

CONGOLESE

AN INTRODUCTION FOR SERVICE PROVIDERS



TABLE OF CONTENTS

This cultural backgrounder aims to help initial resettlement providers (IRPs, formerly resettlement agencies), local resettlement providers (LRPs), and other service providers better understand and support Congolese refugees in the U.S. This information does not represent the strengths and challenges of all Congolese refugees. Providers should adapt their services to the individual needs of their clients.

3 Brief Profile

Overview of Crisis.....	3
Conditions in First-Asylum Countries	4
Languages and Ethnicities	5
Religions	5

6 Considerations for Resettlement Services

Cultural Adjustment.....	6
Housing	7
Building Trust.....	8
Employment	9
Education.....	10
Language Access	11
U.S. Laws.....	11
Health and Mental Health	12
Hygiene	13
Budgeting and Personal Finance.....	14
Supporting with Food Access	15

16 Acknowledgements

References	16
Endnotes.....	17





BRIEF PROFILE

OVERVIEW OF CRISIS

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has described the decades-long refugee crisis in the DRC as “one of the world’s most complex, challenging, protracted, and forgotten crises.”¹ Human rights violations in the DRC include physical mutilation, killings, sexual violence, arbitrary arrest, and detention in inhumane conditions.

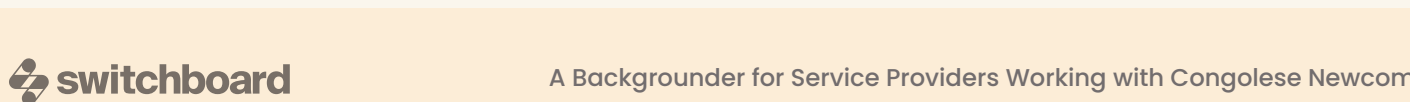
Following its independence in 1960, the DRC experienced significant political instability, with foreign powers becoming involved in its internal affairs, contributing to violence and the assassination of key leaders. Over time, numerous armed groups emerged. In 1996, Rwanda invaded the DRC to pursue perpetrators of the 1994 Rwandan genocide who had taken refuge in the DRC’s eastern region, sparking the First Congo War (1996–1997). A rebel movement, backed by neighboring Rwanda and Uganda, then overthrew the government in 1997. Continued tensions led to the outbreak of the Second Congo War in 1998.

Although a peace accord was signed in 2003, unrest still plagues the country. In recent years, violence has intensified and contributed to instability across the broader Great Lakes region, displacing millions and forcing new waves of refugees to join those uprooted by earlier conflicts.² Today, the most prominent rebel group is Rwanda-backed Alliance Fleuve Congo/March 23 Movement (AFC/M23), which controls significant territory in eastern DRC. In 2026, in response to Rwanda’s alleged support for M23, the United States imposed sanctions on Rwanda’s military and senior officials.

Millions of Congolese are displaced and still living in the DRC, often in inadequate conditions that leave them susceptible to disease, food insecurity, and violence. Additionally, Congolese refugees’ displacement has a dramatic impact on first asylum countries, which struggle to meet the needs of the displaced.

Congolese refugees typically find first asylum in Angola, Burundi, the Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Uganda, the United Republic of Tanzania, or Zambia. Before coming to the U.S. most Congolese refugees will have resided in refugee camps or in urban centers.³ The region can be unstable for citizens and refugees alike, and many refugee camps are full or above capacity. Some refugees, finding themselves unable to secure services in their first country of entry, continue to Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Kenya, or South Africa.

Often, in first-asylum countries, basic services are limited or unavailable. Migrants may lack sufficient safety, water access, food security and nutrition, health access, and provision of basic needs. Restrictions on freedom of movement also hinder refugees' ability to seek employment or integrate into local communities. UNHCR has reported increased instances of sexual violence across first asylum countries. Displaced individuals can also face discrimination and xenophobia from other refugees and/or local groups.



