



To: Members of the Vermont Senate Committee on Education
From: World Learning/School for International Training (SIT)
Date: February 2, 2024
Subject: Prepared Testimony in support of S. 191, an act relating to New American Advancement Grant Applicants

Thank you to the Members of the Senate Committee on Education for welcoming me to your committee. My name is Mary Kay Sigda, and I am the Senior Program Officer with World Learning/the School for International Training (SIT) for our New Vermonter Education Program (NVEP).

It is an honor to testify before you today in strong support of S. 191, an act relating to New American Advancement Grant Applicants. On behalf of everyone working to support the resettlement of refugees in southern Vermont, including the Ethiopian Community Development Council (ECDC), the Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation (BDCC), and Vermont Adult Learning (VAL), I want to begin by expressing our deep appreciation to Senator Hashim for his leadership on this issue. I also want to thank VSAC for being terrific partners over the last six months while we have continued to open our campus to refugees from around the world.

In my role, in addition to providing support to our partners at The Tutorial Center in Bennington, I spend four days a week at the Multicultural Community Center in downtown Brattleboro working directly with the teachers and a group of more than 55 refugee students (or “New Vermonters” as we refer to them) – a group which is growing with each new set of arrivals. I observe the passion and yearning that these New Vermonters bring to the classroom in pursuit of additional English language and learning skills that they can use to further their own education and abilities to secure a good-paying job.

The New Vermonters I’ve been fortunate to know and work with have arrived in the United States after overcoming unimaginable odds and horrendous experiences. They are incredibly hard workers who want to settle in and contribute to our communities and our local economies as quickly as they can. For context, some New Vermonters arrive in the United States not knowing how to read or write in their own native language, while others have advanced degrees from their home country. Each deserves an opportunity to succeed.

One example is Najat from the Middle East. She arrived less than a year ago and speaks Arabic but has no reading or writing skills. Today, she is writing the English alphabet and speaking basic sentences about her family, thanks to her incredible patience and perseverance. Another example are three young Congolese men who were in their last semester of university when they were relocated. If VSAC grants were available to them, they could continue their studies in civil, chemical, and electrical engineering – all fields Vermont needs experts in.

Right now, VSAC resources are only available to support New Vermonters after they've already been in the state for a year. This one-year residency requirement significantly delays their access to resources and opportunities that will help them to connect with their new community and provide for their families.

And other resources, such as those available to the State Refugee Coordinator, are stretched extraordinarily thin, as they must cover everything from core case management to employment services, mental health, legal support, and some educational needs. The VSAC short term advancement grants are therefore critical since they are the most flexible and readily accessible source of funding to support New Vermonters' ability to pursue further education and employment.

For example, Jorge from Latin America arrived less than two years ago, and he didn't speak a word of English. Today he is enrolled in our TOEFL exam preparation course so that he can apply for an associate's degree this fall. Sohaila from Afghanistan has been waiting two years to enroll in an MA program and thanks to VSAC advancement grants, she studied composition and research methods at CCV and is currently enrolled in our TOEFL exam course.

To give you a sense of the need for this legislation, just last year Vermont welcomed and resettled approximately 500 refugees, about two-thirds of whom are adults. This means more than 330 refugees are likely still ineligible to access VSAC support and have had to wait most of the past year before being able to pursue additional education, continuing their career pathway, and rebuilding their lives.

As Members of this Committee are well aware, southern Vermont has been hit especially hard by the consolidation of higher education during recent years. Adjusting these requirements to help New Vermonters pursue nondegree education and training opportunities would also have important economic benefits to the region, particularly by helping address workforce shortages.

In fact, nearly all of the refugees we've welcomed to southern Vermont over the last two years have chosen to stay in Vermont, and over 80 percent of those eligible for employment have found good paying jobs among 49 local businesses. They've earned an average hourly wage of \$19.07 (\$5.40 more than minimum wage) and contributed over \$3.7 million in annual taxable wages.

I will close by pointing out that this issue is not going away. ECDC and USCRI anticipate resettling approximately 600 people in the state over the course of 2024. While not every adult will want or need to access support from VSAC, the language learning and other training opportunities that the short-term advancement grant offers will be absolutely critical to helping New Vermonters settle and succeed in Vermont this year.

From all of us at World Learning and the School for International Training, thank you very much for the opportunity today to share our experiences supporting New Vermonters and letting us reiterate our strong support for the change proposed in S. 191. We also deeply appreciate VSAC's willingness to understand the experiences of New Vermonters and their efforts to find additional ways to support them. We look forward to continuing to partner with you all.