | 11 |
| Democratic Republic of Congo | 89 | 48 | 47 | 32 | 1 | 5 | 222 |
| Eritrea | 6 | 5 | 4 | | | 1 | 16 |
| Ethiopia | 4 | 14 | | | | | 18 |
| Guatemala | | | | | | 1 | 1 |
| Haiti | | 2 | | | | 1 | 3 |
| Iran | 13 | 4 | | | | | 17 |
| Iraq | 36 | 29 | | | | | 65 |
| Kenya | 1 | | | | | | 1 |
| Myanmar | 7 | | | 4 | | | 11 |
| Other | | | 1 | | | | 1 |
| Pakistan | 6 | 3 | | 1 | | | 10 |
| Somalia | 10 | 5 | | | | | 15 |
| | | | | | | | |
| Total | 289 | 294 | 93 | 82 | 64 | 21 | 843 |

Source: Virginia Department of Social Services, at https://www.dss.virginia.gov/community/ona/refugee_services.cgi

CCC's interactions with its clients are most intense within the next 90 days. The agency connects resettled families with social services, enrolls children in school, helps to secure necessary documentation, assists with job searches, coordinates health screenings, and offers cultural orientation, English language training, and other kinds of assistance as their staffing and resources allow. The office also helps to administer the \$1,025 one-time payment that each refugee receives from the U.S. State Department, which may only be spent on essentials such as rent, utilities, food, and clothing. The overarching goal of all these services is to enable the newcomers to become self-sufficient as soon as possible. In conjunction with the Office of Refugee Resettlement (part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), the Office of New Americans (part of the Virginia Department of Social Services), and numerous local agencies, CCC continues to offer its clients occasional support in the areas of health, schooling, and employment for the next five years. After five years in the United States, resettled refugees are generally eligible to petition for citizenship.

Federal funding for resettlement agencies is directly tied to the number of incoming refugees they serve — which means that their staffing and financial resources have fluctuated dramatically over the past five years. While CCC resettlement services in Newport News remained open (but laid off staff), Catholic Charities USA closed 22 of its 72 resettlement offices around the country in 2017 and 2018. When we spoke to Kristen Larcher in January 2022, her team had rebounded from 5 to 11 employees in just a few months, and she was expecting to hire more staff soon. Even in a social services sector that is used to contending with the vicissitudes of geopolitics, public budgets, and private philanthropy, the challenges of the past year have been unprecedented.⁸ The CCC office in Newport News, like many of its counterparts around the country, received more clients between October 2021 and January 2022 than it had in the past three fiscal years combined.

⁸ Priscilla Alvarez, "America's System for Resettling Refugees is Collapsing," *The Atlantic* (9 September 2018), at <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/09/refugee-admissions-trump/569641/>; Antonio Olivo, "Refugee aid groups in Washington region overwhelmed by Afghan caseloads," *The Washington Post* (12 December 2021), at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2021/12/12/afghan-refugees-washington-virginia-cases/>; and Nahal Toosi, "Thousands of Afghans stuck at U.S. military bases face long road to resettlement," *Politico* (20 December 2021), at <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/12/20/afghan-evacuees-future-525725>

Refugees and Housing: A Difficult Search

One of the greatest challenges in resettlement occurs before refugees have even arrived in our community. For every incoming family, CCC must secure housing that is safe, accessible by public transport, and affordable for workers who may be earning close to minimum wage in their first U.S. jobs. This is a tall order in the best of times, but the challenge has been particularly daunting in the present housing market. The surge of Afghan evacuees has coincided with rising rents and a shortage of affordable housing almost everywhere, so resettlement agencies all over the country have turned to makeshift solutions, including motels, mother-in-law-units, and Airbnbs.⁹ Kristen Larcher tells us that CCC has sometimes also placed new arrivals to Hampton Roads in extended-stay motels until more permanent housing can be found.

In early 2022, newly resettled refugees in Hampton Roads were paying monthly rents that ranged from \$600 (for a studio apartment) to \$1,300 (for a multi-bedroom house). These rents are well below the regional median. Refugees' first homes in Hampton Roads are typically serviceable but far from luxurious.

