



How Internationally Trained Immigrants & Refugees Can Fight COVID-19, Re-open our Economy, and Advance Equity & Opportunity:

Recommendations for the Biden-Harris Administration

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Upwardly Global 

Executive Summary

The Biden administration is facing multiple crises. The COVID-19 pandemic has claimed more than 500,000 lives. The greatest economic downturn since the Great Depression has left millions jobless. The racial inequality in our system, often ignored, has been magnified by the first two challenges.

Immigrants and refugees--including an estimated two million with college degrees who are currently un- or under-employed in the U.S.¹--will play a key role in addressing all three crises. These professionals come to the U.S. with essential skills in healthcare, STEM, and business fields; offer multilingual skills and global savvy; and add diversity to our workforce that has been shown to bolster resilience, problem-solving skills, and adaptability.² With support from the federal government, these professionals could more fully contribute their skills to the U.S. workforce, especially at this critical time.

Nearly half of immigrants who have entered the U.S. since 2010 have a bachelor's degree, a graduate degree, or a professional degree. Despite rising levels of education and training, these immigrants are not guaranteed a smooth transition to the U.S. job market. They face a variety of barriers that keep them from working jobs appropriate to their skill level. Many instead face unemployment or underemployment, working in "survival jobs" that often keep them in poverty. Yet, because these immigrants arrive with education and training from their home countries, they are often overlooked when policies are crafted to provide immigrants with the tools they need to thrive in our economy.

Upwardly Global works with this community of immigrant and refugee job seekers. Over two decades, Upwardly Global has supported more than 18,000 immigrant and refugee professionals in translating their international training to the U.S. job market. At the same time, Upwardly Global partners with employers to support them in accessing pipelines of diverse talent and creating more equitable, inclusive hiring practices.

While we are proud of our accomplishments, much more can and must be done to advance the full inclusion of this cohort of U.S. workers. With federal support, programs like Upwardly Global can be scaled to reach more of the two million immigrant professionals sitting on the sidelines of our economy.

In this paper, Upwardly Global makes a number of recommendations to help speed the economic inclusion of immigrant and refugee professionals. These include:

- Greater federal coordination of immigrant inclusion via the establishment of an Office of

¹ Jeanne Batalova, Michael Fix and James D. Bachmeier. "Untapped Talent: The Costs of Brain Waste among Highly Skilled Immigrants in the United States." Migration Policy Institute. December 2016. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/untapped-talent-costs-brain-waste-among-highly-skilled-immigrants-united-states>

² Monica Munn and Jina Krause-Vilmar. "Creating Welcoming Workplaces: Let's embrace workforce diversity like our future depends on it." WES Mariam Assefa Fund. September 21, 2020. <https://www.wes.org/fund/insight/creating-welcoming-workplaces-lets-embrace-workforce-diversity-like-our-future-depends-on-it/>

New Americans within the Executive Office of the President. Such an office would coordinate the work of federal agencies, assist state and local governments, and share and promote best practices.

- Review and reform of occupational licensing processes, particularly in the healthcare field, so that licensing requirements do not unnecessarily create barriers for immigrant and refugee professionals with experience in the licensed occupation.
- Support for legislation that has proposed solutions for various barriers faced by internationally trained professionals attempting to gain U.S. work experience.
- Greater funding for various workforce development programs that will help internationally trained professionals translate their experience and training to the U.S. job market.
- Reversing regulations from the previous administration that impose barriers to immigrant and refugee self-reliance.
- Bolster the U.S. refugee resettlement program with adequate funding to support refugees in fully contributing their education and skills to the U.S. workforce.

Upwardly Global stands ready to serve as a resource to the administration as it works to realign U.S. policies to honor our tradition as a welcoming nation.

Background

Meeting Our Challenges Will Require All Hands on Deck

The Biden administration faces multiple crises. COVID-19 is ravaging the country, with more than 1 in 1,000 Americans dead and the pandemic far from controlled. We are in the middle of the greatest economic downturn since the Great Depression.³ The pandemic has shone a spotlight on a system rife with inequality and systemic racism. These challenges and others the administration is facing require all hands on deck.

Immigrants and refugees are playing—and will continue to play—a crucial role in the fight against COVID-19. Immigrants disproportionately are in occupations considered “essential workers.” For example, immigrants make up more than 16 percent of all healthcare workers, including nearly 30 percent of physicians.⁴ IT workers have been critical during the pandemic, with millions of people now working from home and merchants moving their sales to online platforms. Approximately one in four IT workers are immigrants.⁵

Even as the administration fights to bring the pandemic under control, it must also put the country on the path to economic recovery. Immigrants will play a vital role in helping the economy to recover. And they will play an increasingly important role in our long-term economic future.

In 2017, approximately 3.2 million immigrants had their own businesses, and about one in five entrepreneurs in the country were immigrants. Immigrant-owned businesses employed nearly 8 million Americans, and generated sales of \$1.3 trillion.⁶

These entrepreneurs, large and small, supported by the administration’s relief effort, will help drive the creation of jobs that will pump money back into our depleted economy.

In the longer term, immigrants will make up the most important component of growth in this country’s working-age population between now and 2035. Without immigrants, the U.S. working-age population would decrease in coming years (See Figure 1).⁷

³ Kimberly Amadeo. “History of Recessions in the United States.” The Balance, December 17, 2020. <https://www.thebalance.com/the-history-of-recessions-in-the-united-states-3306011>.

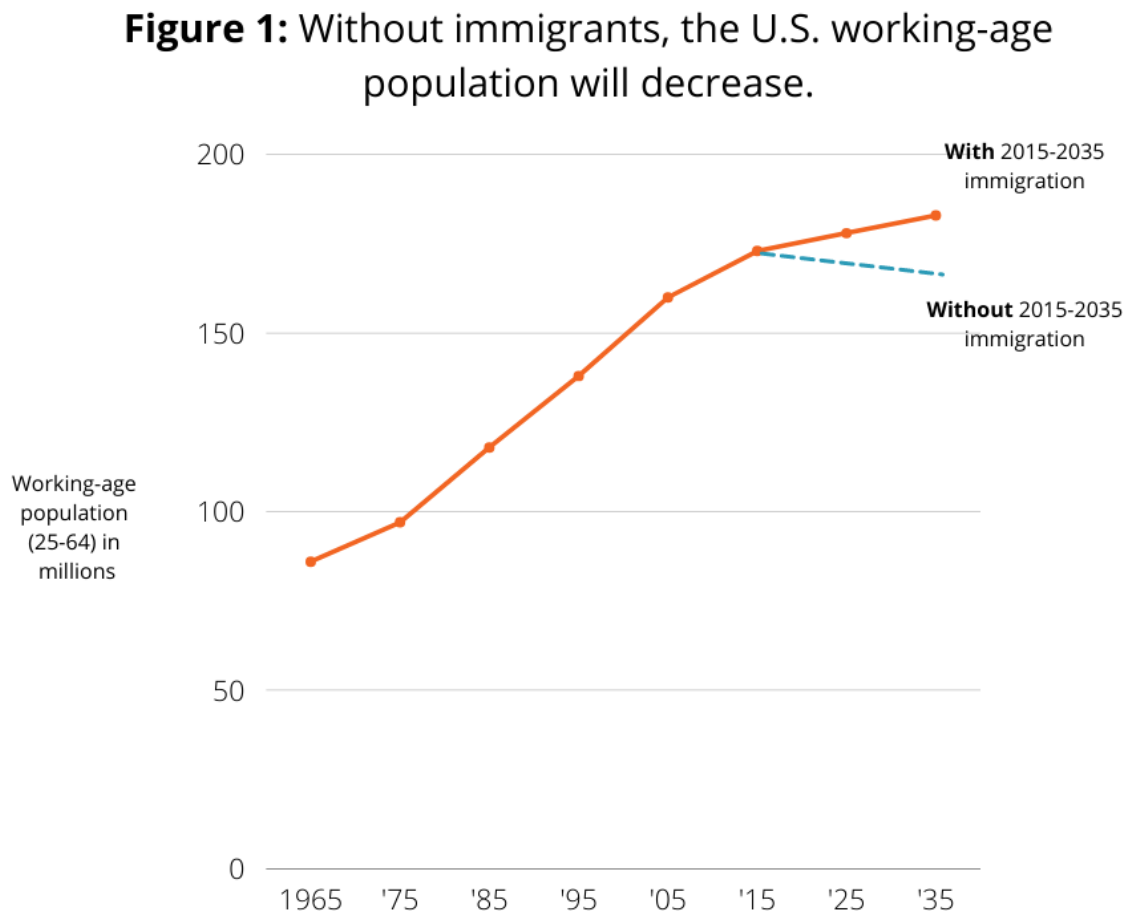
⁴ New American Economy Research Fund. “Immigration and Covid-19,” March 26, 2020. <https://research.newamericaneconomy.org/report/immigration-and-covid-19/>.

