

RRSC

Refugee Resettlement
in Small Cities

University of Vermont

New Americans Employment Experience in Vermont



Overview

Employment is a central aspiration and foundation for Vermonters from all walks of life and background. For New Americans – immigrants who have arrived in the state through direct resettlement via the US Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) or through secondary migration – employment is the foundation of effective integration and socio-economic outcomes. Yet many barriers to such objectives remain; they have been present before the current political moment but have become heightened as cuts to the USRAP and significant changes to US immigration policies at the federal level have reverberated throughout the country. For these reasons, the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants-VT (USCRI-VT, based in Colchester) and the Association of Africans Living in Vermont (AALV, based in Burlington) partnered with myself and my research team (based at the University of Vermont in the Department of Geography and the Global Studies Program) to undertake a study of best practices of refugee employers and the lived experiences of refugee workers within a range of workplaces in Vermont.

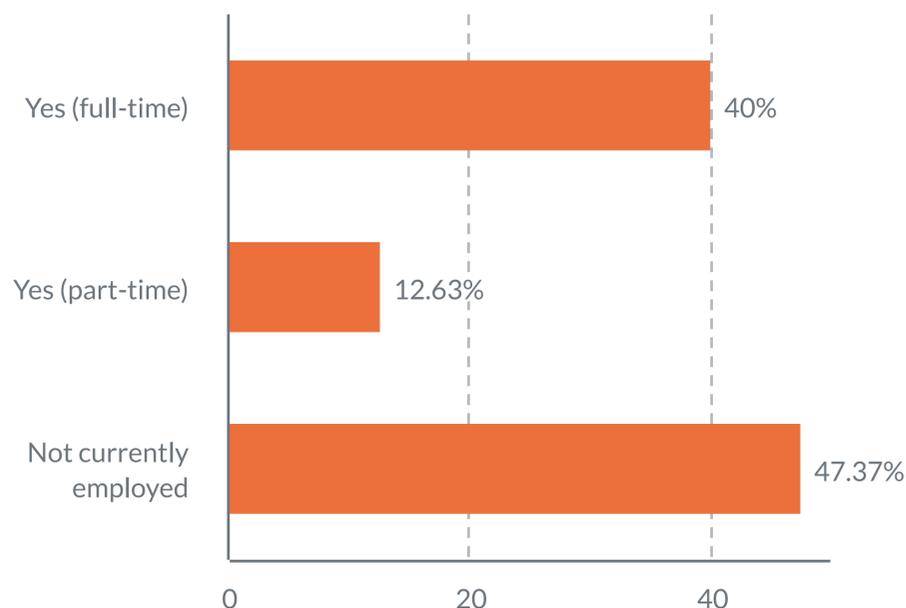
Both AALV and USCRI-VT have long-supported the employment aspirations of New Americans settled primarily (but not exclusively) in Chittenden County, especially within the towns of Burlington, South Burlington, Winooski, Essex, and Essex Junction. Additional sites of employment include St. Albans, Shelbourne, and Williston. To better understand the trends and practices we drew upon existing research that I and my team have conducted over the past 12 years and conducted a new study as well. I have been studying refugee resettlement outcomes in Vermont, the US and across the world during this period; the specific projects we drew upon for existing data include two funded by the US DOT (on refugee transportation and mobility), one funded by the National Science Foundation (on refugee resettlement in non-traditional locations) and several funded internally by UVM on refugee resettlement. These utilized mixed methods including interviews, surveys, focus groups, participant observation and analysis of census and other demographic data.

Our new study was designed to explore, analyze and document employment opportunities and challenges for refugee arrivals and New Americans in Vermont. The project will identify trends among employers of New Americans in Chittenden County to better understand New Americans in the workplace. This research has been done by conducting interviews with employers, refugee workers and service providers in collaboration with USCRI-VT and AALV (who have helped us to identify participants and representative workplaces). The purpose of the research is to create a best-practices model for current and future employers of New Americans in order to provide a safe and welcoming workplace. The project's primary objective is to identify ways to improve safety and well-being for New Americans in the workplace. The main products of this research will be two reports, a set of recommendations for best practices regarding employing New Americans and a short handbook or toolkit that can help employers who may be interested in hiring New American workers. We also hope that this research can be helpful for policymakers hoping to address employment issues for New Americans in the state.