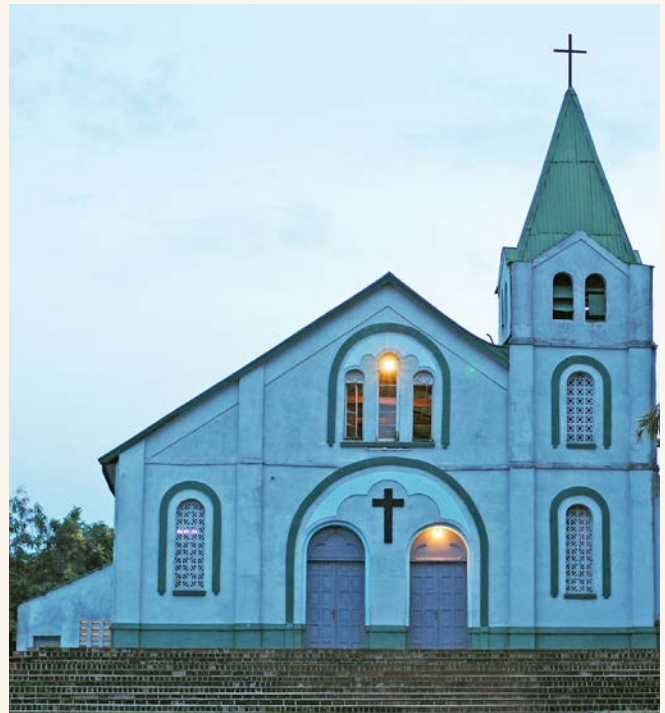
LANGUAGES AND ETHNICITIES

While the official languages of the DRC are Lingala, Swahili, Tshiluba, and Kikongo, French is most commonly taught in schools. There are more than 200 ethnic groups that speak over 250 languages in the country. Many Banyamulenge, Hutus, and Tutsis speak the Bantu language Kinyarwanda, though this language is politically sensitive in the Congolese context. Kinyarwanda is one of the national languages of Rwanda, and some Congolese may perceive Kinyarwanda-speakers as outsiders, which has historically fueled tensions. Banyamulenge people may also speak a dialect of Kinyarwanda.

Lingala is most widely spoken among the military and in the capital of the Western DRC, Kinshasa. Swahili, sometimes called Kiswahili, is widely spoken in the eastern part of the country. Refugees in the U.S. from the DRC may be disproportionately Swahili-speakers, as Eastern Congo and North and South Kivu have endured the burden of the conflict in recent years. Even those who are not native speakers of Swahili can often communicate in it; thus, Swahili may function as the language of communication between individuals who have no other language in common.

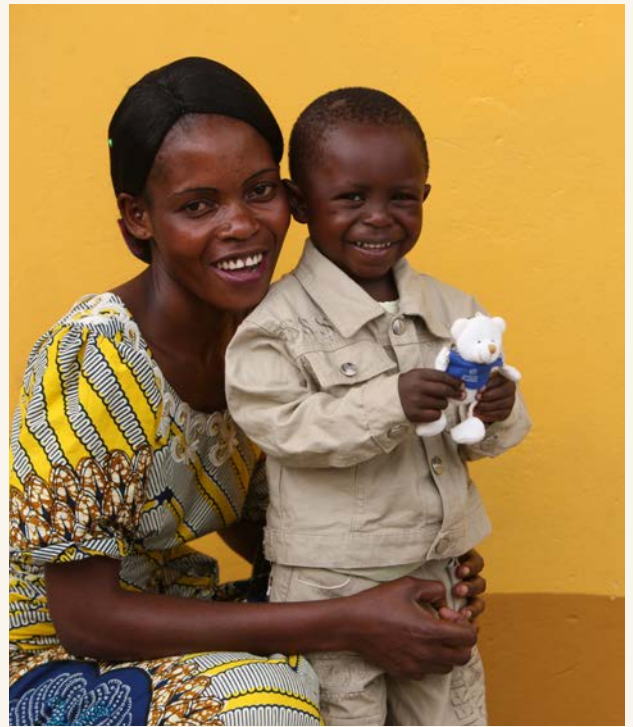
RELIGIONS

Approximately 95% of Congolese are Christian; of which nearly half are Catholic and another half are Protestant, including members of evangelical churches. Approximately two percent of native-born Congolese are Sunni Muslim. Many Congolese also hold traditional beliefs concerning the influence of the spirit world, which may coexist with Christianity and Islam.⁴



CONSIDERATIONS FOR RESETTLEMENT SERVICES

Providers report that Congolese refugees often face a significant learning curve in adjusting to U.S. life. For example, they may have little to no reference to systems including the U.S. legal system, housing practices, and financial institutions. Congolese newcomers nevertheless are able to draw on their own personal qualities, experiences, and communities to adjust to their new lives in the U.S.



CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

Like other refugee populations, Congolese need support as they adjust to U.S. cultural norms. Some adjustments are easy to support while others may take time, patience, and repetition.

TIPS

- **Discuss the importance of timeliness.** Focus on U.S. norms about arriving to appointments and work on time. Make connections between developing time management skills and the role this plays in building respect and trust with others.
- **Facilitate discussions about changes in family dynamics** and how these changes may impact children. Discuss ways to navigate family conflict that may arise while adjusting to U.S. culture. For example, Congolese children often learn English more quickly than their parents, which can cause a power shift from the parents to the children.
- **Review the cultural adjustment process and discuss healthy ways to cope** with possible challenges that may arise, including changes in family roles, possible substance use, and concerns related to mental health.

Encourage Congolese clients to build and rely on strong social networks within the Congolese-American community for support as they adjust to life in the United States. Ethnic community-based organizations (ECBOs) and religious institutions may offer supportive environments for building these networks. In locations with many Swahili speakers, providers may offer a list of churches that offer Swahili-language services. If appropriate and relevant, address questions about marital rights and laws, including polygamy, at-will divorce, and arranged marriages.

HOUSING

In refugee camps and urban environments, Congolese home life is typically very different from what they can expect to encounter in the United States. Differences can include the physical space, responsibility of maintenance and care, and amenities within the home.



In the DRC, many urban inhabitants live in houses made of cement. While residing in refugee camps, however, Congolese migrants may have lived in temporary homes made of mud or brick, or in one large room that was split using a curtain. Additionally, in camp and urban settings, refugees are frequently responsible for acquiring or purchasing materials for their semi-permanent homes, even though they do not own the land. Maintenance and repairs are also their responsibility, and there may be loose local or camp regulations to consider, but no “landlord” to consult on such matters.

The availability of running water in Congolese homes varies by region. Even in urban areas, where running water is more common, supply may be irregular. In urban areas, most people use charcoal stoves (“makala”), kerosene stoves, or, increasingly, gas stoves. Newcomers from rural areas may be accustomed to cooking using an outdoor fire. Many Congolese refugees lack experience with electric stoves and ovens.

TIPS

- **Discuss housing regulations, specifically occupancy laws, tenant rights and responsibilities, and leases as legal agreements.** For example, some clients may not understand why large families cannot reside in one- or two-bedroom dwellings due to occupancy laws. They may approach the landlord-tenant relationship, the rental price, and the leasing terms as negotiable rather than bound by a signed, legal agreement.
- **Discuss how clients cared for their homes previously.** Identify which habits they may need to change to keep their new home clean, and how new appliances or household items can assist them in doing certain daily tasks.
- **Use repetitive demonstrations** to assist Congolese clients with appliances and other household amenities that are new to them. Using volunteers or interns to conduct in-home demonstrations can be an effective strategy. If possible, provide visual aids for clients to reference, such as Settle In’s *Welcome to Your New Home*.
- **Review household maintenance.** Clearly outline which upkeep and repair responsibilities belong to the occupant and which fall to the landlord. Review tasks related to home cleanliness.

Providers may encounter clients who express the desire to own their own homes early in resettlement or have unrealistic expectations of the timeline for home ownership. In these instances, discuss the pathway to home ownership and set realistic timelines. Encourage early employment, motivate budgeting, and help clients set financial goals. Community guests from banks or first-time homebuyer programs may also prove helpful.

BUILDING TRUST

Due to both local and federal government corruption in the DRC, along with the possible spread of misinformation, Congolese clients may distrust government-funded organizations like initial resettlement providers. Staff, volunteers and interns, and community partners should take time to build trust and rapport with Congolese clients.



TIPS

- **Build partnerships with local Congolese or, as appropriate, religious communities.** Community leaders can reinforce key messages about resettlement in the U.S.
- **Incorporate storytelling in the delivery of services.** Create safe environments and ask appropriate questions for Congolese newcomers to share their experiences.
- **Apply a trauma-informed lens when addressing questions and challenges.** For instance, if a client refuses to participate in a service, rather than becoming frustrated or forcing the issue, consider if the choice may be influenced by trauma. If appropriate, explore what other services or other resources might be available to assist the client or address the challenge.
- **Refer clients to resources or services in a timely manner** and follow up with the client to confirm they were able to access them.
- **Emphasize that public benefits are not provided directly by your organization,** but instead by local and federal government. Clearly explain what clients need to do in order to enroll in or continue benefits, and, if benefits discontinue, explain why.