⁵ New American Economy Research Fund. “Immigrant IT Staff Help People Work Remotely During Covid-19,” May 28, 2020. <https://research.newamericaneconomy.org/report/covid-19-immigrant-tech-workers/>.

⁶ New American Economy. “New Data Shows Immigrant-Owned Businesses Employed 8 Million Americans; Immigrants Wield \$1.1 Trillion in Spending Power,” March 12, 2019. <https://www.newamericaneconomy.org/press-release/new-data-shows-immigrant-owned-businesses-employed-8-million-americans-immigrants-wield-1-1-trillion-in-spending-power/>.

⁷ Jeffrey S. Passel, and D’Vera Cohn. “Immigration Projected to Drive Potential U.S. Labor Force Growth through 2035.” *Pew Research Center | Fact Tank* (blog), March 8, 2017. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/03/08/immigration-projected-to-drive-growth-in-u-s-working-age-population-through-at-least-2035/>. Pew assumed immigration continuing on a historic trend, not factoring in how policy changes might affect migration flows.

Figure 1: Without immigrants, the U.S. working-age population will decrease.



Jeffrey S. Passel, and D'Vera Cohn. "Immigration Projected to Drive Potential U.S. Labor Force Growth through 2035." Pew Research Center | Fact Tank (blog), March 8, 2017.

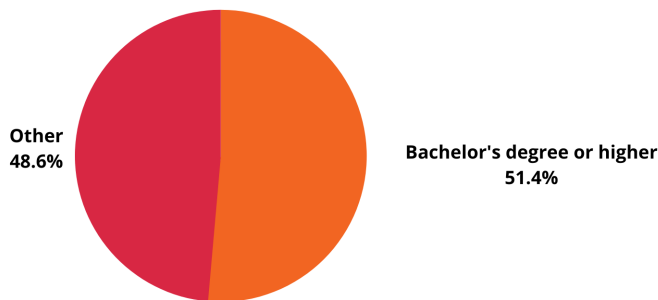
In this report, we will focus on one segment of the immigrant population—internationally trained professionals—who could do more to contribute to the response to our current crises, as well as to our economy over the longer term, if the government invested in helping them overcome barriers to finding employment appropriate to their skill level.

Immigrant and Refugee Professionals Can Do More to Help

The composition of immigrants coming to the U.S. has shifted in recent years. According to Census figures, nearly half of immigrant adults who have entered the U.S. since 2010 have a

bachelor's degree or a graduate or professional degree (See Figure 2).⁸

Figure 2: Immigrants are an increasingly educated, critical part of the U.S. workforce.



U.S. Census Bureau. "Selected Characteristics of the Foreign-Born Population, 2019: ACS 1-Year Estimates." Accessed January 15, 2021.

However, having a degree does not guarantee a smooth transition to professional life in the U.S. Many college-educated immigrants—including refugees and asylum seekers—cannot find employment in jobs appropriate to their skill level. Instead, they are unemployed or “underemployed”—working in jobs that require much less skill and education (and consequently pay less). Immigrant professionals

may be underemployed for a variety of reasons. They may not be proficient in English. They may not be familiar with the U.S. job market. They lack the professional networks to help them make the right contacts. Their international academic or professional credentials might not be recognized by U.S. licensing bodies. The training and experience they bring with them may not be aligned with U.S. standards for the same profession. Employers may not recognize their international training and experience out of misunderstanding or bias.⁹

There are many immigrants in this situation. Approximately 25 percent of immigrants with college degrees—about two million in all—were either unemployed in 2016 or were employed in jobs requiring much less education. These immigrants were earning *much* less than what they would have made in a job appropriate to their skill level—foreign-educated men in low-skilled jobs were earning \$56,000 less annually than were internationally trained professionals in high- or middle-skilled jobs.¹⁰ In fact, some 85 percent of Upwardly Global’s community of job seekers has lived at or below the poverty line, struggling to make ends meet, and thus are more likely to receive public benefits. Nearly 75 percent of Upwardly Global’s program participants identify as coming from communities of color.

Upwardly Global reached out to members of our community whose financial situations had suffered in 2020 due to the pandemic. There were many with dire needs, and our organization dispensed nearly 100 emergency relief grants to immigrant job seekers who had all or part of

⁸ U.S. Census Bureau. “Selected Characteristics of the Foreign-Born Population, 2019: ACS 1-Year Estimates.” Accessed January 15, 2021.

<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?t=Foreign%20Born&tid=ACST1Y2019.S0502&hidePreview=false>.

⁹ Jeanne Batalova, Michael Fix, and James D Bachmeier. “Untapped Talent: The Costs of Brain Waste among Highly Skilled Immigrants in the United States.” Washington, D.C.: Migration Policy Institute, New American Economy, World Education Services, December 2016. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/untapped-talent-costs-brain-waste-among-highly-skilled-immigrants-united-states>, 5.

¹⁰ Jeanne Batalova, Michael Fix, and James D Bachmeier. “Untapped Talent: The Costs of Brain Waste among Highly Skilled Immigrants in the United States.” Washington, D.C.: Migration Policy Institute, New American Economy, World Education Services, December 2016. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/untapped-talent-costs-brain-waste-among-highly-skilled-immigrants-united-states>, pp. 20-22.

their survival job income cut off due to pandemic-related causes. For example, there was an individual who had a survival job at Newark Airport, but when the pandemic hit, many airport activities shut down, and this individual was laid off. Another individual, with two children, worked as an Uber driver seven days a week to make ends meet. During the pandemic, he has been able to drive much less. By the time one of our asylee members finally received work authorization, COVID-19 was spreading in New York City and opportunities to work dried up. That asylee became homeless.

The underutilization of the skills of internationally trained professionals is a missed opportunity

Figure 3: Economic costs of the underutilization of immigrant talent.



Jeanne Batalova, Michael Fix, and James D Bachmeier. "Untapped Talent: The Costs of Brain Waste among Highly Skilled Immigrants in the United States." Washington, D.C.: Migration Policy Institute, New American Economy, World Education Services, December 2016.

not just for the immigrant, but for the economy as a whole.