A further challenge is identifying property owners who are willing to rent to this group. CCC occasionally encounters landlords who may be reluctant to take on tenants from certain parts of the world. A much more common obstacle, however, is landlords' willingness to accommodate the special circumstances of refugees, who arrive in Hampton Roads without Social Security numbers and a U.S. employment or credit history. Landlords may not initially understand that refugees have already undergone an extensive, multi-agency vetting process that far surpasses any local background check, or that CCC works with its clients on money management and rental assistance in the first months after their arrival.

⁹ Miriam Jordan, "A Refugee Crisis Runs into a Housing Crisis," *The New York Times* (15 December 2021), at <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/15/us/afghan-refugees-housing.html>

In practice, therefore, many of our region’s incoming refugees have traditionally been resettled in a handful of apartment complexes in Newport News that have a history of renting to this group and a longstanding relationship with CCC. At best, this has created supportive communities of international newcomers who look out for one another and share resources. At worst, this has contributed to a kind of ghettoization that may sometimes hinder long-term integration. The lack of affordable housing in Hampton Roads only contributes to the challenge of resettling refugees in the region.

Although renting to refugees might initially seem risky, resettlement specialists note that those who have endured long waits and surmounted numerous obstacles to get to this country tend to be particularly resourceful and hardworking once they arrive. As we’ll see below, refugees as a group are, in fact, distinctive for their upward mobility and long-term economic success. Further, additional direct assistance from the U.S. State Department can now sometimes cover refugees’ first three to six months of rent, which is paid directly to landlords by the resettlement agency.

“The most difficult unmet need for refugees is housing,” Virginia’s State Refugee Coordinator Seyoum Berhe said at an event at ODU in March. CCC is actively searching for Hampton Roads landlords and property managers who would like to rent to refugee families. The need for large single-family homes (suitable for eight persons or more) is especially great.

Finding a Job: Refugees and Hampton Roads

At least one adult in each family is expected to find work soon after resettling in Hampton Roads. In practice, however, the wait for Social Security numbers and other official documentation necessary to begin employment can sometimes be prolonged and frustrating. CCC offers pre-employment training and sessions on topics such as financial literacy, interview preparation, and resume assistance. The agency works with programs such as Virginia Career Works and the Virginia Initiative for Education and Work (VIEW), and the local departments of human services, to connect clients with potential employers and other kinds of professional training.

The spectrum of educational and work experience among refugees is vast; some are highly skilled professionals with graduate educations, while others may never have learned to read or write in their native languages. U.S. employers may not necessarily recognize refugees’ professional credentials or past work experience. Some new arrivals — especially Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders who worked closely with U.S. nationals in Iraq or Afghanistan — may already be fluent in English, while others hardly know the language. The gender gap among refugees is often considerable, as women may have previously been discouraged from pursuing an education or working outside the home. Taken together, all of these barriers mean that resettled refugees typically start out in entry-level positions that are not necessarily in their previous fields, and then they must work their way up.

In the second quarter of the 2022 fiscal year, the average hourly wage of the 25 refugees that CCC helped to place in full-time jobs was \$12.99. There was a gap between the average wage for men (\$13.75) and that for women (\$12.25) — a reflection of the greater fluency in English and past work experience that the men typically possess upon arrival. One of our region’s largest employers of newly resettled Afghans is the Army & Air Force Exchange Service (AAFES) in Newport News. Burlington Medical, the City of Newport News, Christopher Newport University, and area hotels have also hired CCC’s recent clients.

This spring we spoke with Susan Durant, human resources manager at Burlington Medical, a Newport News company that designs and produces customized lead aprons and other protective medical equipment. She told us that around 25 of the plant's 145 employees are currently resettled refugees from Afghanistan and other Middle Eastern countries. Many have come to the company with a skill that is increasingly rare among our region's entry-level workers: they are highly proficient sewers. Some honed this talent at home, while others once worked as professional tailors. Thus, although these employees may initially have little knowledge of English, they possess valuable skills, a strong work ethic, and typically advance quickly. An established core of resettled refugees at the company has facilitated carpooling, and those with seniority now train new hires themselves. Durant told us that Burlington Medical is looking into the possibility of hosting English as a Second Language classes on site, an arrangement that could potentially benefit both the company and its employees.