This preliminary report draws from interviews with a total of 27 individuals (10 employers, 13 employees and 4 service providers working in the field of employment assistance) to explore, analyze and document employment opportunities and challenges for New Americans in Vermont. The objective has been to identify important trends: what is working well, where improvements need to be made, and what we can learn about best practices from employers. With this information, the next step will be to create a best-practices toolkit for current and future employers of New Americans to support a safe and welcoming workplace. We add context to these interviews with the following information.

Our focus in this study is on refugees, those who have been officially resettled in Vermont through the USRAP or have arrived through secondary migration. Here are some of the results from a survey of 100 individuals who are currently clients of AALV.

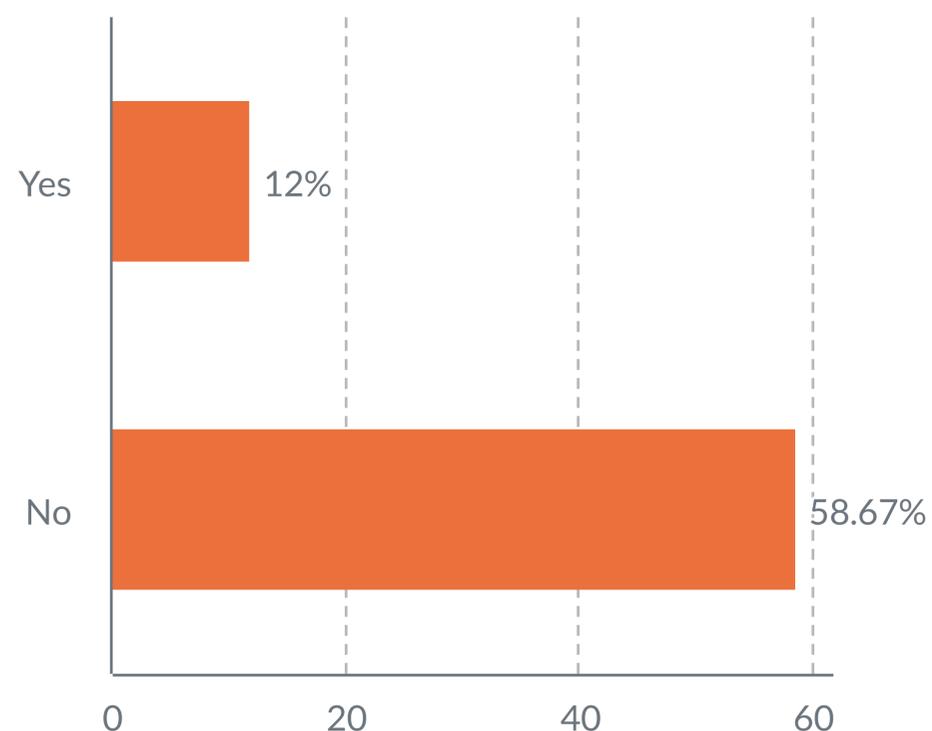
Are you employed?



We can see here that approximately half of the individuals surveyed were employed. It should be noted that AALV works with clients beyond the first year of arrival whereas USCRI-VT is primarily focused on the first year of arrival. Employment figures for USCRI-VT are considerably higher than for AALV. One of the main barriers for retention that have been mentioned by employers and employees alike is a lack of recognition for prior education and training, a so-called ‘accreditation gap’ that has led to what many describe as a ‘deskilling’ of immigrant newcomers. We see this in a similar set of answers to the following question from AALV clients.