Internationally trained professionals employed in jobs that do not make full use of their skills earn less, have less to spend, and pay less in federal, state, and local taxes.

According to one estimate, the total amount of lost wages for the economy was \$39.4 billion annually, and federal, state, and local

governments lost an estimated \$10.2 billion as a result (See Figure 3).¹¹

For employers, internationally trained immigrant and refugee professionals could help fill dire talent shortages that the U.S. economy was experiencing prior to the pandemic--and continues to experience in essential sectors currently. For example, in 2018, five of 10 open positions for skilled manufacturing workers remained unfilled due to a skills gap crisis. These were jobs for production and supply chain workers, digital talent, engineers, researchers, scientists, software engineers and operational managers.¹² These trends continue today: 2020 market analysis points to three million mid- to high-skill job openings in essential industries—business operations, finance, healthcare, IT, and infrastructure—in key metropolitan areas across the U.S.¹³

In 2018, across the United States, there were more than 12 health care jobs open for every

¹¹ Jeanne Batalova, Michael Fix, and James D Bachmeier. "Untapped Talent: The Costs of Brain Waste among Highly Skilled Immigrants in the United States." Washington, D.C.: Migration Policy Institute, New American Economy, World Education Services, December 2016. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/untapped-talent-costs-brain-waste-among-highly-skilled-immigrants-united-states>, pp. 20-22.

¹² Deloitte. "Manufacturing Industry Faces Unprecedented Employment Shortfall." Press Release. *Deloitte United States* (blog), November 14, 2018. <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/pages/about-deloitte/articles/2018-manufacturing-skills-gap-study.html>.

¹³ Upwardly Global, "Reskilling & New Skilling Market Research & Partnership Outreach – Accenture Job Market Analysis & Career Opportunities Webinar," December 11, 2020.

unemployed health care worker.¹⁴ The pandemic will only make matters worse,¹⁵ and the underutilization of skills by internationally trained professionals is hampering our response to the pandemic. There are approximately 165,000 internationally-trained immigrants in the U.S. with undergraduate degrees in health-related fields who are currently working below their skill level or are unemployed. Nearly half of these immigrants (plus another 98,000 U.S.-trained underemployed immigrants with degrees in health-related fields) hold undergraduate degrees in nursing, with another 10% holding degrees in pharmacy or pharmaceutical sciences.¹⁶ These immigrants speak a variety of languages, and thus could help treat a diverse patient population. They could, for example, serve as contact tracers at a time when there are documented shortages of bilingual contact tracers.¹⁷ These immigrants could also help with vaccine distribution, providing culturally and religiously nuanced information to immigrant communities that might appear distrustful about receiving the vaccine.

Yet, because these immigrants arrive in the U.S. with skills and training, they are often overlooked when policies are crafted to provide immigrants with the tools they need to thrive in our economy. Internationally trained professionals who struggle to translate their skills and training to the U.S. workplace should be explicitly included in immigrant inclusion policies.

Upwardly Global

Founded in 2000, Upwardly Global is the first and longest-serving organization focused on advancing the inclusion of immigrant and refugee professionals into the U.S. workforce. Upwardly Global's innovative skill-building and networking programs coach internationally trained professionals in rebuilding professional careers.

Upwardly Global also supports employers in crafting inclusive, equitable hiring practices that build diverse workforces—workforces proven to foster resilience, problem-solving skills, and innovation. Upwardly Global's network of immigrant and refugee professionals can serve as a pool of diverse talent for our partner companies—nearly 75% of Upwardly Global's program participants identify as coming from communities of color. Our organization has partnered with dozens of U.S. employers, including Fortune 500 companies like Accenture, Visa, and Starbucks, to hire job seekers who have completed our programs.

¹⁴ New American Economy Research Fund. "Immigrant Healthcare Workers Are Critical in the Fight Against Covid-19." Accessed December 11, 2020.
<https://research.newamericaneconomy.org/report/covid-19-immigrant-healthcare-workers/>.

¹⁵ Andrew Jacobs. "A Parallel Pandemic Hits Health Care Workers: Trauma and Exhaustion." *The New York Times*, February 4, 2021, sec. Health.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/04/health/health-care-workers-burned-out-quitting.html>.

¹⁶ Jeanne Batalova, and Michael Fix. "As U.S. Health-Care System Buckles under Pandemic, Immigrant & Refugee Professionals Could Represent a Critical Resource." *Migration Policy Institute | Commentaries* (blog), April 6, 2020.
<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/news/us-health-care-system-coronavirus-immigrant-professionals-untapped-resource>.

¹⁷ Fiona Kelliher. "California's Coronavirus Contact Tracing Efforts Hampered by Lack of Bilingual Staff." *The Mercury News*. August 15, 2020.
<https://www.mercurynews.com/2020/08/15/californias-coronavirus-contact-tracing-efforts-hampered-by-lack-of-bilingual-staff>.

Upwardly Global is prepared to partner with the administration as it tackles the serious challenges that lie ahead. Our organization urges the administration to support the inclusion of internationally trained professionals in the labor market, so that they may fully contribute their education, skills, and experience to the country's pandemic response, while at the same time helping to diversify the U.S. workforce.

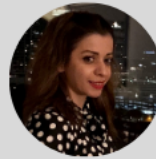
We believe that investment in rebuilding the professional careers of internationally trained professionals yields great value for our country. In 2019, Upwardly Global saw our alumni achieve an income gain, on average, of nearly \$50,000 (including a \$27,000 gain for alumni who had previously been employed in a job below their skill level). As a result, the total amount added to the economy is approximately \$50 million. In 2020, the average starting salary for our program alumni was \$59,460. See our alumni stories in Box 1.

BOX 1: UPWARDLY GLOBAL ALUMNI ON THE FRONTLINES OF COVID-19 RESPONSE



**REMY, HEALTHCARE
PROFESSIONAL FROM RWANDA**

"When I became a physician back in Rwanda, I took an oath to help people. Now, I'm keeping that promise in my new home, fighting COVID-19 as a Contact Tracer with my local Health Department. I'm proud to be back in my field, and to be keeping my promise. Upwardly Global has helped me every step of the way."



**ZINAH, HR PROFESSIONAL FROM
IRAQ**

"I am part of a pandemic task force at my job, understanding how COVID is affecting staff & operations. I am grateful to UpGlo for helping me rebuild my career so I can support my colleagues during this time."



**ALEX, IT PROFESSIONAL FROM
HONG KONG**

"I've always been interested in tech and how it can make our lives easier. I'm proud to be part of the workforce that has allowed so many people to work from home and help us all practice social distancing. It's an honor to give back to my new home during this difficult time, and I'm grateful to Upwardly Global for helping me get there."



**KASIA, HEALTHCARE
PROFESSIONAL FROM POLAND**

"I'm a fully licensed physician in Poland, but haven't been able to complete the long process to re-license in the U.S. It was hard to watch COVID-19 spread through my community – but it was tougher not to be able to help. I knew my duty was to be on the frontlines, and so, with support from Upwardly Global, I've started working at a medical center providing COVID-19 screening."

Over two decades, Upwardly Global has supported more than 18,000 immigrant and refugee

professionals with our one-on-one career coaching, online professional English language courses, training on U.S. workplace skills, and skills training in particular industries. We also offer networking opportunities—with the help of volunteers from our partner companies—for immigrant professionals who otherwise may not have connections in the industries and occupations for which they have been trained. We also provide licensing guides for popular careers in select states. In 2019, partnering with 55 employers, we launched more than 1,000 careers.