The Economic Impact of Refugees on Hampton Roads

“Doing well by doing good” is a popular catchphrase for the idea that corporate profits and social conscience need not be mutually exclusive. Acting in a socially responsible way, so the argument goes, can be both lucrative and charitable. The same might be said for refugee resettlement, a humanitarian undertaking that offers some significant benefits for host communities. Although some politicians and pundits have decried the expense and purported dangers of welcoming refugees, these objections appear to be based more on cultural prejudices and party posturing than on sober economic analysis.

Research suggests that “refugees’ economic contributions far outweigh the initial costs of resettlement,” as scholar Anita R. Kellogg notes. She points to local studies that show how resettled refugees have added millions of dollars and hundreds of jobs to the economies of cities such as Cleveland and Detroit. Other scholarly investigations have produced comparable results. A 2017 National Bureau of Economic Research working paper finds that “refugees pay \$21,000 more in taxes than they receive in benefits over their first 20 years in the U.S.,” while a 2021 U.S. Immigration Policy Center policy brief concludes that “refugees have no statistically significant impact on state or local expenditures or revenues where they are settled, in the short- or long-term.”¹⁰

The economic achievement of refugees tends to outstrip that of other immigrants. A 2017 New American Economy report shows that refugees who had lived in the United States five years or less had a median income of just under \$22,000 — but their median income more than tripled in subsequent decades, “growing far faster than other foreign groups.” Further, refugees’ entrepreneurship rate (13%) is higher than that of other immigrants (11.5%) and the U.S.-born population (9%).¹¹

¹⁰ Anita R. Kellogg, “Why do some U.S. mayors want more refugees?” *The Washington Post* (28 June 2021), at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/06/28/why-do-us-mayors-want-more-refugees/>; William N. Evans and Daniel Fitzgerald, “The Economic and Social Outcomes of Refugees in the United States: Evidence from the ACS,” NBER Working Paper (June 2017), at <https://www.nber.org/papers/w23498>; and Reva Dhingra, Mitchell Kilborn, and Olivia Waldemikael, “Does Refugee Resettlement Impact State and Local Finances?” U.S. Immigration Policy Center (September 2021), at <https://usipc.ucsd.edu/publications/usipc-fiscal-impact-refugee-resettlement-methodological-appendix.pdf>.

¹¹ “From Struggle to Resilience: The Economic Impact of Refugees in America,” *New American Economy* (June 2017), at <https://research.newamericaneconomy.org/report/from-struggle-to-resilience-the-economic-impact-of-refugees-in-america/>

Refugees have assumed an especially vital role in older cities with shrinking populations. In Cleveland, Detroit, Buffalo, and elsewhere, refugees have moved into empty homes, started new businesses, and revived languishing neighborhoods.¹² While the overall population of Hampton Roads continues to grow at a modest rate, the localities in our region's older urban core have good reason to welcome refugees and other immigrants.

The New American Economy report indicates that Virginia ranks among the top five states in total refugee spending power (\$2.6 billion in 2015) and refugee contributions to state and local tax revenue (\$260 million). This is a product of our state's robust resettlement network, which has an especially strong foothold in the prosperous localities of Northern Virginia. While some U.S. states have recently shrunk their resettlement programs or resisted hosting Afghan evacuees, Virginia remains a leader in this field. CBS News reported in February 2022 that more than one-third of 67,380 Afghan evacuees processed at U.S. military sites were resettled in just three states: Texas (10,494), California (8,301), and Virginia (5,171). Alexandria, Fairfax, and Manassas are among the top 20 U.S. cities where Afghans have resettled.¹³

Refugees enrich their host communities in many ways, cultural and economic, although how long they actually stay in a community affects their local impact. The U.S. Immigration Policy Center policy brief stresses that the initial costs of resettlement are overwhelmingly borne by federal (not state or local) authorities, but it is also true that refugees' purchasing power and contributions to state and local taxes rise significantly over time. CCC and other local agencies do not systematically track their clients after they have become self-sufficient, so it is difficult to determine how many remain in Hampton Roads in the long term. Anecdotal evidence suggests that members of some national groups, such as Iraqis, have tended to move on to other parts of the country with larger émigré populations.