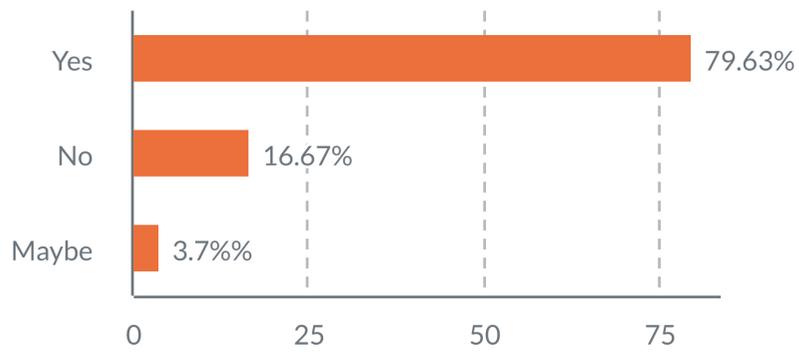
Was your prior education or training recognized when you came to the US?

Another set of insights into New American employment experiences can be seen in a separate study that my team undertook in which we surveyed a group of 100 recently arrived refugees in 2017. We asked them a set of 30 questions in 6 different categories on topics including healthcare, employment, education, housing, transportation, and civic integration. We conducted two surveys; the first we asked within 3 months of arrival and asked what people had hoped for and the second we asked a year later to get a sense of what had actually happened. Here are some of the results in the category of employment.

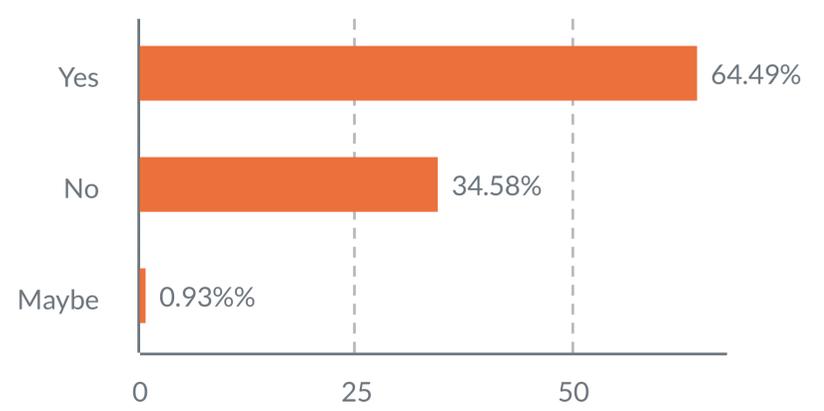


Desire for Employment

Did you want to find a job when you first arrived?