Because there is such diversity—in academic training, occupation, English-language ability, cultural awareness—among the internationally trained professionals who come to the U.S., preparing these individuals for the U.S. job market is very individualized and labor intensive.

Much more can and must be done. With federal support, programs like ours can be scaled to reach the two million college-educated immigrants who are underemployed or unemployed and speed their labor market integration, using the valuable skills they bring with them from their home countries. The resulting boost to the economy would also be scaled.

This report offers a roadmap for building policies that advance the full inclusion of immigrant professionals in the U.S. workforce, bolstering both our immediate response to the COVID-19 pandemic and long-term resilience, innovation, and economic vibrancy.

Analysis and Recommendations

Federal Coordination

Immigration policy is set at the national level, but the federal government largely takes a hands-off approach on immigrant inclusion.

Instead, the work of immigrant inclusion occurs at the local level, with the help of local and state governments and nonprofit immigrant-serving organizations. There are many promising practices circulating in states, localities, and nonprofit organizations that advance the labor market inclusion of immigrant professionals by removing unnecessary barriers and through highly-effective training and education to align the skills these immigrants and refugees bring with them to the specific requirements of the U.S. job market.

In truth, the federal government has much at stake in ensuring that those who are admitted to the U.S. are fully included into the American fabric, and the federal government is well-positioned to coordinate public and private stakeholders who can work together to tackle this challenge.

Recommendation 1: Establish an Office of New Americans

Upwardly Global applauds the administration for the Executive Order directing the Domestic Policy Council to convene a Task Force on New Americans.¹⁸ We now urge the administration to

¹⁸ The White House. “Executive Order on Restoring Faith in Our Legal Immigration Systems and Strengthening Integration and Inclusion Efforts for New Americans,” February 2, 2021.

establish a permanent Office of New Americans, dedicated to supporting the inclusion of immigrants into our society and workforce.

Purposes and Organization of the Office

Legislation introduced in the current Congress provides a good outline for the purpose and the organization of the office. Among other purposes, the Office of New Americans would:

- support the inclusion of immigrants into the social, economic, cultural, and civic life in the U.S.;
- coordinate the work of federal agencies to ensure that relevant programs, such as workforce development, adult education, and other programs meet the demand and unique needs of immigrants and refugees;
- work with state and local entities to support effective efforts at immigrant inclusion—with, among other things, technical assistance funding and other support to increase capacity of state and local governments and community agencies that assist immigrant and refugee job seekers gain employment appropriate to their level of skill and experience; and
- counsel the President, members of Congress, and other federal officials on immigrant inclusion in the U.S. workforce.

The Office would be staffed by deputy directors for citizenship and inclusion, workforce and the economy, and children's integration success. There would also be a Bureau of State and Local Affairs that would, among other things, coordinate the efforts of state and local entities in supporting immigrant inclusion.

Why We Support a Permanent Office Within the Office of the President

We believe there should ultimately be a permanent Office with dedicated staff and funding, in order to accomplish the significant work of federal coordination of immigrant inclusion. We believe the Executive Office of the President is the logical place to house the Office of New Americans, to best ensure participation of and coordination with the broad range of federal agencies that have programs relevant to immigrant inclusion.

Options for Establishing the Office and for Staffing

Having a legislative mandate would ensure the establishment of the Office and provide stability between administrations. We urge the administration to support the National Office for New Americans Act, H.R. 527, introduced by Representative Meng (NY) and S. 291, introduced by Senator Markey (MA). However, absent congressional action, the office could be established by executive action.

Depending on what is feasible, funding to staff the Office could come from a dedicated budget request (as are other offices, such as the Office of Science and Technology). Alternatively, some staffing could be funded through a budget request for the office, with additional support coming from the temporary reassignment from federal agencies of persons with expertise in programs pertaining to immigrant inclusion.

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/02/02/executive-order-restoring-faith-in-our-legal-immigration-systems-and-strengthening-integration-and-inclusion-efforts-for-new-americans/>.

A Focus on Immigrant and Refugee Professionals

As mentioned above, internationally trained professionals are often overlooked as a population in need of resources to help them overcome barriers to inclusion in the U.S. workforce. The work of the Office of New Americans should include meeting the unique language, training, and educational needs of immigrant and refugee professionals, as well as other immigrants and refugees.

With respect to internationally trained professionals, an Office of New Americans should conduct research to examine barriers that prevent these individuals from finding work appropriate to their level of training, including professional licensing (Box 2).. Where these barriers prove unnecessary, the Office of New Americans should recommend policies to remove them, beginning with federal agencies that set rules over various aspects of workplace education and training.

BOX 2: REVIEW AND REFORM OF OCCUPATIONAL LICENSING

More than one-quarter of U.S. workers now require a license to do their job. While licensing requirements promote health and safety, and provide incentives for professional development among workers in licensed occupations, they also often serve as a barrier for immigrants and refugees who earned their credentials and experience in their home countries.

Most state-level licensing practices do not recognize international degrees or experience, meaning that immigrant and refugee professionals often need to repeat significant parts of their education and training to be able to return to their professional fields in the U.S. The path is long for many, especially healthcare professionals: The re-licensing process for internationally-trained physicians can take more than 5 years and cost more than \$15,000, plus lost wages. Licensing is one of the many barriers that has sidelined an estimated 165,000 internationally-trained healthcare professionals in the U.S.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, a number of states have taken steps to bring in foreign-trained health care professionals into their workforce by issuing emergency licenses to health care professionals with licenses to practice in other countries. More recently, the White House called on states to issue temporary vaccination licenses for foreign-educated healthcare professionals. The Office of New Americans should promote these best practices with other states where internationally trained healthcare professionals stand ready to help.

Recommendation 2: Engage Employers in Advancing Immigrant Inclusion

While there is an important role for the government in promoting best practices for immigrant workforce inclusion, employers are also critical partners. The Office of New Americans should convene industry leaders so that employers can learn from each other and learn about potential partners in government or the nonprofit world. With respect to internationally trained professionals, such convening could help employers understand the value of internationally acquired credentials.

Working with employers, an Office of New Americans can play a role in helping the administration meet its goals to advance racial equity and support for underserved communities—not just through the federal government, but through the broader economy. Approximately 85 percent of positions are filled through existing networks.¹⁹ The Office of New Americans could play a valuable role in introducing employers to new networks, by working with employers and employer associations to connect them with immigrant and refugee serving organizations that might provide a more diverse pipeline for their workforce.

Finally, such convenings could be used as forums to recognize the good work already being done by employers who are already taking diversity and inclusion seriously, and are engaged in supporting and training their immigrant and refugee workers.

Workforce Development Legislation

Several pieces of legislation have been introduced in the current and recent Congresses that would mitigate the challenge of the underutilization of skills faced by internationally trained professionals while at the same time helping to fill critical talent gaps for U.S. employers.

The U.S. Citizenship Act

We applaud the administration for sending the “U.S. Citizenship Act of 2021” to Congress in February 2021.²⁰ The bill provides for important programs for immigrant inclusion, something that has been generally overlooked by the federal government.

Among other things, the legislation contains provisions regarding workforce development. Section 3505, the Workforce Development and Shared Prosperity Grant Program, will provide grants to states, local governments, and other qualifying entities for workforce development programs targeted at immigrants and refugees.

