



# RECRUITING REFUGEES AND IMMIGRANTS INTO THE CNA WORKFORCE



A GUIDE FOR EMPLOYERS

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## INTRODUCTION

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According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there are projected to be 264,500 Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) jobs across the state of California by 2030, representing a 22.3% increase from 2020. To fill these jobs, employers hiring CNA positions will need to provide robust outreach across California's diverse communities to meet these demands.

Increasingly, employers across industries are looking towards California's refugee and immigrant communities to meet their hiring needs, and this is no exception in the CNA field. While these efforts can be successful, they require thoughtful consideration of hiring practices, workplace environment, and outreach strategies.

In this current economy, multiple industries representing thousands of employers in California face hiring challenges, and recruitment in this competitive environment means that employers need to find ways to stand out to potential new hires and distinguish themselves from other competing employers.

At the same time, refugee communities face increasing choices and opportunities for starting jobs and establishing careers in California, with rising wages providing ample workforce pathways and routes to economic success. Employers face the task of appealing to these communities as providers of viable and desirable career options.

This toolkit aims to provide a roadmap for employers in the healthcare industry who want to better recruit from refugee communities, helping them to achieve both of these goals. The toolkit provides a contextual overview of refugee resettlement, outlines the multifaceted benefits of hiring refugees, explains how to facilitate the hiring of refugee workers, and details successful outreach mechanisms to achieve this.



# UNDERSTANDING REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT

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Under international law, a refugee is an individual who is “unable to return to his or her home country due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or social group.” Today, there are 32.5 million persons with refugee status around the world.

The vast majority of refugees live in countries bordering the one from which they fled. Only a tiny fraction of these are eligible for “resettlement” in third countries, such as the United States – these are typically individuals (and their families) that are considered particularly vulnerable.

As the U.S. Department of State explains, this group may include female-headed households, victims of torture or violence, religious minorities, LGBT refugees, or people who need specialized medical care. Most recently the Biden Administration has raised this cap on refugee admittance to the United States to an upper limit of 125,000 refugees for fiscal year 2023.

Refugees are subject to the highest level of security checks of any entrant to the United States. Once a refugee is selected for resettlement, they must then undergo an extensive vetting process that takes two years on average and includes multiple interviews,

background checks, medical screening and cultural orientation. This process takes place before the refugee is even allowed to enter the United States.

Prior to a refugee’s arrival in the United States, the U.S. Department of State assigns him or her to one of the nine resettlement agencies that partner with the federal government to provide initial resettlement services. Such services include finding an apartment, enrolling children in school, obtaining health services, and assisting with finding employment.

The U.S. government sets program parameters and provides funding for many of these initial services for refugees. Refugees may receive different services because of family size, ages of family members, resettlement site location, and income.

Refugee is an official immigration status designated by the U.S. government, but there are also many other immigration statuses that are served by resettlement agencies as well as other community-based organizations. There are many other types of humanitarian migrants such as humanitarian parolees, asylees, asylum seekers, and others that may have temporary or permanent authorization to work in the U.S. and might also make great CNA employees. Employers should connect with immigrant-serving organizations in their area to learn more about local populations and opportunities

To learn more about additional immigration statuses, visit the [United States Citizenship and Immigration Services \(USCIS\) website](https://uscis.gov).

The U.S. Department of State works closely with the nine resettlement agencies (RAs) to review incoming refugee profiles and determine where best to resettle them. Where refugees are placed is based on the particular needs of each refugee and the resources available in each local community or local resettlement agency. If a refugee has relatives already residing in the United States, the refugee is likely to be resettled near them.