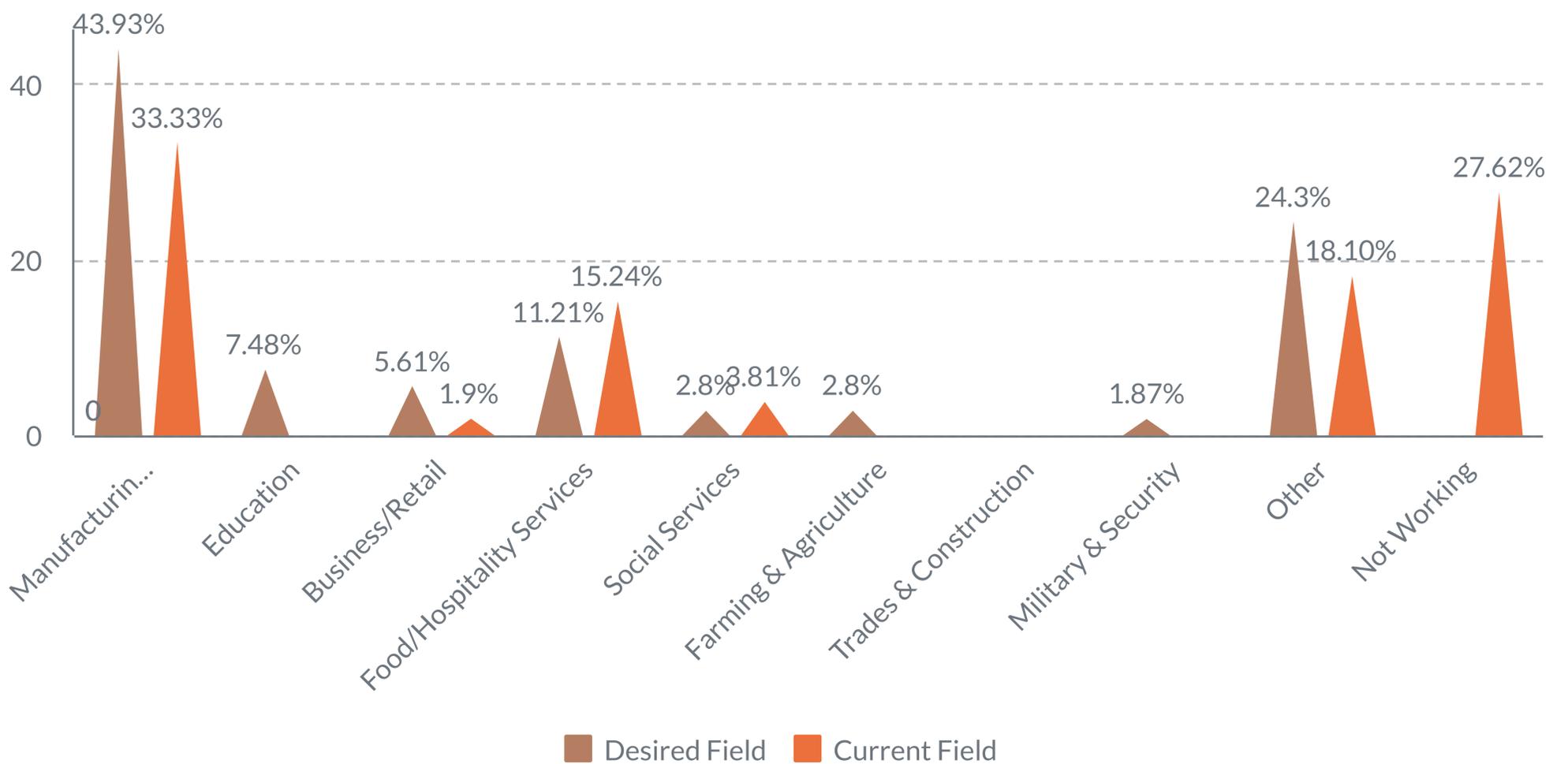


Are you currently working?