Section 3508 would require a study on factors affecting employment opportunities for immigrants and refugees with professional credentials. The study would assess barriers preventing immigrant and refugee professionals from using their experience obtained outside the U.S. to obtain employment in the U.S. The report would make policy recommendations for

¹⁹ Lou Adler. “New Survey Reveals 85% of All Jobs Are Filled Via Networking.” LinkedIn, February 29, 2016. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/new-survey-reveals-85-all-jobs-filled-via-networking-lou-adler>.

²⁰ The White House. “Statement by President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. on Introduction of the U.S. Citizenship Act of 2021,” February 18, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/02/18/statement-by-president-joseph-r-biden-jr-on-introduction-of-the-u-s-citizenship-act-of-2021/>.

removing barriers to employment for these individuals.

Upwardly Global stands ready to work with Congress and the administration to ensure that programs working with internationally trained professionals are included among the programs that qualify for funding in the Workforce Development and Shared Prosperity Grant Program.

The Professional's Access to Health Workforce Integration Act

Also known as the “PATH Act,”²¹ this bill was drafted to respond to a nationwide health workforce shortage by awarding grants to eligible entities—clinics, community-based organizations, academic institutions, faith-based organizations, local governments and other entities—to provide services to assist unemployed and underemployed internationally educated health professionals, to help them enter the health workforce with employment to match their skills and education, or to advance to positions matching their professional training. Grants may also be used:

- to provide training to reduce barriers to entry and advancement for internationally trained immigrants;
- to educate employers regarding the abilities of internationally educated health professionals;
- to assist in the evaluation of the foreign credentials of internationally trained health professionals; and
- to provide contextualized English courses for internationally trained health professionals.

In exchange, internationally trained professionals benefiting from this program would agree to serve in a medically underserved community for up to one year.

This legislation is valuable because it authorizes separate appropriations for the grants. Should Congress fail to act, the administration could request appropriations for these or similar grants in its budget for the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). It could also use existing funding to award grants accomplishing similar goals through (for example) the Bureau of Health Workforce within HHS, whose mission aligns with the goal of these grants.

The Resident Physician Shortage Reduction Act of 2019

While this bill does not focus exclusively on internationally trained professionals, it alleviates a roadblock to the licensing of internationally trained physicians: a shortage of hospital residency slots. Recent U.S. medical graduates are much more likely to get into a medical residency than are internationally trained physicians who may have extensive practice but have been out of school for a number of years.²² This legislation provides for an additional 3,000 residency positions in hospitals nationwide, for a total of 15,000 over five years. It also directs the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) to conduct a study on strategies for increasing diversity in the health professional workforce.

Since the Social Security Act governs the number of hospital residencies and how they are allocated, a change in the number of residencies requires amending the Act. A study on strategies

²¹ H.R. 5917 (2018), <https://www.congress.gov/115/bills/hr5917/BILLS-115hr5917ih.pdf>

²² “Task Force on Foreign-Trained Physicians: Report to the Minnesota Legislature 2015.” St. Paul, Minnesota: Minnesota Department of Health, January 2015. <https://www.immigrationresearch.org/system/files/finalrpt.pdf>.

for increasing diversity in the health professional workforce could, however, be conducted by HHS without need of legislation.

H.R. 6432

This bill directs the Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) to establish a task force to study the impact of physician shortages in the U.S. and to quantify the number of individuals who have completed physician training outside the U.S. and who are not practicing as physicians. The study will also identify reasons these individuals are not practicing, and identify regulatory and other barriers preventing them from practicing.

Improving Opportunities for New Americans Act (H.R. 8046)

This bill would require the Secretary of Labor, coordinating with other departments, to conduct a study on factors affecting employment opportunities for immigrants and refugees with professional credentials. The content of this bill has been incorporated into the administration's "U.S. Citizenship Act," described above.

Both H.R. 6432 and H.R. 8046 would initiate studies. Should Congress fail to act, the administration should act on its own to study these problems, propose solutions and publish the findings.

There are other bills that would increase representation by underrepresented communities in the infrastructure workforce.

Transportation and Infrastructure Profession Opportunity Grants Act

This bill, introduced in the last Congress, authorizes grants for demonstration projects to provide individuals—particularly those from minority communities and U.S. veterans—with the opportunity to gain education and training for well-paying transportation and infrastructure occupations. Grants would be awarded to applicants that include partnerships with organizations with experience serving these communities. Among the activities covered by the grant would be "case-management and career coaching services ... to assist eligible individuals gain work experiences, connection to employers, and job placement." While this bill would serve individuals with a wide variety of needs, it would include valuable opportunities for immigrants and refugees with international training in transportation or infrastructure professions to gain U.S. work experience. More importantly, this legislation would increase diversity in the transportation and infrastructure workforce.

This legislation funnels the infrastructure profession opportunity grants through the Social Security Administration's Social Services Block Grants program. Should Congress fail to act on this stand-alone legislation, another way to accomplish this legislation's worthwhile goal would be to include provisions for similar grants within an infrastructure bill. Thus, the administration would make progress on two priorities: building up U.S. infrastructure and diversifying the workforce.

Building U.S. Infrastructure by Leveraging Demands for Skills (BUILDS) Act

Introduced in the last Congress, this bill would diversify the infrastructure workforce by

providing grants promoting sector partnerships leading to worker training, retention, and advancement. Among other things, grants authorized by this legislation would help the infrastructure industry diversify its job seeker base to include individuals with barriers to employment and those who are underrepresented in the industry. Individuals identified as such would receive support to address barriers to their employment.

This bill would promote the diversification of the infrastructure workforce. While it does not explicitly reference internationally trained professionals, it should be interpreted to include them. Updates to bill language would clarify that immigrant and refugee professionals with training in infrastructure would be included in the scope of this legislation.

The BUILDS Act could move through Congress as a stand-alone bill, or it could be included in a larger infrastructure package when the administration proposes one. Either way, there should be dedicated funding to diversify this sector, so that the goal is not dropped in the competition with other priorities.

Recommendation 3: Support Legislation to Increase Diversity in the Workforce

Upwardly Global urges the administration to support the above legislation and similar initiatives to reduce barriers to employment for internationally trained professionals and other disadvantaged workers and increase diversity in the workforce. Details on pathways forward for specific bills are included in analysis above.

There are other bills that address immigrant inclusion more broadly. For example, the **New Deal for New Americans Act** includes, among other things, programs promoting citizenship, English language training, and workforce development. It does not explicitly include immigrants and refugees with international training who experience barriers to employment in the U.S., but with minor language changes, it could explicitly include these individuals.

Budgeting for Success

Programs to promote the workforce integration of immigrants will require funding. The nation's workforce training programs have been hampered by the failure to adequately budget for them. Good policy is only as good as there is funding to implement it. In the immediate future, economic stimulus funding should include career pathway opportunities to those who are brought in to help the country combat the pandemic, including immigrants.

Recommendation 4: Invest in a Contact Tracing Workforce that Will Support Health Equity

Congress is currently preparing a bill that will require a quick ramping up of U.S. public health personnel, including: \$46 billion for coronavirus testing, contact tracing, and community-based testing sites, particularly in medically underserved areas; more than \$7 billion to hire 100,000 public health workers to support coronavirus response; and \$20 billion for a national vaccination program.²³ This presents an opportunity to create long-term opportunities with spending to solve

²³ Tami Luhby and Katie Lobosco. "Here's What's in the House Democrats' Stimulus Relief Plan." CNN, February 22, 2021. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/19/politics/stimulus-house-democrats-proposal/index.html>.

the immediate problem, and to approach hiring with a lens for diversity, equity, and inclusion, considering the myriad ways that internationally trained healthcare professionals are uniquely positioned to fill these roles.