¹² Jesse McKinley, "A Surprising Salve for New York's Beleaguered Cities: Refugees," *The New York Times* (20 February 2017), at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/20/nyregion/a-surprising-salve-for-new-yorks-beleaguered-cities-refugees.html>

¹³ Camilo Montoya-Galvez, "Here's where Afghan evacuees have resettled in the U.S.," *CBS News* (24 February 2022), at <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/afghan-evacuees-resettled-us-texas-california-virginia/>

How welcoming are we?

In a year when millions of people all over the world were uprooted from their homes, residents of Hampton Roads have welcomed the displaced in many different ways. Numerous individuals, institutions, and community groups are working alongside Commonwealth Catholic Charities to support refugees.

Hampton Roads Refugee Relief (HR3) is a small nonprofit organization, founded in 2017, which coordinates volunteers and connects local refugees with helpful resources, especially after their first three to six months in our region. HR3 has collaborated with Sentara to offer health screenings and vaccination clinics, and with the Immigration Clinic at the College of William & Mary Law School to provide legal support for Afghan evacuees who are seeking permanent residency.

For the past several years, a Refugee Health initiative at EVMS has trained medical students to identify and address the unique health needs of refugees, simultaneously bringing screenings, health fairs, and other medical services to the newcomers in our region. The initiative is part of the EVMS Global Health division, which the school may now be phasing out in order to focus more closely on other kinds of health inequity in our region, according to its director, Dr. Alexandra Leader. The initiative's services will certainly be missed within the resettled refugee community.

Old Dominion University has become the first campus in Virginia, and the first public institution in the country, to affiliate with Every Campus a Refuge, a program that encourages all universities to host one refugee family. In March 2022, ODU welcomed its first guests, a family of six from Syria, and has provided a rich array of supportive services to assist them on their road to self-sufficiency. After several months, the family will transition to independent housing, thereby making room on campus for new guests to take their place.

Working through faith-based organizations Church World Service and Samaritan's Purse, several area churches have independently sponsored Afghan families. Church World Service's Afghan Placement and Assistance (APA) Community Partner program allows community groups to resettle Afghan evacuees independent of the local agencies that have traditionally

coordinated this work — an innovative response to the urgent demand for services at a time when the resettlement agencies are still working to rebuild their earlier capacity.

Given the breadth of all these activities, it is striking that the number of refugees formally resettled in Hampton Roads is comparatively low. The Virginia Department of Social Services counts 843 clients served by the CCC office in Newport News between 2016 and 2021. With the exception of Roanoke (which served 736 clients), this is less than any other large metropolitan area in the state. Unsurprisingly, the three resettlement agencies in Northern Virginia together welcomed the most clients (7,353). Per capita, however, Hampton Roads truly lags, with an approximate population of just 48 recently resettled refugees per 100,000 residents (Graph 3). Northern Virginia and Richmond can each claim around 150, while the greater Harrisonburg area is home to as many as 723 recently resettled refugees per 100,000 residents.