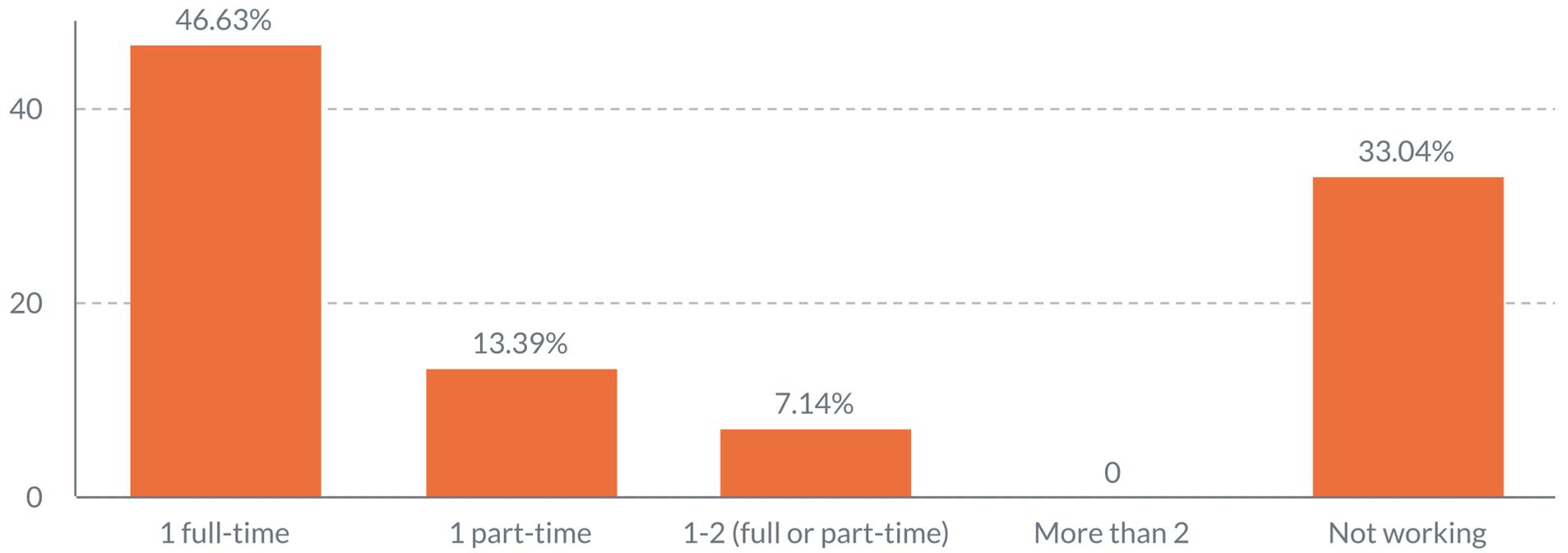
Field of Work

Desired vs Current Field of Employment



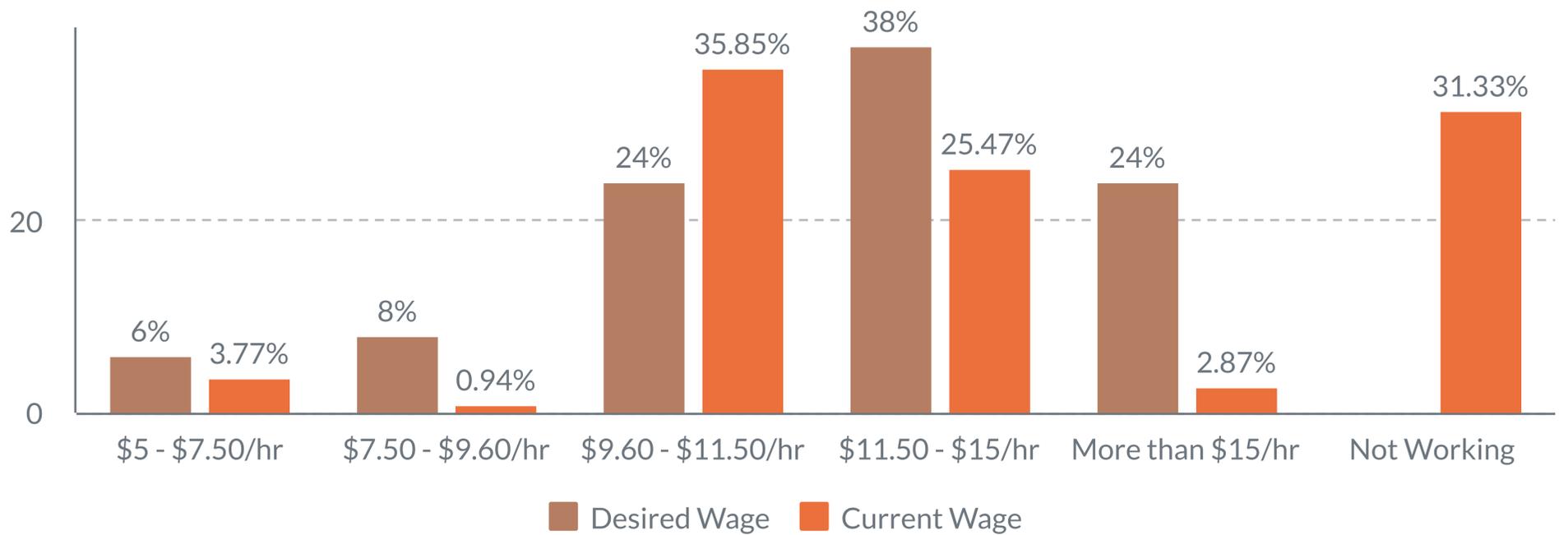
Number of Jobs

How many jobs are you currently working?