Implementation: The administration should include in rules governing grants for hiring public health workers a requirement that states make a concerted effort to recruit workers from the communities most affected by the pandemic, including immigrant communities and communities of color.²⁴ States should also form partnerships with health care providers to provide a pathway to long-term careers in the healthcare industry for these workers. Such a course of action will simultaneously help the U.S. meet three important goals: ramping up the workforce needed for pandemic response; diversifying the healthcare workforce; and mitigating the chronic shortage of workers in the healthcare industry.

Recommendation 5: Invest in Skilling to Support Economic Recovery

As the administration's attention turns from controlling the pandemic to helping the economy recover, it should invest in re-skilling for the millions who have lost their jobs—disproportionately immigrants and persons of color.²⁵ Skilling efforts should include internationally-trained professionals who have relevant professional skills but need support in gaining the additional training or experience to meet U.S. requirements for their profession. This would not only provide immediate help to people who have lost their jobs, but would serve as a long-term investment in workforce skills.

Implementation: In its budget for the Department of Labor, the administration should request additional funding for programs to re-skill workers affected by fallout from the pandemic. Outside of emergency funding, the administration should reverse the long downward slope of federal investment in the skills of U.S. workers.²⁶

Recommendation 6: Increase and Expand Scope of Workforce Development and Adult Education Programs

Upwardly Global calls on the administration to increase funding for workforce development, education and training programs across the country. Among other things, there should be increased funding to boost programs for English language learners, including programs to support internationally trained professionals who need vocational English language training.

Implementation: In its FY 2022 budget, the administration should request increased funding for the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), which provides funding for these programs. More funding is needed to support English-language acquisition and Integrated

²⁴ The COVID Racial Data Tracker. <https://covidtracking.com/race>

²⁵ Rogelio Saenz and Corey Sparks. "The Inequities of Job Loss and Recovery Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic." Issue Brief. National Issue Brief. Durham, New Hampshire: University of New Hampshire, Carsey School of Public Policy, August 10, 2020. <https://carsey.unh.edu/publication/inequities-job-loss-recovery-amid-COVID-pandemic>.

²⁶ "After Two Decades of Cuts, We Need Real Investments in Skills Training." Fact Sheet. National Skills Coalition. Accessed February 25, 2021. <https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Funding-Cuts-Fact-Sheet-March2019.pdf>.

Education and Training programs, contained in Title II of WIOA, for immigrant job seekers who already have basic language ability and a survival job, but need to acquire additional skills to move into higher-wage jobs. The WIOA workforce training programs have never been funded at authorized levels, and funding that has been appropriated has been cut 40 percent in the past two decades²⁷—despite the fact that U.S. employers are increasingly challenged to fill mid- and high-level jobs in essential sectors.

Recommendation 7: Improve Immigrant Access to Community College

As the Biden administration works to implement its goal of making available up to two years of tuition-free community college education for working adults and other students, we urge the administration to include additional support for immigrants and other working adults to make it possible for them to take advantage of the opportunity. This effort should include funding for vocational and professional English-language courses and supportive services for job seekers, including immigrants, that will help them understand the job market, the credentials needed for their chosen occupation, and how to navigate cross-cultural barriers to the job search.

Implementation: The administration’s future budgets should increase funding for workforce education programs and target some funding to help community colleges provide support services for immigrants and refugees with special needs. Funding should also be increased for Perkins Career and Technical Education Programs, increasing the capacity of Community Colleges to fund innovative occupational education programs, including best practice programs to speed the integration of immigrant and refugee professionals into the U.S. workforce.

Recommendation 8: Ensure Student Financial Aid is Available to Immigrants and Refugees

The Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSAA) provided emergency funds for eligible private nonprofit or public institutions to be used for student aid and certain institutional costs. Students with exceptional needs are prioritized for aid to cover the cost of attendance or for emergency costs arising from the pandemic—including tuition, food, housing, health care, or child care. Students eligible for financial aid should include immigrants and refugees participating in non-credit courses/training to help them transition to a career appropriate to their internationally acquired training.

Implementation: Department of Education Guidance should explicitly include such individuals in their materials concerning the CRRSAA.

Recommendation 9: Ensure Immigrant and Refugee Access to Federally-Funded Apprenticeship Programs

Upwardly Global applauds the Biden administration for its commitment to expand registered

²⁷ Katie Spiker. “Despite Focus from the Administration, Budget Falls Short on Much Needed Investment in Workforce and Education Programs.” *National Skills Coalition* (blog), March 12, 2019. <https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/blog/higher-education/despite-focus-from-the-administration-budget-falls-short-on-much-needed-investment-in-workforce-and-education-programs/>.

apprenticeship programs.²⁸ Paid apprenticeships, “mid-ternships” and “returnships” give immigrants and refugees, including those with training abroad, valuable U.S. work experience and education in U.S. workplace culture. We urge the administration to ensure that this population is served in future apprenticeships.

Implementation: As the administration reconstitutes the National Advisory Committee on Apprenticeships, ensure that there is representation from organizations that understand the unique needs of immigrants and refugees, including internationally trained immigrant and refugee professionals.

Guidance for future grants for apprenticeships should make clear that apprenticeship grants may cover costs related to vocational English language instruction and other supports for immigrants and refugees. Build in incentives for employers to bring on apprentices from immigrant and other minority communities.

Recommendation 10: Provide Tax and Other Incentives to Encourage Employers to Build Hiring Practices that Center Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Another avenue for funding workforce training is by providing tax incentives to employers for building hiring practices that center diversity, equity, and inclusion—including the hiring of internationally trained professionals. The best training to be had is in the workplace, but many U.S. employers are not connected to talent streams that include immigrants and refugees. As mentioned above, the administration, through the Office of New Americans, can play a role in connecting employers to new networks through immigrant and refugee serving organizations.

Beyond networking, employers can be incentivized to diversify their workforce through tax credits. Employers will gain from greater diversity in their talent pool, linked to innovation and resilience.²⁹ Such a program would also advance the administration’s goal of “building back” better by advancing racial equity across the economy.

Implementation: Beyond steps taken to ensure diversity in apprenticeship programs, work with Congress to create new tax incentives for employers to hire workers from diverse communities.

Rules and Regulations

The Trump administration used executive actions—executive orders, regulatory changes, policy manual changes—that stymied the full inclusion of immigrant and refugee professionals in the U.S. workforce. Reversal of these regulations should be a priority. Below we make recommendations to roll back or reverse unproductive policies, and replace them with more

²⁸ The White House. “Fact Sheet: Biden Administration to Take Steps to Bolster Registered Apprenticeships,” February 17, 2021.
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/02/17/fact-sheet-biden-administration-to-take-steps-to-bolster-registered-apprenticeships/>.

²⁹ Monica Munn and Jina Krause-Vilmar. “Creating Welcoming Workplaces: Let’s embrace workforce diversity like our future depends on it.” WES Mariam Assefa Fund. September 21, 2020.
<https://www.wes.org/fund/insight/creating-welcoming-workplaces-lets-embrace-workforce-diversity-like-our-future-depends-on-it/>

forward-looking executive actions.