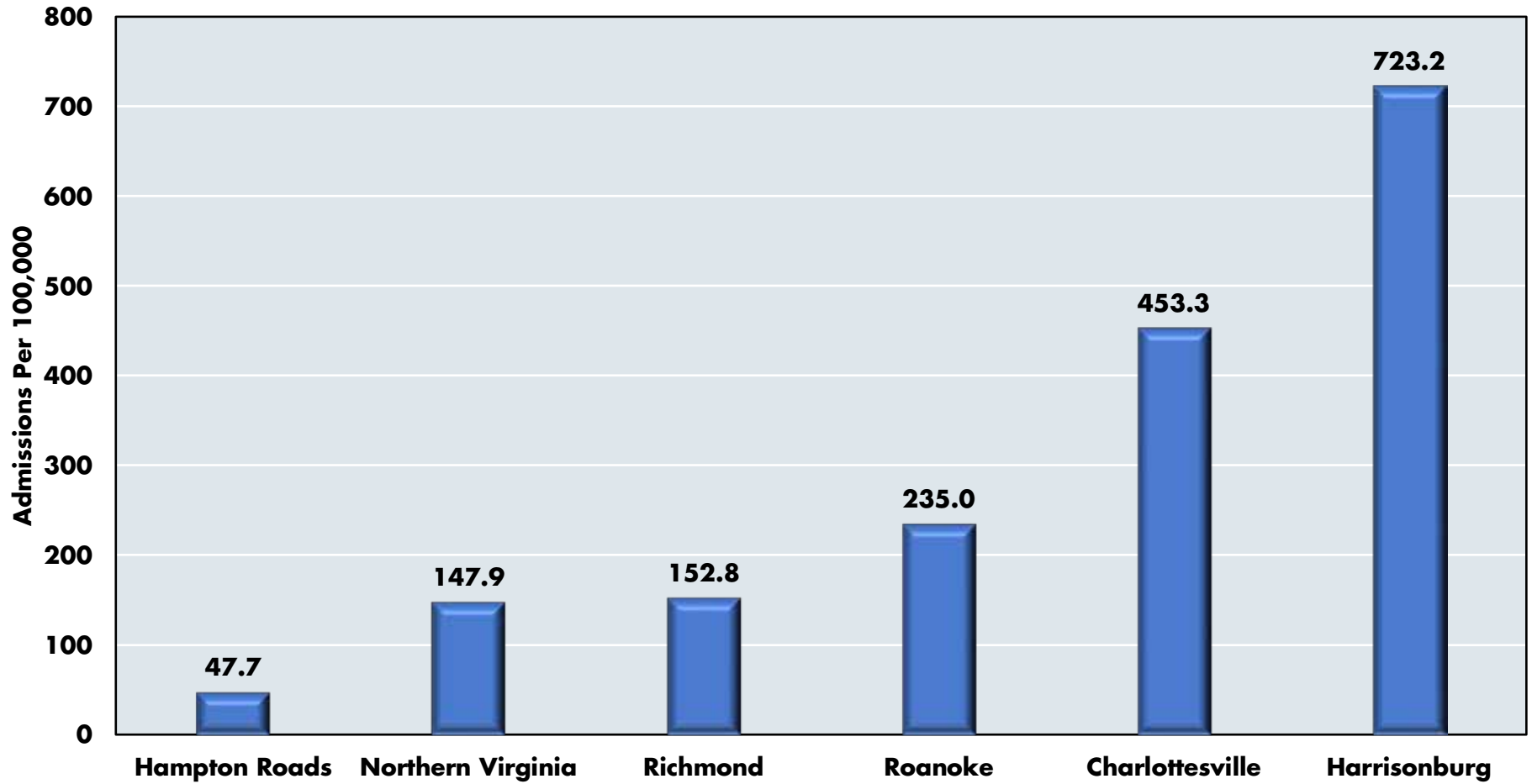


What might explain this discrepancy between Hampton Roads and Virginia's other metro areas? Although representatives in the Department of Social Services' Office of New Americans did not respond to our interview requests, we can nevertheless offer some general observations about resettlement offices in Virginia and elsewhere around the country. The location of these offices depends upon a wide range of factors, beginning with longstanding tradition and the available resources of regional organizations, such as Commonwealth Catholic Charities, that have an existing relationship with one of the nine national voluntary agencies. New offices are more likely to be established where housing is less expensive, jobs are plentiful, and where public authorities and local community members have signaled their receptiveness to resettlement.¹⁴ Despite its high cost of living, Northern Virginia is a perennial magnet for refugees, who, ideally, can be resettled near other family members. For this reason, the Ethiopian Community Development Council initiated its national resettlement program in Arlington in 1991. The Church World Service program in Harrisonburg has long been supported by the area's strong Mennonite community; refugees and other immigrants have found employment in the area's poultry and farming industries.