It is important to note that while refugees may be placed in these cities initially, it does not necessarily reflect where refugees may ultimately reside. For a variety of reasons, including employment prospects, refugees may move to larger urban areas such as Los Angeles or San Francisco, which typically do not receive large numbers of refugees for initial resettlement. Once in the United States, refugees are free to move about the country and are work authorized. *A refugee's work authorization does not expire and is not time bound in any sense.*



## WHY HIRE REFUGEES?

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As an employer, your goal is to build a resilient, skilled, and diversified workforce. Hiring refugees can significantly contribute to achieving this objective. Here are some of the key reasons why hiring refugees is a rewarding decision:

- ▶ **Diverse Skills and Experiences:** Refugees originate from various parts of the world and have different educational, professional, and life experiences. Their diverse skills can help drive creativity, stimulate innovation, and enhance problem-solving in the workplace. They often have training in various fields, and their unique perspectives can help to broaden the thinking and approach of your team. Moreover, their life experiences of overcoming adversity often translate into strong resilience and adaptability, valuable traits in the fast-paced and evolving healthcare industry.
- ▶ **Work Authorization and No Sponsorship Costs:** Unlike certain visa categories, refugees arrive in the U.S. with work authorization and do not require sponsorship from employers. This is a significant advantage for companies, as the process of sponsoring a foreign worker can be costly and time-consuming. This means that refugees can start work immediately after being hired. They also have the freedom to switch jobs, which allows for mobility and the opportunity for career growth. This makes refugees a practical choice for employers seeking to add to their workforce swiftly and efficiently, without the burden of additional costs and bureaucratic hurdles. Additionally, a refugee's work authorization is permanent and does not expire, eliminating the need for costly and uncertain renewal processes. This enhances stability within the workforce and provides employers with long-term, reliable employees.



- ▶ **High Rates of Cleared Background Checks and Drug Screenings:** One of the benefits of hiring refugees, particularly for sensitive roles like Certified Nursing Assistants (CNAs), is their high probability of passing necessary background checks and drug screenings. Refugees go through a rigorous screening process before being resettled, including extensive security checks. This makes them likely to pass similar checks conducted by employers. Additionally, studies have found that refugees are less likely to fail drug tests. This not only increases the pool of eligible workers for healthcare jobs that often have stringent eligibility criteria but also offers employers peace of mind regarding the integrity and reliability of their staff.
- ▶ **Strong Work Ethic:** As newcomers to the American workforce, refugees often demonstrate high levels of motivation and dedication towards their work. They are eager to secure their livelihood and are highly driven to succeed in their new communities. A study conducted by Deloitte and the Tent Partnership for Refugees revealed that businesses which hired refugees saw lower turnover rates compared to other employee demographics. This could lead to substantial cost savings, given the high costs associated with staff turnover including recruitment, training, and loss of productivity.
- ▶ **Robust Support System:** Refugees in the US receive substantial support from various resettlement agencies, which assist with job training, language skills, and cultural orientation. As an employer, you can benefit from this system. These agencies can help to smooth the onboarding process, provide continued language support and, in some cases, assist with transportation and housing, all of which can lead to increased job stability and lower turnover rates among refugee employees.
- ▶ **Cultural Diversity:** Diversity in the workplace has repeatedly been shown to boost productivity, enhance creativity, and foster innovation. By bringing different cultural perspectives, refugees can help your organization to adapt products or services to cater to a diverse patient population. This cultural competence in healthcare delivery can improve patient satisfaction and health outcomes. Furthermore, diversity can contribute to an inclusive corporate culture, improving team cohesion and employee morale.
- ▶ **Community Engagement:** By hiring refugees, businesses can show their commitment to humanitarian values and social responsibility. This can significantly enhance your company's reputation within the community. Furthermore, research suggests that many consumers, particularly millennials, prefer to support businesses that hire refugees. As millennials seek care for aging parents and caregivers, they may be more likely to support businesses that demonstrate a commitment to social impact and humanitarian relief.
- ▶ **Multilingual Capabilities:** In the healthcare sector, where communication with patients is paramount, multilingual capabilities can be a significant asset. Refugees often speak more than one language, which can enhance patient interaction, particularly in areas with diverse linguistic communities. This can improve patient satisfaction and health outcomes and can potentially attract a wider patient demographic to your healthcare facility.