EMPLOYMENT

Congolese refugees' formal work experience and skills vary. They may have worked in a range of contexts, from professionals in urban areas to farmers and herders in rural areas. Additionally, women or individuals who have spent long periods in refugee camps may have limited to no formal work experience. However, Congolese clients possess significant strengths, such as entrepreneurial resourcefulness and a strong work ethic, that they bring to their employment search in the U.S.



TIPS

- **Set clear expectations and timelines.** Identify the types of entry-level jobs that are available, work to mitigate child care barriers, and emphasize the need for all employable adults to work to achieve self-sufficiency. Leverage long-term goals, such as starting a business or returning to school, when discussing early employment and building language proficiency.
- **Use a strengths-based approach.** Discuss clients' transferable skills that will help them find a job in the U.S. For example, experiences in agricultural work can translate to management of crops and food preparation.
- **Facilitate an open and honest dialogue on traditional family roles in the context of employment.** Emphasize the need for all employable adults to work to achieve self-sufficiency. Create and refer to a resettlement plan and household budget to assist refugees in understanding the importance of full employment.
- **As relevant, emphasize the need for continuing English Language Learning** even after obtaining employment in order to gain the skills needed for job upgrades and overall integration.

EDUCATION

The DRC education system varies significantly by region. While there are many successful schools, especially in urban areas like Kinshasa, Lubumbashi, and Goma, educational outcomes remain low nationwide. Rural schools face many challenges, such as access barriers and poor-quality instruction. Access to and availability of education programs in refugee camps also varies widely. Many Congolese refugees have experienced limited or interrupted education. In some camps, shortages of teachers and learning materials, as well as safety and security concerns, significantly disrupt schooling.

Financial pressure may push young family members to privilege employment over education as soon as they arrive in the United States. Advise clients that they will have the best long-term financial prospects if they combine working with education. Encourage them to focus on improving their English and, if possible, to take vocational training.



TIPS

- **Use the family's resettlement plan** to discuss and reinforce key messages regarding education and achieving self-sufficiency.
- **Use picture-based materials for key messages.** This strategy increases client understanding and information retention.
- **Leverage clients' interest in the value of education and eagerness to see their children succeed** while discussing the fundamental differences in the DRC and U.S. school systems. Talk about educational rights and responsibilities, expectations of parental involvement, daily attendance requirements, role of digital literacy and device access, and opportunities/activities available through the local school system.
- **When possible and relevant, introduce Congolese clients to other community-based education programs** beyond those designed to teach English. Discuss literacy and digital literacy programs or programs that assist with obtaining General Educational Development (GED) diplomas for older youth.

LANGUAGE ACCESS

Due to the variety of languages spoken and the long history of interethnic tensions in the DRC, providers and community partners should take care when navigating client relationships with case managers and interpreters. Several ethnic groups, including Banyamulenge, Congolese Tutsi, and Hutu, have experienced discrimination in the DRC.

TIPS

- **Ask clients about their preferences regarding language** and, when relevant, the interpreter's cultural or ethnic background.
- **Work with interpreters in advance** to help prepare for situations in which clients will be communicating in their second, third, or even fourth language.
- **Discourage parents from using their children as interpreters.** Instead, emphasize the parents' right to have an interpreter, remind them how to access interpretation, and support parents' own language learning.

U.S. Laws

For many Congolese refugees, the U.S. legal system is their first experience interacting with a formal judicial system. Resettlement providers and community partners, such as police officers, firefighters, and landlords, play an important role in explaining U.S. laws and building trust in U.S. systems.

TIPS

- **Discuss the rights and protections that exist for adults, children, and families** in the U.S. legal context, including laws related to personal safety and child wellbeing. For example, it may be useful to discuss laws related to domestic violence, marriage age, and child welfare.
- **Particularly in areas with limited public transportation, advise clients on driving laws.** Emphasize that clients who purchase cars will need to pay for car insurance and follow road laws to avoid breaking the law. Remind clients that failure to follow all traffic laws may lead to accidents or license suspension, and serious offenses have the potential to influence immigration outcomes.



