

Engaging Refugee Workers in Workforce Coalitions

This spotlight is part of a [series](#) summarizing six “build & learn” pilots launched in 2024 to explore how field building could take shape in different settings and impact domains. Developed with trusted field partners, the pilots focused on bringing actors together to spur efforts that would have otherwise not emerged or been slow to develop. They were designed to catalyze meaningful impact while generating insight to inform a broader field-building strategy.

THE CHALLENGE

Workers with refugee status face barriers to workforce opportunities that limit their upward mobility, often forcing them to accept low-quality jobs with risks to their physical safety. Knowingly or unknowingly, employers perpetuate these barriers through practices like relying on staffing agencies to source foreign-born personnel for frontline roles. This practice unnecessarily complicates the career navigation process for foreign-born workers and limits the ability of employers and refugee populations to build an understanding of each other’s skills and needs.

Insight into how employer practices affect the refugee workforce could advance inclusive workforce strategies. However, refugee-supporting organizations that could give voice to these concerns and translate the needs of employers in their own communities are seldom invited to build connections with employers. They are often excluded from workforce development conversations within chambers of commerce and economic development partnerships.

THE GOAL

This build & learn pilot project aspires to draw ethnic community-based organizations representing refugees into workforce development activities in the Louisville, Kentucky, region. It sought to accelerate existing efforts to build a diverse coalition that includes refugees, employers, resettlement agencies, government, and community-based organizations so they can understand how their agendas align and develop recommendations for employers interested in advancing refugee hires.

THE FIRST STEP

The steering committee approved an initial investment of \$150,000 to KentuckianaWorks to host three meetings to build awareness of refugees’ hiring and retention challenges and create strategies to better support their success, including through stronger relationships among employers, service providers (including those supporting workplace-based English proficiency training and professional skills), and local immigrant and refugee leaders.

At the first meeting, an **employer panel** focused on

- how companies **benefit from the skills and diverse perspectives** refugees and immigrants bring,
- **creative solutions to challenges** like onboarding and language barriers,
- how support agencies can help **streamline the employment process**, and
- the **need for targeted investments** to support the long-term success of refugee employees.

Discussions surfaced differing perspectives about what is and is not working in the region, explored potential shared goals, and identified additional partners still missing from this newly established shared table.

At the second meeting, an **employee panel** surfaced challenges including

- **insufficient public transportation** that requires most new employees to find carpools to workplaces until they can earn enough to buy their own car or risk termination from late arrival or the inability to work longer hours;
- **a need to ensure safe and welcoming working conditions** that are free from discrimination and are receptive to all cultural backgrounds;
- **a desire for assistance with the costs** of international transcript translation and verification of skills and credentials; and
- **an interest in engaging on residency requirements** for certain occupational sectors.

Following the panel, participants worked in groups to prioritize a list of potential resources and tools from the first meeting. The highest-ranked resource options included training for employers and employees on promoting workplace integration, a how-to guide for refugee workers, and a best practices manual for employers. A third meeting is still to come.

“*Imagine if we had a combined strategic effort to create job fairs, negotiation sessions, workshops, and training sessions to match refugee workers with employers.*

—Alma Herović, International Rescue Committee

PARTNERS

KentuckianaWorks is the lead partner for this engagement. It serves as the Louisville region's Workforce Development Board, with the mission of helping job seekers in the seven-county region find jobs, education, and training.

Steering committee member Samra Haider (Center for Employment Opportunities) shaped and stewarded this pilot. Ryan Kelsey and Catherine Harvey (Urban Institute) provided planning and logistical support.

“*I'm looking forward to seeing...what solutions we come up with and how we open up dialogue between employers and the populations that we serve.*

—Daniela Watanabe, Kentucky Refugee Ministries

LESSONS LEARNED

KentuckianaWorks plans to build a set of resources (e.g., asset maps, fact sheets) for employers and refugee-serving organizations that could be used locally and shared broadly with other communities. It also intends to develop company career maps that would help refugee-supporting organizations better understand the trajectory of opportunities available at their local employers.