- ▶ **Cultural Sensitivity:** Refugees, given their personal experiences, often exhibit high levels of empathy and cultural sensitivity. These qualities can be particularly beneficial in healthcare settings, where understanding and respecting patients' cultural beliefs and practices can significantly improve patient care.
- ▶ **Availability for Shift Work:** In industries like healthcare, which often require round-the-clock services, the willingness to work different shifts is a valuable quality. Refugees are generally highly motivated to establish themselves in their new communities and are, therefore, often willing to take on shift work. This flexibility can assist in ensuring continuity of care and reduce the challenges associated with filling less desirable shifts.

By engaging in hiring practices that include refugees, employers gain a reputation as inclusive, socially responsible entities. This, coupled with the diverse set of skills and experiences that refugees bring, can create a win-win situation for both the employer and the employee, contributing to the long-term success of the company.

## HOW TO HIRE REFUGEES

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Developing desirable workplaces necessitate both knowing how to onboard refugee workers as well as creating refugee-responsive workplaces. This section provides an overview of employee documentation required in the onboarding process as well as suggestions for fostering a workplace that is desirable for refugees and can facilitate their success and longevity as employees.

### Understanding Employment Documentation

An expiration date on the green cards means that the holder must renew the card, not that the bearer's work authorization has expired.

When filling out I-9 documents, employers can expect to see common immigration documents issued by the Department of Homeland Security – Form I-94, Employment Authorization Document (Form I-765) or a foreign passport with an I-551 stamp.

Additionally, employers might also see a Permanent Resident Card (“green card”), which is available to refugees after one year into their time in the United States, and granted to Afghans and Iraqis with Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) within weeks of their arrival. Other common documents include Social Security cards, driver's licenses and state identification cards for refugees who have been in the country for a longer period.

Refugees may experience a delay in receiving an SSN. Although employers eventually need to record an SSN for wage reporting purposes, the employer may start work regardless of whether they have been issued an SSN. Employers can enter 00.00.0000 in the SSN field for employees who have not yet received their social security numbers.

Just like for any other potential employee, a refugee can present any document that reasonably appears to be genuine and relates to the employee according to the List of Acceptable Documents, outlined by the U.S. Department of Justice. It is illegal to demand to see certain documents, such as immigration documents if a refugee presents a document from List B (such as a State ID) and a document from List C (such as an SSN). Refugees do not need to inform employers of their refugee status, and employers do not need to ask.

## Creating a Responsive Workplace

Understanding employment documentation is a great step in increasing capacity to hire and onboard refugees successfully. Additionally, employers will want to consider measures to foster a responsive workplace that allows refugee workers to be successful in their jobs. Successful implementation of these measures can help advertise the workplace during outreach and increase employee retention.

- ▶ **Many refugee employees would prefer to not adopt the label of refugee as a primary identifier.** As one refugee employee remarked, “Refugee is a legal status, not a human status.” Because refugees, like all employees, come from different backgrounds and have multiple intersecting identities, organizations should be mindful of treating them as a homogenous group. This one-size-fits-all approach can be a “common pitfall” for organizations who are otherwise thinking in the right way about refugee workplace inclusion, according to one prominent talent-matching organization. Some refugee employees seek to maintain their refugee identity; others hope to shed it over time. Inclusion in the workplace should therefore accommodate a variety of refugee identities, and organizations may want to avoid clearly “calling out” refugees because of their assigned legal status.
- ▶ **Employers should cover the costs of CNA training to new hires as an incentive.** It is increasingly common that the tuition costs of new employees are reimbursed by employers after a certain job retention period. These tuition costs can be major barriers and hurdles for potential refugee workers who may be interested in working as a CNA. These reimbursement options can be advertised during outreach, including with CNA training institutions who may direct graduates towards an employer. If partnering with an RA, make sure that these are clearly communicated to organization staff and the refugee community.

Build your CNA workforce with the CNAP Program, where funds are available to offset the costs of Earn and Learn programs for newly hired CNAs. Visit [www.california.carefortheaging.org](http://www.california.carefortheaging.org) to learn more.