Recommendation 11: Reverse the Trump Administration's Public Charge Rule

We applaud the Biden Administration for issuing Executive Order 14012,³⁰ taking steps to review the Trump Administration's regulation on inadmissibility on public charge grounds, published in August 2019.³¹

Immigrants experiencing unemployment or underemployment may temporarily rely on public benefits, such as food stamps, to make ends meet. That does not make them a “public charge.” As long as people in this country earn wages insufficient to pay for living expenses, there will be workers—immigrants and native-born alike—who must occasionally rely on public benefits to make up the difference. See Box 3 for a story from Upwardly Global's community.

BOX 3: A PATHWAY TO SELF-SUFFICIENCY



One of Upwardly Global's clients, Au, a market analyst from Vietnam who came to the U.S. in 2016, originally survived with her husband on his minimum-wage salary until she became pregnant. With temporary access to Medicaid, Au was supported through her pregnancy and delivered a healthy baby. Today, after going through Upwardly Global's coaching program, Au is back to work as an analyst, earning a six-figure salary and giving back to her community in myriad ways.

As many as 85 percent of Upwardly Global's immigrant job seekers lived below the poverty level at some point, most working in low-wage survival jobs while they worked to overcome barriers to success in their profession in the U.S. Some of these struggling underemployed professionals drew on public support to help meet living expenses. A 2018 survey demonstrated that 61 percent of our program alumni could have been vulnerable to the public charge test based on their household incomes alone. Our program alumni now earn an average of nearly \$60,000 annually, and some earn well over \$100,000 per year.

Implementation: The public charge rule is currently in effect, though several appellate courts have ruled that it is likely unlawful. The Supreme Court has allowed the rule to take effect while

³⁰ The White House. “Executive Order on Restoring Faith in Our Legal Immigration Systems and Strengthening Integration and Inclusion Efforts for New Americans,” February 2, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/02/02/executive-order-restoring-faith-in-our-legal-immigration-systems-and-strengthening-integration-and-inclusion-efforts-for-new-americans/>.

³¹ U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. “Inadmissibility on Public Charge Grounds, Final Rule.” Federal Register, August 14, 2019. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2019-08-14/pdf/2019-17142.pdf>.

court cases proceed. A U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois has ruled the public charge regulation violated the Administrative Procedures Act, and vacated the public charge final rule.³² A companion regulation for the State Department was prevented from going into effect by a court ruling in the Southern District of New York.³³ The administration should withdraw government challenges to the court rulings, and rewrite the public charge rule.

Recommendation 12: Reverse Regulations that Put Work Authorization Out of Reach for Asylum Seekers

The Biden administration must reverse regulations promulgated by the Trump administration that prevent asylum seekers from gaining timely access to work authorization. One rule would require asylum seekers to wait one year from the filing of their asylum application until they could *apply* for work authorization.³⁴ Another rule eliminates a requirement to process work authorization applications within 30 days of receipt.³⁵ The effect of these two rules deny asylum seekers permission to work for more than 13 months.

Immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers must have timely access to work authorization in order to achieve self-sufficiency while contributing to our economy. To keep them waiting for months or years for permission to work goes against U.S. policies that value self-sufficiency, with implications for our workforce and economy. Since 2017, Upwardly Global has worked with more than 300 asylum seekers who had international training in engineering, IT industries, health care, and finance. These asylum seekers earn, collectively, approximately \$18 million annually and contribute an estimated \$2.1 million in federal taxes each year. Denying these individuals permission to work, to provide for their families, and to contribute to the economy does not make sense.

Implementation: The U.S. District Court for Maryland placed an injunction against implementation of these rules,³⁶ but the Court provided relief only for the plaintiffs, members of two Washington, D.C. area immigrant and asylee service organizations.³⁷ The basis of the Court's decision was that plaintiffs were likely to prevail in arguing that the Trump

³² Judge Gary Feinerman. "Memorandum Opinion and Order, Cook County, Illinois vs. Chad Wolf." U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois Eastern Division, November 2, 2020.

<https://www.courthousenews.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/public-charge-il.pdf>.

³³ U.S. District Judge George B. Daniels. "Make The Road, New York, et. al. v. Michael Pompeo, et. Al." U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York, July 29, 2020.

<https://www.nilc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/MTRNY-v-Pompeo-PI-Order-2020-07-29.pdf>.

³⁴ Department of Homeland Security. "Asylum Application, Interview, and Employment Authorization for Applicants, Final Rule." Federal Register, June 26, 2020.

<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2020-06-26/pdf/2020-13544.pdf>.

³⁵ U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. "Removal of 30-Day Processing Provision for Asylum Applicant-Related Form I-765 Employment Authorization Applications, Final Rule." Federal Register, June 22, 2020.

<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2020-06-22/pdf/2020-13391.pdf>.

³⁶ "Casa De Md. v. Wolf, Civil Action No. 8:20-Cv-02118-PX," September 11, 2020.

<https://casetext.com/case/casa-de-md-v-wolf>.

³⁷ U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. "Application for Employment Authorization | USCIS," February 1, 2021. <https://www.uscis.gov/i-765>.

administration violated the Administrative Procedures Act, and that the installation of Chad Wolf as acting Secretary of DHS was illegal, and thus rules issued under his authority were also illegal. This ruling provides an opportunity for the administration to withdraw the rule since, if the rule was issued without authority and violated the Administrative Procedures Act, it should be rescinded entirely.

Recommendation 13: Make Immigration Fees More Fair

The outgoing administration published a new immigration benefit fee schedule with sharp increases in application costs for a range of immigration benefits.³⁸ We applaud the Biden-Harris administration for taking a first step to reexamining the fee schedule with Executive Order 14012.³⁹

We have particular concerns about a new requirement for asylum applicants to pay an initial work authorization fee and a requirement that work authorization applicants submit biometrics and pay the fee for that. Asylum is a humanitarian benefit. The imposition of high fees for work authorization, combined with other regulations (mentioned above) that will make work authorization for asylum seekers extremely difficult to obtain, will present one more obstacle for asylum seekers to provide for themselves and their families while they await a decision on their case. As noted above, Upwardly Global has worked with more than 300 asylum seekers who now collectively earn approximately \$18 million annually. The imposition of new fees for asylum seekers may keep these individuals from accessing employment authorization, and the economy would lose the benefit of their contributions.

We urge the administration to reexamine USCIS processes and costs, eliminate duplicative and unnecessary costs, reconfigure immigration fees to remove charges for humanitarian benefits, and take into account ability to pay more broadly.

Implementation: On September 29, 2020, the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California issued an injunction preventing the fee rule from taking effect.⁴⁰ The court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs' claims that Chad Wolf was not serving lawfully as DHS secretary and thus the rule issued by him was not lawfully issued. The court also found that DHS violated the Administrative Procedures Act. USCIS has subsequently published a notice that it is complying

³⁸ Federal Register. "U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Fee Schedule and Changes to Certain Other Immigration Benefit Request Requirements," January 29, 2021. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2021/01/29/2021-02044/us-citizenship-and-immigration-services-fee-schedule-and-changes-to-certain-other-immigration>.

³⁹ The White House. "Executive Order on Restoring Faith in Our Legal Immigration Systems and Strengthening Integration and Inclusion Efforts for New Americans," February 2, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/02/02/executive-order-restoring-faith-in-our-legal-immigration-systems-and-strengthening-integration-and-inclusion-efforts-for-new-americans/>.

