

NY State Budget provides more aid to refugees in Buffalo

Buffalo News – Jay Tokasz – 11 April 2022



Refugees from Burma learn to speak English at the International Institute in 2009. The institute is among four Buffalo resettlement agencies expected to benefit from a boost in funding in the new state budget.

Derek Gee/News file photo

Refugee resettlement, which helped turn around Western New York's decades-long population slide, is

getting a boost from state lawmakers.

The \$220 billion state budget approved Saturday includes \$6 million to aid refugees in building a new life after fleeing countries torn apart by war or political strife. It's double the amount awarded in 2021 and the most state money committed to refugee resettlement since the New York Enhanced Services to Refugees Program was created in 2017.

Much of the money will likely end up in Western New York, which has four resettlement agencies.

"There's not many occasions where you can do God's work and also have it be so that it benefits your community economically," said State Sen. Sean Ryan (D-Buffalo), who pushed for the funding along with Assemblyman Jon Rivera (D-Buffalo). "It's the work coming out of Buffalo that showed we can pretty quickly integrate refugees into our schools, our community, our economy, and that it's actually a long-term gain and not

An uptick in resettlement is anticipated statewide, as President Biden agreed last year to admit 125,000 refugees into the U.S. – far more than were allowed during the Trump administration.

Over the past six months, the Buffalo Niagara region took in more than 600 evacuees from Afghanistan alone, and a second phase of Afghan arrivals could happen later this year, said Jennifer Rizzo-Choi, interim director of the International Institute of Buffalo.

More than 16,000 refugees from across the globe settled in the City of Buffalo over the past two decades, said Ryan.

Data from the 2020 Census showed that Buffalo's population grew for the first time in 70 years, and many experts have pinned that growth primarily on new immigration to the city via refugee resettlement efforts. Erie County's population also grew to 954,236 people in 2020, up from 919,040 a decade earlier. The gains could help spur an increase in federal funding to the region.

Ryan said he believes the region has the capacity to add more refugees, but resettlement agencies need help in handling what is expected to be a surge in admissions amid growing political instability and hostility in other parts of the world, including Ukraine.

It's far too soon to know when, or how many. And it may not be a huge number, simply because Ukrainian refugees have options closer to home.

An estimated 4.5 million Ukrainians fled their home country since Russian armed forces invaded in late February. The Biden administration recently announced the U.S. will take 100,000 Ukrainian evacuees, although local resettlement agencies have received no official word yet on what role they will play, Rizzo-Choi said.

"The Ukrainian population is still a big question," she said.

The region's four resettlement agencies – the International Institute, Catholic Charities of Buffalo, Journey's End and Jewish Family Services – will receive a "sizeable chunk" of the \$6 million to use toward resettlement efforts.

Federal aid covers the cost of casework by a resettlement agency for up to 90 days after a refugee's arrival in a host community. But many refugees often need services beyond three months.

"Ninety days is a very short window for somebody to acclimate to their entire new life in a foreign country, especially if they don't speak the languages that are spoken here," said Rizzo-Choi.

The state money allows agencies to continue providing services such as employment training after the 90 days, easing refugees' transitions into communities, she said.