► **Employers may look to offer language translation and development resources to refugee employees who do not speak the local language within the organization.** This can help support refugees in navigating the workplace, engage with their colleagues, grow within the organization, and feel comfortable in their new home.

Refugees can benefit significantly from translation resources in the early stages of their employment, especially as they begin acclimating to the workplace and their new society. These resources can enable the employees, who may lack proficiency in the local language(s), to execute their job responsibilities early in their tenure and to interact with others in the workplace more smoothly and more often.

There are several areas in which organizations can provide support when it comes to translation. At a minimum, organizations can simply build *resource awareness* by publicizing existing day-to-day language translation resources. In addition, organizations can develop *translation sheets* that translate key job-related phrases and vocabulary. Similarly, employers can consider developing *translated signage*, or *visual signage* with pictures and icons, to ensure that important pieces of information, such safety signage, can be easily understood by everyone.

Finally, employers may look to leverage the services of two different types of translators—first, employee translators who speak both languages could be asked to serve as informal translation support for their colleagues. Second, for organizations with available resources, formal translators could be hired to support the employer and employees and to navigate more complex conversations (for example, performance reviews and other HR conversations). If constraints make using translators difficult, call-in translation services can be useful for some types of meetings.

In addition to translation support, companies can help refugee employees access language development opportunities designed to develop proficiency in the local language(s). To foster language development, it is important to design inclusive environments where language development is accelerated.

Outside the team environment, *language exchanges* can help connect refugee employees looking to learn the local language(s) with colleagues looking to learn the refugees' language, creating opportunities for language development as well as community-building. For employers with available resources, *formal language development* classes and language certification programs, either developed internally or subsidized externally, have proven successful.

► **Ongoing learning and growth opportunities are critical in helping refugee employees continue to grow and add value to the organization.** Organizations can help refugee employees grow by providing access to skill development and certification opportunities.

It is important that the organization provide role-specific initial training to support refugee employees in building the basic skills needed to succeed in their new roles. Courses can be tailored to fit refugee employee backgrounds; individuals may even require basic training—in, for example, mathematics—if the employee has received little or no formal education in the past.

Once onboarded, organizations can continue to provide access to ongoing learning and development opportunities, including certification opportunities, to support refugee employees in their careers—either for the type of work they did before they were displaced or for the new jobs they are seeking. If possible, class and study time can be carved out from employees’ workweek schedule, further demonstrating organizational commitment to inclusion and employee growth.

To make the investment in a certification course worthwhile for refugee employees, employers may choose to ask these employees to commit to working for the organization for a specified amount of time after completing the course, similar to how some firms subsidize employees’ graduate degrees in return for a commitment of a few years of work.

Organizations can also encourage professional growth by exposing refugee employees to new opportunities, and by connecting them to colleagues and leaders who can help them develop the skills to succeed.

► **Supplemental services.** Refugee employees often also face other external issues that can hamper their ability to meet a standard work schedule. Employers can work with refugee employees to identify potential challenges and provide access to supplemental services—leveraging the support of external resettlement agencies or nonprofits—that can help them acclimate to the workplace as they integrate into society.

Contact the CNAP program for valuable workforce partnerships and resources that will assist in providing critical wraparound services to increase employee success in training programs by providing the necessary life-skill resources such as: assistance with housing, groceries, childcare, transportation as well as English language skills and job coaching. Visit [www.california.carefortheaging.org](http://www.california.carefortheaging.org) to learn more.

Employers can arrange for *transportation support* for those employees who may lack access to their own transportation. Organizing community carpools can be enormously helpful, and employers with additional resources can provide transportation subsidies for public transport or transport vans. This may be especially helpful if the employer is located long distances from areas where refugees reside.

In addition, *childcare resources* are of interest to refugee and nonrefugee employees alike. If they aren’t already doing so, employers can consider offering resources such as in-house day care or subsidies for external care for all employees. This is relevant for refugee employees who might have arrived without a spouse and have no community support to help care for their children.

Employers can also provide or encourage access to *mental health services*, either on- or off-site, to support workers who may want to discuss the challenges they face. Where possible, employers should help refugee employees connect with a diverse network of mental health providers who can speak with employees in their native languages.