⁴⁰ U.S. District Judge Jeffrey S. White. "Immigrant Legal Resource Center, et al., v Chad F. Wolf, et al., Order Granting Plaintiffs' Motion for Preliminary Injunction and Request for Stay of Effective Date of Rule and Denying Request for Administrative Stay." U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California, September 29, 2020. http://cdn.cnn.com/cnn/2020/images/09/29/immigrant_legal_resource_center_v_wolf_et_al_candce-20-05883_0098.0.pdf.

with the court order, and collecting fees under the previous fee schedule.⁴¹

This provides the administration with an opportunity to re-do its most recent fee review, which can be done keeping in mind anticipated policy changes the administration might enact that will have an impact on fees. For example, under the Trump administration, immigration adjudicators have been saddled with redundant but ultimately unnecessary extra vetting, which added processing costs. Once a new fee review is completed, the administration can proceed with issuing a new proposed fee schedule.

Recommendation 14: Seek a One-Time Appropriation for USCIS

We also urge the administration to seek a one-time appropriation to stabilize the funding for U.S. Customs and Immigration Services (USCIS) so the agency can process an enormous backlog of applications for a range of immigration benefits, including work authorization. There has been a decline in applications (and thus a decline in fee receipts), in part due to policies of the previous administration. At the same time, the agency has spent more on detecting fraud and on enhanced vetting, which has led to reduced productivity and growing backlogs—without showing that the added expense has detected additional fraud.⁴² Incoming fees alone will not be sufficient to process incoming applications plus those stuck in the backlog.

Implementation: The president should make this request in his next budget.

Recommendation 15: Support the Full Inclusion of Refugees, Including Refugee Professionals

We applaud the Biden-Harris administration for its intention, signaled in an executive order on February 4, 2021, to rebuild and enhance the U.S. refugee program.⁴³ Refugees arrive in the U.S. with a range of skills and abilities, including some with professional education and training. A robust refugee resettlement system will advance the full integration of refugees into the workforce with workforce development, skilling, and training programs.

The Refugee Career Pathways program, a program begun by the Office of Refugee Resettlement in 2018, provides refugees with the necessary training and technical assistance in order to overcome obstacles to initiating their careers in the U.S. and to ensure they have the resources and knowledge needed to succeed. That program could be augmented by taking advantage of the time refugees spend waiting for the pre-resettlement process to be completed. During this time (currently averaging 1.5 to 2

⁴¹ Federal Register. “U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Fee Schedule and Changes to Certain Other Immigration Benefit Request Requirements,” January 29, 2021.
<https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2021/01/29/2021-02044/us-citizenship-and-immigration-services-fee-schedule-and-changes-to-certain-other-immigration>.

⁴² Sarah Pierce and Doris Meissner. “USCIS Budget Implosion Owes to Far More than the Pandemic.” Migration Policy Institute | Commentaries, June 15, 2020.
<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/news/uscis-severe-budget-shortfall>.

⁴³ The White House. “Executive Order on Rebuilding and Enhancing Programs to Resettle Refugees and Planning for the Impact of Climate Change on Migration,” February 5, 2021.
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/02/04/executive-order-on-rebuilding-and-enhancing-programs-to-resettle-refugees-and-planning-for-the-impact-of-climate-change-on-migration/>.

years),⁴⁴ the government should provide refugees with information useful for transferring their skills and knowledge to the U.S. workplace—including vocational English language learning and information about occupational license requirements.

Once in the United States, refugees are supported in part by the Refugee Cash and Medical Assistance program, begun in 1980. In the early years of the program, states were reimbursed for up to 36 months for providing assistance to refugees. Currently, refugee cash assistance and refugee medical assistance are limited to eight months.⁴⁵ Cash assistance for employment training and placement assistance are geared to the refugee attaining self-sufficiency as quickly as possible. Refugee professionals who may need more time to translate their international training to the U.S. job market may instead be encouraged to take a survival job in order to meet the program’s need to achieve self-sufficiency “as quickly as possible.”

Implementation: To rebuild and enhance the U.S. refugee program, the administration should request a special appropriation to help rebuild the refugee resettlement system, including the many faith-based and nonprofit organizations that were part of the resettlement network. Many of these organizations were forced to lay off staff or close offices altogether when refugee admissions were dramatically reduced during the Trump administration.⁴⁶ Without support from a revitalized resettlement network, including workforce development and inclusion programs, refugees will have difficulty finding the support they need to adjust to life in their new country.

To speed the process of refugees becoming self-sufficient after they arrive, the president should include in the budget refugee resettlement funding for pre-arrival programs that will help refugees prepare for participation in the U.S. workforce.

Regarding support for refugees after they have been resettled, the Immigration and Nationality Act still authorizes reimbursement to states, and grants to public and private nonprofit agencies, for up to 36 months for cash and medical assistance provided to refugees after arrival.⁴⁷ The administration has plenty of leeway to request appropriation for refugee resettlement assistance beyond the eight months that has been the norm in recent years. The longer timeframe will give refugees more time to pursue an appropriate career while survival needs are taken care of. An expansion of the timeframe for cash and medical assistance should be included in the administration’s budget as the administration begins to rebuild the refugee resettlement program.

Conclusion

There is an enormous amount of work to be done to recover from the pandemic and, beyond that, to build back an economy that has been severely damaged as a result of the pandemic. Immigrant and refugee workers are playing, and will continue to play, a key role in pandemic response and

⁴⁴ National Immigration Forum. “Fact Sheet: U.S. Refugee Resettlement,” November 5, 2020.

<https://immigrationforum.org/article/fact-sheet-u-s-refugee-resettlement/>.

⁴⁵ Andorra Bruno. “U.S. Refugee Resettlement Assistance.” Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, January 4, 2011. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41570.pdf>.

⁴⁶ Priscilla Alvarez. “America’s System for Resettling Refugees Is Collapsing.” The Atlantic, September 9, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/09/refugee-admissions-trump/569641/>.

⁴⁷ 8 USC 1522(e)(1)

economic recovery. With appropriate support to meet their unique needs, immigrants and refugees can do more.

With regards to internationally trained immigrant and refugee professionals, federal support has the potential to scale up programs that meet the unique individual needs of immigrants and refugees who are trained in a profession, but need specialized assistance to translate their skills to the U.S. labor market.

To gain maximum benefit from the contributions that immigrants and refugees can provide in helping our country overcome our crises, the government must act quickly. In the preceding pages, Upwardly Global has laid out some actions the administration could take to speed the economic integration of immigrant and refugee professionals. Following these recommendations—along with those of colleague organizations serving other communities of immigrants and refugees—will not only help the administration succeed in its response to our public health and economic crises but, over the long term, supporting immigrants and refugees entering the workforce today will increase the diversity of tomorrow’s workforce at all levels.

Upwardly Global stands ready to be a resource for the administration, for the federal agencies that will carry out this work, and for the state and local governments that are partners in this effort.

About the Author

Maurice Belanger is an analyst and writer with more than 25 years experience working in the field of immigration policy. Previously, Maurice was Director of Public Information for the National Immigration Forum. In that capacity, he translated complicated immigration law and policy, incorporating political context and background that can be just as important to understanding policy developments as the wording of proposed laws and regulations.



Upwardly Global, founded in 2000, is the first and longest-serving organization focused on advancing the inclusion of immigrant and refugee professionals into the U.S. workforce. Upwardly Global's innovative skill-building and networking programs coach internationally trained professionals in rebuilding professional careers and U.S. employers in accessing their talents with inclusive hiring practices. To date, Upwardly Global has placed more than 7,500 people, adding \$358 million to the economy each year.

www.upwardlyglobal.org