

January 27, 2021

Enhancing Access to COVID-19 Emergency Rental Assistance Programs for New Americans

Proposal Request

U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants Vermont (USCRI Vermont) would like to request **\$150,000** in grant support for enhancing access to COVID-19 emergency rental assistance for refugee and immigrant communities in Vermont. This funding would support statewide specialized interpretation services and application assistance through intensive case management for refugee and immigrant populations with limited English proficiency in need of the emergency rental and utilities assistance offered through the State of Vermont with Emergency Rental Assistance funding. USCRI Vermont proposes to provide these services for a period between April 1, 2021 and December 30, 2021.

Over the past eleven months, the work of USCRI Vermont has shifted from the resettlement of arrivals and providing social services support to helping protect the health, safety, livelihood, and housing stability of refugee and immigrant families throughout the state struggling through the COVID-19 crisis. USCRI Vermont, in coordination with the Association of Africans Living in Vermont (AALV) and other community organizations, provided direct services to over 250 refugee and immigrant families. As a key part of this focus, USCRI Vermont assisted eligible individuals with limited English proficiency in applying to the Vermont COVID-19 rental housing stabilization and utilities arrearage assistance programs.

New arrivals face a range of barriers that can adversely affect long-term housing retention and stability. One of the biggest challenges refugee arrivals face is orienting themselves to the complex new world of renting an apartment or a house, including how to understand lease agreements and deposits; coordinating utilities and paying bills; household safety and new appliances; and connecting with neighbors and the community as residents in their new neighborhood. Inability to communicate with landlords, unfamiliarity with U.S. housing laws, and financial instability can be significant barriers that add to housing challenges. USCRI has learned one of the most effective methods for helping new arrivals and refugee families navigate the complexities of securing affordable housing is by educating and preparing clients at the outset of the search and/or placement through linguistically appropriate content and customized interpretation services.

For this program, USCRI Vermont housing case manager and several interpreters will receive training on the assistance programs and coordinate work closely with Vermont Legal Aid (VLA) and other partner organizations. Interpreters and case managers will conduct outreach, identify community members who need emergency rental and utilities assistance, and assist qualified clients with applications and assembling required information and documentation.

As the sole refugee resettlement agency in Vermont, USCRI Vermont is uniquely qualified to provide this assistance in partnership with AALV and other partners. USCRI Vermont staff are responsible for placing refugees into their initial housing and, as a result, have extensive connections with landlords. USCRI Vermont staff also assist each refugee family resettled in Vermont with applying for subsidized housing, working closely with housing authorities and Champlain Housing Trust. USCRI Vermont can provide written translations of key program documents and has a statewide on-call interpretation service, with in-person and remote telephonic and video options, covering a wide range of languages.

Founded in 1980, USCRI Vermont (formally the Vermont Refugee Resettlement Program) brings hope and opportunity to the lives of refugees and immigrants through comprehensive, integrated, and linguistically and culturally appropriate services. USCRI is the only Voluntary Agency in Vermont that provides refugee resettlement services through the United States Refugee Program. As the only refugee resettlement agency in Vermont, USCRI Vermont has helped thousands of newly arrived refugees and other eligible populations from over 35 countries secure safe and affordable housing, adjust to new cultural and social norms, gain employment opportunities, learn English, and access other community services. Securing affordable housing for new arrivals within the first few weeks is one of our most critical services, and USCRI is well-positioned to enhance and expand housing services to more adequately support both the initial and long-term housing needs of refugees. Over the last decade, USCRI has helped over 3,000 refugee and immigrant families find housing and achieve economic and social self-sufficiency in Chittenden County and throughout the state.

Sincere regards,



Amila Merdzanovic, Director USCRI Vermont