Finally, as the demands for using technology within the healthcare sector increase, employers may want to consider providing extended training and *digital literacy support* for incoming employees who may be less comfortable and familiar with technological tools required in the workplace.



## REACHING AND CONNECTING WITH REFUGEE COMMUNITIES

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While having a good basic understanding of employment documentation and creating a responsive workplace are key steps to hiring refugees, it is also important to know where and how to make strong community connections to best advertise job openings and make your company known.

The two primary means of reaching refugee communities are directly connecting with resettlement agencies in robust partnership to create hiring onramps and conducting direct outreach to refugee communities. Often, a combination of both approaches is recommended.

### Connecting with Resettlement Agencies

A Resettlement Agency (RA) is a state-designated organization that provides initial services to refugees resettled in a geographic area. Many RA's offer employment services in-house, and therefore partner with local employers to provide employment to refugee clients.

Resettlement agencies work with refugees to help them find jobs and become stable in their new communities. These agencies also provide support to companies in identifying qualified potential employees, assisting with new-hire paperwork, translation and interpretation needs, and follow-up services to ensure mutual satisfaction. These services are offered free of charge for an unlimited amount of time.

### **Client Success Story: Mariam**

Mariam, a single mother from Sierra Leone, arrived to the San Jose area in 2018. Through some community connections, she was able to secure a job as a caretaker in a healthcare facility, but was only able to make minimum wage. Mariam began working with a local Resettlement Agency and expressed the passion she had for her work and her desire to grow in the healthcare industry but also her struggles to take care of her children.

Mariam was able to locate a nurse training school that offered weekend courses, and attended while working 40 hours a week at her regular job, often struggling to find the childcare she needed to attend both work and school. She completed school and starting working a CNA job that paid her 20% more and also offered a good benefits package.

Mariam has continually stated her desire to take care of others in her career, and she is now able to do that while still providing for her family, both in San Jose and at home in Sierra Leone.

In addition to her certification and new employment, Miriam also showed other signs of growth in her journey to become a CNA. When she first came to the U.S., she was timid and shy, unsure of herself and nervous about communicating even though she had a good grasp of English. Mariam now shows up for work with a sense of confidence and pride. Miriam's success can be an inspiration to other refugee women wanting to work as a CNA in California.

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### **Why Was Mariam Successful?**

Key elements to Mariam's success included the support she received from the local resettlement agency, the ability of the vocational school to offer flexible CNA class schedules, and the support of her employer. Mariam knew that by earning her CNA certificate, she would be hired by this employer who would reimburse her for the tuition costs. In addition, the employer paid a good wage and offered good benefits. These critical elements were the impetus for Mariam's CNA journey, and in the end benefitted both Mariam and her new employer.

Each resettlement agency affiliate will have staff members that can assist companies with their hiring needs. Typically, the staff members that company hiring managers or recruiters work with most closely are Job Developers or Employment Specialists. These individuals can work with employers to refer qualified candidates, assist with the application process, answer any questions about documentation, and provide ongoing support once a refugee begins working.



Employer-RA partnerships are symbiotic. RAs often have competing employers searching for talent, and the most successful relationships are active and engaged. Here are a few suggestions for standing out and being a strong partner with RAs:

- ▶ **Lend volunteers** – many RAs depend on volunteers for help with job readiness activities such as resume writing, interview practice, and professional mentoring. Volunteers may offer to speak to classes about working as CNAs and career pathways in the healthcare industry. If your company has employees of refugee backgrounds, they can be strong ambassadors and help connect with other individuals with similar life experiences.
- ▶ **Support refugees in career pathways programs** – many refugee job seekers enter the healthcare field through career pathways programs offered at RAs. In these programs, participants may complete certification programs like CNAs before starting their job search process. Advertising tuition reimbursement programs, offering interviews to graduates, and providing mentoring to participants can all support building a strong refugee workforce that can fill CNA positions.
- ▶ **Invite RA staff to your facilities** – conducting facility tours, both for RA staff and for their refugee clients, can help demonstrate what working with your company could look like, as well as help reinforce ideas about roles that potential employees may be interested in.
- ▶ **Develop simplified recruitment systems** – Refugee job seekers can face numerous barriers to employment, including language and cultural barriers, basic job readiness skills, and digital literacy skills. Avoid hiring practices like lengthy interviews, clunky online application systems, personality quizzes, and other things that can make jobs inaccessible to this population. Consider working with RA staff to develop streamlined recruitment systems with priority interviews with staff used to recruit from refugee communities.
- ▶ **Emphasize your refugee-friendly workplace** – the previous section discussed developing a culturally component workplace and letting RA staff know about these accommodations can be key.
- ▶ **Focus on job quality** – especially when multiple employers are vying for talent, offering strong entry pay, benefits, consistent hours, transportation assistance, simplified application processes, childcare assistance, and career growth can all demonstrate why your jobs are high quality, and why RA staff should help direct talent to your workplace.

## List of California Resettlement Agencies

Below is a list of active Resettlement Agencies in California.

### 1 Anaheim, CA

Ethiopian Community Development Council

### 2 Concord, CA

HIAS - Jewish Family & Community Services East Bay

### 3 Garden Grove, CA

World Relief Southern California

### 4 Glendale, CA

International Rescue Committee  
U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants  
International Institute of Los Angeles

### 5 Los Angeles, CA

International Rescue Committee  
Episcopal Migration Ministries  
Interfaith Refugee and Immigration Service

### 6 Los Gatos, CA

HIAS - Jewish Family Services of Silicon Valley

### 7 Modesto, CA

World Relief Modesto

### 8 North Highlands, CA

World Relief Sacramento

### 9 Oakland, CA

International Rescue Committee

### 10 Sacramento, CA

Church World Service  
Doors, Inc.  
Center for New Americans  
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops  
Sacramento Food Bank & Family Services  
U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants  
Lao Family Community Development, Inc.  
International Rescue Committee

### 11 San Diego, CA

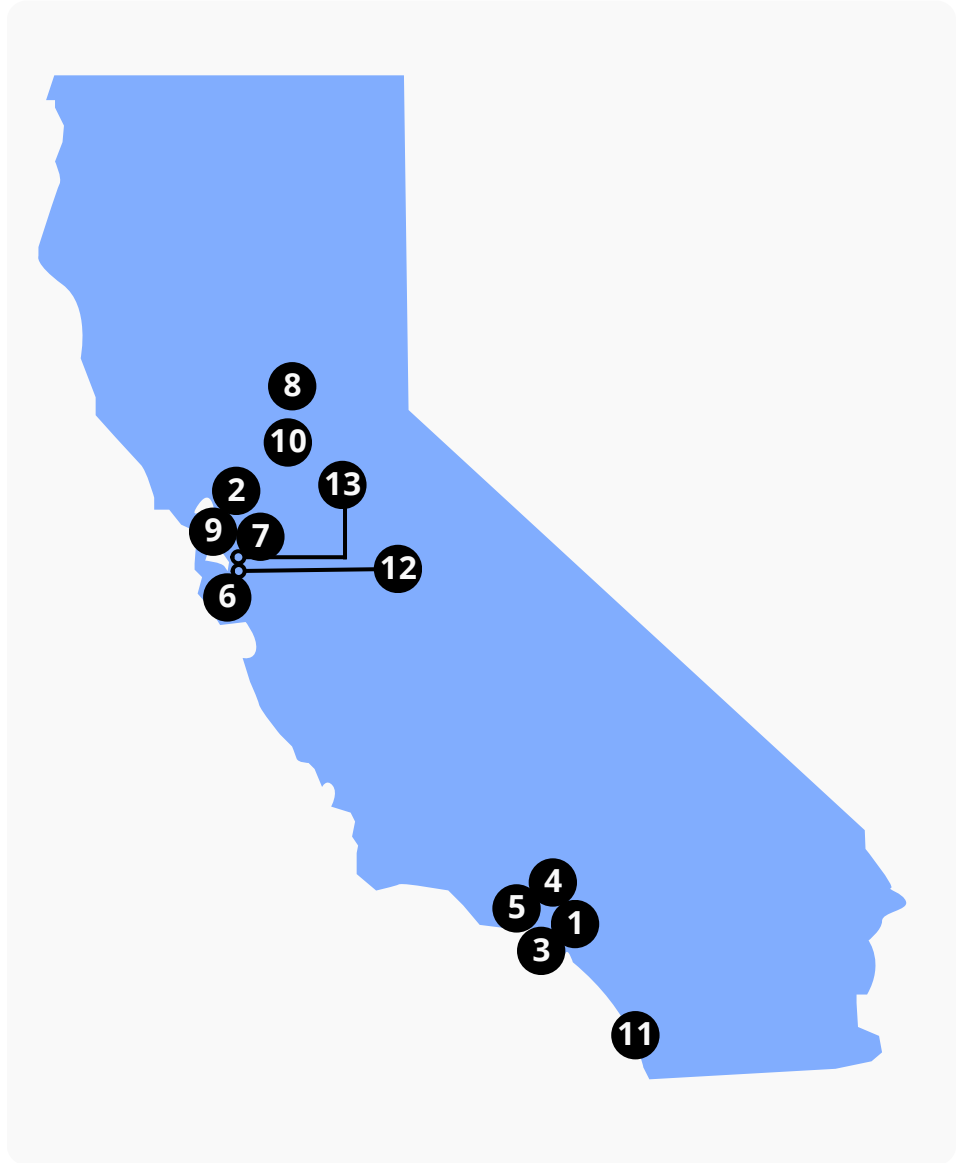
Ethiopian Community Development Council  
Alliance for African Assistance  
HIAS - Jewish Family Service of San Diego  
International Rescue Committee  
U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants  
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops  
Catholic Charities Diocese of San Diego