¹⁴ Michael D. Shear and Jim Tankersley, "For Afghan refugees, a choice between community and opportunity," *The New York Times* (24 November 2021), at <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/24/us/afghan-refugees.html>

GRAPH 3

**CUMULATIVE REFUGEE ADMISSIONS PER 100,000 RESIDENTS
SELECTED METROPOLITAN AREAS IN VIRGINIA, FY 2016 – FY 2021**



Sources: Virginia Department of Social Services, United States Census Bureau, and the Dragas Center for Economic Analysis and Policy, Old Dominion University. Cumulative refugee data for FY 2016 – FY 2021 divided by 2019 population data.



Final Thoughts

In Hampton Roads, we see much untapped potential for supporting the work of resettlement. A recent opinion piece by Krish O'Mara Vignarajah, president and CEO of Lutheran Immigrant and Refugee Service, and Joe Gebbia, co-founder and chairman of Airbnb, points to numerous ways that businesses might partner with local agencies to meet the needs of refugees, "including job training and placement, child care support, transportation, health care and mental health services, financial literacy and so much more."¹⁵ Of course, such partnerships do not flourish on their own, but must be actively pursued and cultivated by resettlement authorities. Greater community engagement on behalf of Hampton Roads' refugees seems both apt and realizable, given the comparatively modest number who resettle here and the substantial resources of our region. These notably include our large population of active service members, veterans, and contractors, some of whom may have once worked alongside, or have been helped by, the most recent evacuees.

Watching images of those fleeing their homes in Afghanistan, Syria, or Ukraine might invite a sense of helplessness. The problem is too big, too complex, and, often, too far away. Yet, there are opportunities for us in Hampton Roads to be more inviting, more involved, and more compassionate for those in need.

Money is always needed. The amount of work involved in resettlement and integration of new refugees is astounding. We need to recognize that a new refugee may need more help than can be offered by official networks. Direct contributions not only increase the capacity for assistance over the long haul, but also build resilience in the face of economic or policy shocks. Through a wish list on the CCC website, anyone can purchase essential furnishings such as bed frames, linens, kitchen supplies, and even laptop computers, which will go directly to newly resettled refugees. If you are an employer in Hampton Roads, consider hiring a member of a refugee family.

¹⁵ Krish O'Mara Vignarajah and Joe Gebbia, "How business leaders can help meet the needs of Afghan refugees," USA Today (9 December 2021), at <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2021/12/09/afghan-refugees-need-help-airbnb/8690933002/>

Time is also a resource. In fact, it is immensely valuable. Case managers at busy resettlement agencies are generally not able to provide a personal introduction to supermarkets or public transportation networks, to offer extended practice in English conversation, or to provide tech support with mobile phones and internet connectivity — although these tasks (and many others like them) are an important part of helping newly resettled refugees thrive. This is where volunteers can play a critical role. A growing number of churches and community groups are going a step further, sponsoring Afghan evacuees directly through the U.S. State Department's Sponsor Circle program or a similar program coordinated by Church World Service. The newer Uniting for Ukraine program, managed by the Department of Homeland Security, is based on a similar model of private sponsorship. A recent New Yorker article notes that "one of the most critical factors in the successful integration of immigrants is their ability to find a community, and [groups such as the] Sponsor Circles help to create local bonds."¹⁶ If you are looking to foster this kind of community within Hampton Roads, contact a local or national agency, and seek out opportunities to extend the welcome to those fleeing persecution abroad.

Investing in refugees can yield substantial returns. The academic literature and popular press are replete with examples of how immigrant communities have above-average rates of entrepreneurship. As we have often discussed in these reports, Hampton Roads needs an influx of individuals who are willing to work and invest in their own and others' human capital. By offering the proverbial "hand up" today, we may help invigorate the economy of the region even as we build caring communities.

The world is an uncertain place. We are facing global social and economic shocks, and the bow wave of refugees fleeing climate change is only beginning. The challenge is before us. How will we respond?

¹⁶ Eliza Griswold, "The Ordinary Americans Resettling Migrants Fleeing War," The New Yorker (25 April 2022), at <https://www.newyorker.com/news/us-journal/the-ordinary-americans-resettling-migrants-fleeing-war>