HEALTH AND MENTAL HEALTH

The lasting political and economic collapse of the DRC dramatically impacted the country's health care system. The majority of Congolese have little or no access to health care services.⁵ Western medicine is generally accepted and practiced, although traditional medicine is often used when modern health care services are not available or affordable. Some Congolese hold strong spiritual or religious beliefs which may connect physical, mental, and spiritual well-being with ritualistic practices related to the natural world

Congolese refugees may arrive with a variety of medical conditions. Self-reports may not always be complete or accurate and new arrivals should follow recommendations for medical screenings. To learn more, see the [*Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\) Congolese Health Profile*](#).

Many Congolese refugees have witnessed, experienced, and survived conditions that can impact psychological health. Sexual violence is widespread in both the DRC and in surrounding first asylum countries. It is possible for both female and male clients to have experienced instances of sexual violence. The psychological impact of witnessing or experiencing extreme violence can lead to effects including insomnia, alcohol or drug use, high stress, anxiety, anger, and depression.

Among the Congolese, there is frequently stigma surrounding mental health care. There is a misconception that only those who are "crazy" need mental health services, and some may consider it shameful to access these services. Faith leaders can be powerful allies in combating stigma and promoting emotional well-being. Elderly family members may also have a strong influence on the rest of the family so encouraging health practices and behaviors in elders may improve the family's overall health.

TIPS

- **Show respect for Congolese belief systems regarding medical care** while also educating refugees on the availability and benefits of medical services in the U.S.
- **Support Congolese clients in understanding the complex U.S. health care system.** Health care navigators or volunteers can help accompany Congolese refugees to appointments or to the pharmacy and assist in understanding health insurance and medical bills.
- **Demystify and destigmatize mental health services** when discussing health and cultural adjustment. For example, ask interpreters to replace the term "mental health" with "emotional health" or "services to address emotional well-being." Replacing "therapy" with "counseling" may also be helpful.
- **Consider partnering with a local mental health service provider** to train your staff in destigmatizing mental health services and linking Congolese clients to needed services. Unfamiliarity with the signs of mental health distress can lead Congolese clients to inaccurately complete mental health screenings without supports.
- **Use community partnerships to address health concerns.** Build strong relationships with leaders of the Congolese community to help convey the importance of accessing mental health services.

HYGIENE

Congolese refugees may have experienced variable access to clean water and basic sanitation facilities in the DRC and first asylum countries. In urban areas, many homes have indoor water including toilets, showers, and sinks, though water supply may be irregular. In rural areas or refugee camps, Congolese clients may have relied on wells, rivers, or shared facilities. Due to these differences, some clients will have familiarity with home cleaning products, hygiene products, and bathroom fixtures, while others will need demonstrations and guidance on how to use and maintain them.

Resettlement staff should be prepared to engage with clients directly and respectfully around expectations of hygiene practices in the U.S., including personal hygiene and household cleaning and maintenance.