### 12 San Jose, CA

International Rescue Committee

### 13 Turlock, CA

International Rescue Committee





## Community Recruitment Efforts

In addition to direct coordination with local RAs, many employers may want to explore direct outreach efforts in order to advertise job openings to refugee communities. Here are some additional community outreach tips that may help attract refugee job seekers.

- ▶ **Use in-language recruitment** where possible, including translating flyers and sending staff with linguistic capacity to community job fairs. In addition, using promotional materials with simplified language and culturally resonating images can help capture interest.
- ▶ **Make connections with places and organizations where refugees are located**, including with local ethnic community centers, welcome centers, public agencies, workforce development boards, religious institutions, and other locations.
- ▶ **Post your open positions** in our Career Center where we connect talent with opportunity. CNAP is employer-driven and provides nursing home employers with resources to build and sustain a renewable employee pipeline and foster CNA retention by providing advancement along a CNA career pathway. Visit [www.california.carefortheaging.org](http://www.california.carefortheaging.org) to learn more.

Oftentimes, long-term care facilities are not located within short distances of Resettlement Agencies or communities with large numbers of refugees and immigrants. These situations can be particularly helpful to engage in community outreach, as well as think about providing incentives like transportation or relocation support to attract talent that may live further away from the workplace.

## CONCLUSION

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Successful hiring of refugees can be an important part of a long-term hiring strategy that can meet the hiring needs of employers, especially in occupations like CNAs that are in especially high demand. To do this requires thoughtful consideration of the needs of refugee workers and the development of a workplace that can best prepare incoming refugee workers for success.

Additionally, many refugees have strong community ties across their California homes, and when employers support refugee workers who may advance in their careers and leave their positions at those employers, positive experiences and workplace supports are likely to be shared within those communities, leading to additional word-of-mouth referrals for additional vacated positions. Refugees are more likely to work at employers that already have a strong history of hiring other refugees.

By following suggestions laid out in this toolkit, employers can better prepare themselves to reap the benefits of hiring refugees and distinguish themselves to potential refugee workers as desirable places of work.