Wages

Desired vs Current Wage



Communication

★ Language barrier

“And it's not a matter of they're not competent because they absolutely a thousand percent are. It's just a language barrier.” –*Employer of New Americans*

★ Ability to complete the application and interview process

“They are not able to complete the online application and even if they have a resume they don't have a cover letter. Cover letter is something that not very many people can write.” –*Service Provider*

“I've had a lot of friends, a lot of people from my country who desire to work, to do this job, a job and they just can't because they can't communicate properly, easily. That was a main challenge for me.”
–*New American Employee*

★ Ability to communicate with supervisors, co-workers and clients/guests/customers

“I was treated unfairly at my first work. They were making fun of me because I couldn't communicate with them properly.” –*New American Employee*

“You can have a lot of things (to say) but you just can't express them. I'm trying to say that I can't show my potential.” –*New American Employee*

“With 32 different native languages being represented, and English often not being their first language... that sometimes creates a challenge in communicating with the customers, with other coworkers.” –*Employer of New Americans*

★ Ability to understand instructions and safety protocols.

“And there have kind of been a couple where it didn't work because they didn't speak the language that anyone here could work with and yeah we do our best but there are food safety standards”
–*Employer of New Americans*

“And just manufacturing procedures that we have to be able to get across to them and if they can't get it then you know we're required by the FDA to make sure that everybody can understand instructions clearly and we don't have the capacity to translate every procedure and document we have into six different languages.” –*Employer of New Americans*

“If the person doesn't speak English then it's hard for them to explain the safety rules in your warehouse for example... [But] once they learn process, then you do realize this person will come to work every day. They will be very dependable. Loyal to you. They'll do the job. What else do you need as a business?” –*Employer of New Americans*

Housing

★ Cost of housing

“I think you know there’s barriers that many Vermonters have, it’s the cost of housing. It’s expensive to live here and we saw migration outside of Vermont many of our New Americans because of that.”

–*Employer of New Americans*

“I know some of the challenges... I've heard affordable housing and making sure when you're bringing people in, are they going to be able to afford to live here in the community, making sure we're paying a wage and keep moving our wage up to make sure we're paying a livable wage for people” –*Employer of New Americans*

★ Housing availability

“We have 1% housing vacancy rate and it was very difficult to house incoming refugees in Vermont. In other states, it's not like that so they don't have a specific housing case worker. Other case workers find housing for the clients, but here it's a different setting” – *Service Provider*

Transportation

★ Lack of public transportation

“I have the chance now to have another jobs but I can't do it because I have no means of transportation” –*New American Employee*

“It's hard for [New Americans] to get to work. Imagine going to work every day if there is no public transportation. Vermont is not... like New York City or Boston... where you can have transportation everywhere. I realized that once you provide transportation to these people, you can take them to work and everybody is happy in the end”– *Employer of New Americans*

“...Probably another big challenge that the agency does a really good job of addressing is reliable transportation so that they can get to work every day. If they were here and trying to draw from that community 20+ miles from Burlington we would have zero luck and zero ability to retain anybody” –*Employer of New Americans*

Cultural Differences & Workforce Entry

★ **Culture shock**

“They [New Americans] arrive and then there is a lot of stuff they need to learn. They're coming from different environment, coming to live here where they have rules, regulations that we have to follow and it's taking time for them so we learned that employers needs to be patient. Invest time in these people and like I said, once they catch it, once they know how to do the job, then employers will realize that this is gold.” –*Employer of New Americans*

★ **Coming to work on time and following call-out protocol**

“A lot of times somebody just won't show up one day and will come back the next day and we'll say 'where were you' and they'll say 'oh I had appointments'...and just, they'll leave it at that but often times it's with their case workers, they're working on visa, they're working on all of this other stuff or it's classes for language or whatever it is but getting them to understand the you know the need for communication around that stuff is a challenge” –*Employer of New Americans*