TIPS

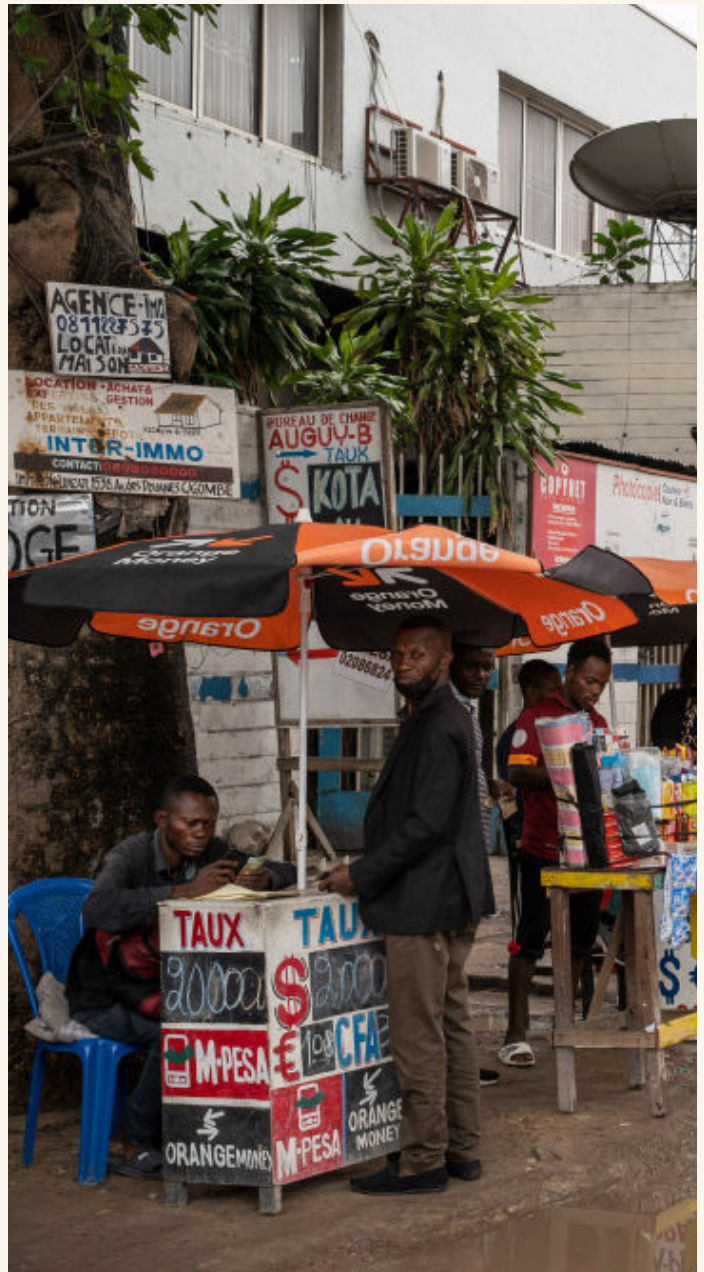
- **Share resources** like Settle In's *Hygiene in the U.S.*
- **Make connections between proper hygiene practices** and workplace and social norms.
- **Conduct in-home demonstrations of various bathroom fixtures**, as lack of running water in some locations may make sinks, toilets, showers, and bathtubs unfamiliar.
- **Provide opportunities for clients to discuss the topic one-on-one.** As needed, discuss how to use specific cleaning and/or hygiene products.



BUDGETING AND PERSONAL FINANCE

The DRC has historically had an unreliable banking system, which has shaped how people manage their finances. Many Congolese adults may be unfamiliar with formal banking services. They may choose, instead, to rely on mobile money platforms such as M-Pesa, Airtel Money, and Orange Money. Informal savings groups known as “tontines” or “likelemba” are also widely used. Those who use these systems likely do so because they consider them more reliable than banks. At the same time, access to formal financial services has expanded in recent years, with banks (like Rawbank, UBA, Ecobank, Equity, and Trust Merchant Bank) serving salaried workers who are often required to receive payment through a bank account.

Congolese clients may have a range of knowledge regarding banking, financial planning, and budgeting. They may be comfortable with formal banking or be inclined to approach it with caution, even while demonstrating strong financial adaptability through community-based systems. Congolese clients can be quite driven by a desire for financial independence as well as home and car ownership.



TIPS

- **Work with clients to identify long-term financial goals** and lay out realistic timeframes to achieve them.
- **Consider a field trip to a bank** and involve a community guest speaker to explain the U.S. banking system. This will assist Congolese clients in understanding and navigating a new, unfamiliar financial system.
- **Be mindful that budgeting tools can be overwhelming, leading clients to disengage.** Videos can help mitigate challenges due to low literacy or limited English proficiency.

SUPPORTING WITH FOOD ACCESS

A Congolese Grocery List⁶

Fresh Produce

- Apples
- Banana
- Cabbage
- Carrots
- Dried Cassava Leaves (“pondu”)
- Eggplant
- Garlic
- Green Bean
- Green Pepper
- Limes
- Mango
- Okra
- Onion
- Plantains (“makemba”)
- Romaine Lettuce
- Spinach
- Sweet Potatoes
- Tomatoes
- Yams

Grains & Legumes

- Red and White Beans (such as kidney, pinto, or cranberry beans)
- Bread
- Jasmine Rice
- Corn Flour

Dairy & Meat

- Beef
- Butter
- Stewing Chicken
- Fish
- Whole Milk
- Yogurt

Beverages

- Ketepa Pride Tea
- Orange Juice/Mixed Fruit Juice

Pantry Staples

- Aluminum Foil
- Bouillon Seasoning
- Vegetable Cooking Oil
- Honey
- Salt
- Eggs
- Tomato Paste
- Nido Dry Whole Milk



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