



Refugee Leadership

A Chicago-area Landscape Analysis of Immigrant and Refugee Leadership Training Programs

Prepared for:

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Prepared by:

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Gratitude

This study would not have been possible without the wisdom of our colleagues and comrades in the immigrant and refugee justice space in Chicago. Much gratitude is expressed to each person who gave us their time during interviews to share their learnings and methods in pushing for change.

We thank the many dedicated advocates, activists, and scholars who work everyday toward equity and justice in our communities. We share a vision that all people, in all our diverse and remarkable experiences, will be free and liberated from oppressions and hierarchies because we exercise collective agency over our own lives.

Nuestra existencia es nuestra resistencia.

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Refugee Council USA (RCUSA), along with Refugee Congress and Institute for the Study of International Migration at Georgetown University, are leading efforts to develop the Refugee Leadership Training Consortium (RLTC). This new initiative takes a holistic approach to addressing access and equity problems as they pertain to the workforce and leadership of Forcibly Displaced People (FDPs), and refugee-led and refugee-serving organizations. People who have been forcibly displaced are active in social-sector settings and are well-represented at the community level. Nonetheless, they continue to face barriers when embarking on career paths that provide the necessary upward mobility to bring them to decision-making positions in government and nongovernmental organizations.

The Chicago-area Landscape Analysis of Immigrant and Refugee Leadership Training Programs will inform the RLTC. Chicago has a rich landscape and history of advocacy and leadership training with immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and forcibly displaced persons. Documented here are practices, programs, and methodologies of how Chicago-based refugee- and immigrant-serving organizations involve direct constituents in their own advocacy to influence national and international policy based on their collective lived experiences. Methodologies included document reviews, desk research, observation of the RCUSA refugee training module in Washington, D.C., and field interviews with Chicago-area advocacy and training organization representatives to answer the following research questions:

- **What is the landscape in the Chicago region for state and local advocacy training for Forcibly Displaced People?**
- **What are the gaps in career-building and other engagement opportunities for FDPs in the Chicago region?**
- **What Chicago-area institutions could join the RLTC as providers of policy advocacy training opportunities?**
- **What salient issue intersections and social determinants emerge that apply to leadership development and training?**
- **Are these Chicago-area training opportunities scalable at a national level, establishing Chicago as an exemplar for policy advocacy training for FDPs?**

◆ Recommendations

The robust body of evidence from scholarly research and hands-on experience with refugee and immigrant leadership development training suggests these best practices in supporting the following recommendations:



Balance career professionalization with leadership development.

Overwhelmingly, training programs included critical thinking and political analysis embedded throughout their curricula. Organizations employed both audience specific and intersectional frameworks to build political and social knowledge. Nonprofit management skills should be combined with strategy, analysis, and community engagement modules to best empower effective FDP leaders.



Political education and analysis should be provided both to FPDs and to organizations.

Training FDPs to take leadership positions within organizations that do not value FDP leadership obstructs success. Traditional barriers and hierarchies that have impeded FDP leadership up to now must be addressed through comprehensive intersectional training workshops, such as on cultural humility.



Prioritize FPD participation at every level.

To ensure a training program that authentically serves FDPs, they should be involved from forming the curriculum and training components, to facilitating (when appropriate), to evaluating, and acting as mentors for future iterations. Leveraging intrinsic and developed leadership of FDP participants through political education can build solidarity and complex political analysis to build cohesive policy and other agendas that have full consent from those most affected. RCUSA and other RLTC partners should engage local member organizations to solicit their leaders to participate in trainings, set policy agendas, and engage in other core activities.



Partner with local member organizations for development, implementation, and scaling of the RLTC.

Member organization participation will be crucial to implement the RLTC at scale: from developing the program with FDP input and recruiting participants, to implementing targeted workshops, internships, and fellowships, to scaling evaluation of various components. Engaging local member organizations early can ensure deep buy-in and program support.



Include formative evaluation from the development through the implementation of the RLTC.

An evaluator trained in culturally responsive practices can engage and collect data from FDP participants and organizational and coalition stakeholders from the start, to support a participatory model and build in evaluation checkpoints and capacity that will sustain evaluation processes in future iterations. Recommended activities include developing a theory of change, a logic model, and a formal evaluation plan with data collection tools (Sheikh 2020, 28). RLTC steering members should consider the role of RCUSA and other primary organizations in the long-term evaluation and accountability of the program. Local partners and organizational members should be included in building strategies for accountability and follow-up.



Employ a cohort model whenever possible to build networks and mentorship for future iterations.

Cohort models have several benefits. Participation can be controlled with a set number of participants, and diversity of cohort members can check inclusive engagement practices. Most importantly, trained leaders will form relationships to strengthen existing FDP networks. They can also engage in participatory processes to assess and fine tune curriculum models for future cohorts and provide mentorship for the next participants.



Address accessibility throughout the RLTC.

The biggest barrier to participation is financial. Consider paying FDP leaders to participate so they do not have to choose between their own leadership development and employment. Reduce other financial barriers by providing food, transportation, and childcare for in-person trainings. Additionally, ensure that materials are translated and that interpretation is offered in all needed languages for full participation, even if English-proficiency is declared.