★ **Appearance – Dressed for Work**

★ **Acceptable behavior in the workplace**

“So we talk about those issues a lot and sometimes we come across cultural differences, sometimes it brings a lot of stress to people. I hear that people get into trouble for--legal troubles for doing what is appropriate in their culture but is not appropriate here. For example like in the, in Bhutanese/Nepali culture it's okay to be very close friends with um, between male and female and also between male and male coworkers and, you know, when they are very close they share their food at work, during lunch time and then you know they care for each other. For example, you know you and I are very close friends and if I see something on your hair I tell you, sometimes, we're so close that even without telling you I get that thing out of your hair and here, because of that some people have gotten into trouble for sexual harassment” –*Service Provider*

“Some, some concerns we have is some traditions for certain male workers. They have some difficulty taking direction from a female team leader or line leader. So we try to do our best to just communicate that they're there to give them instruction and to help and so sometimes that could be a conflict” –*Employer of New Americans*

Training & Education

- Staff a full-time **Training and Education Coordinator** to provide ongoing trainings that increase employees' opportunities for career advancement.
- Staff a full-time **Resource Coordinator** to help employees navigate challenges and connect with outside resources.
- Create a **committee on diversity**
- Provide **translators** for new hire orientations, trainings and meetings as needed

Language

- **Translators** accessible 24/7 – (In-person, language line, and VRI/ODI remote video)
- Offer on-site, paid **English as a Second Language classes**
- **'Buddy system'** where employees are hired in pairs or matched with another New American employee upon hire

Culture

- Paid time off for **culturally relevant** holidays
- **Opportunities for sharing** – i.e. trainings/workshops dedicated to learning about employees' backgrounds, interactive displays in the workplace, sharing food, etc.
- Include an explanation of some **relevant cultural norms** in orientations, trainings and handbooks

Other Initiatives

- **Income advance loans** to help employees handle financial emergencies at home
 - **Carpool** coordination
 - On-site **tax preparation program** for employees
 - Employer **work groups** to discuss successes, challenges and best practices
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Partnerships

United Way Working Bridges

Employer collaborative that offers trainings for employers and employees, works on developing HR practices)

Vermont Adult Learning

Offers both on and off-site English as a Second Language classes and computer classes

Vermont Employment Agency

Provides employee transportation, helps employers recruit new hires and fill temporary positions

Vermont Training Program

Provides employee transportation, helps employers recruit new hires and fill temporary positions

U.S. Committee for Refugees & Immigrants

Service provider for New Americans (housing, benefits access, mental health support, legal aid, transportation, ELL classes, translation, etc.)

Association of Africans Living in Vermont

Service provider for New Americans (housing, benefits access, mental health support, transportation, food security, youth programs, legal aid, ELL classes, translation services, etc.)

While there are many programs already aiming to address the following areas, **this study recommends expanding on these key areas for improving Vermont's resettlement and integration of New Americans.**

Areas of Focus for Public Policy

Affordable housing

Public Transportation

Childcare

ESL Classes

Workplace conduct education

- *Offer classes or support for New Americans who need to work on soft skills (Dress codes, being on time) and understanding the workplace culture*

“What is the state doing about housing?”

“...We’re bringing in refugees, where are we asking them to live? What kinds of conditions are we asking them to live in? um, I think the state could do a lot more um around that”

– *Employer of New Americans*

“English classes aren’t inexpensive”

“...We did it through a grant with Vermont Training Program, which is a state program, but that program isn’t specific to English classes either. I would love to see the state subsidize some of these program.” –*Employer of New Americans*

“Transportation, we haven’t quite figured it out yet.”

“...We’re part of a pilot through working bridges right now to help folks with um transportation because that’s a biggie. Especially on off shift in this county there’s nothing really for third shifters.”

–*Employer of New Americans*