



Sample Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Onboarding Guide

Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) is a spectrum of support services available to refugee and newcomer clients. Services can range from broad social-emotional support, via wellness groups and creative activities, to clinical behavioral health interventions focused on reducing symptoms of mental illness. MHPSS services can be embedded in resettlement, integrated into health clinics, provided in community settings, or accessed through specialty clinics. Service providers can vary in training and technical knowledge, spanning multiple disciplines. Despite these differences, the unifying aim of MHPSS services is to promote healing and connection among newcomers, helping them to thrive.

This guide is a framework for onboarding new MHPSS service providers, whether they are experienced mental health clinicians new to serving refugee populations or novice caseworkers setting out to support newcomers through psychosocial services in resettlement. This guide can be customized to meet new staff members' specific needs and includes organization-specific training. It shares reading materials, recorded webinars, and other resources to complement your organization or program's onboarding activities, which may include training under supervisors, shadowing colleagues, reviewing procedural materials and organization policies, and conducting case consultations and/or case conferences.

See Switchboard's [Sample Comprehensive Case Management Onboarding Guide](#) for additional resources that may be relevant to certain MHPSS staff roles.

Note: This onboarding guide includes external resources that may be unavailable. If you need access or updates, contact the original author.

Learn More About Who You Serve

This first section provides you with an introduction to some of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR)-eligible populations you may serve through your program.

Note: This is not a comprehensive list of ORR-eligible populations that may be enrolled in your agency's program. For a full list of eligibility documents for all eligible client populations, please refer to the [ORR website](#).

Due Date:

Completion Date:

Immigration Statuses and ORR Eligibility	☐ Watch: Understanding Newcomer Immigration Statuses ☐ Watch: How Resettlement Agencies Work with the U.S. Government ☐ Read: Getting Started in Navigating ORR Eligibility ☐ Read: ACF Policy Web Address ☐ Read: Status and Documentation Requirements
Refugees	☐ Watch: Who are refugees and how do they arrive in the U.S.? ☐ Read: Resettlement in the United States ☐ Watch: What is refugee resettlement and what is UNHCR's role?
Cuban & Haitian Entrants	☐ Read: ORR Fact Sheet for Cuban/Haitian Entrants ☐ Read: Understanding Immigration Context and Eligibility for Cuban and Haitian Entrants
Certain Amerasians	☐ Read: ORR Fact Sheet for Amerasians
Victims of Trafficking	☐ Read: ORR Fact Sheet for Victims of Trafficking ☐ Watch: Faces of Human Trafficking Series ☐ Read: On World Day against Trafficking, a Resource List of Anti-Trafficking Resources
Afghan and Ukrainian Humanitarian Parolees	☐ Read: Resource List: Serving Ukrainian Newcomers ☐ Read: Useful Resources to Support Afghan Newcomers in the U.S. ☐ Read: Answering FAQs on Benefits for Ukrainian and Afghan Humanitarian Parolees Arriving On or After October 1 2023
Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Recipients	☐ Read: Special Immigrant Visa (SIV): Application Vetting & Approval ☐ Read: Special Immigrant Visas for Afghans

Understanding MHPSS

This section provides introductory-level, foundational knowledge for MHPSS service providers.

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Fundamentals of MHPSS	☐ Watch: MHPSS: Foundations for Resettlement Caseworkers ☐ Read: Mental Health and Psychosocial Support for Newcomers: Guidance for Service Providers ☐ Complete: Understanding the Behavioral Health Care System in the U.S.	☐ <i>Reflect: At what level of care will you be providing support to clients?</i> ☐ <i>Reflect: What helps you when you are going through a difficult time? What approaches can you bring to your work with clients?</i>
Trauma and Trauma-Informed Care	☐ Read: Trauma-Informed Care: A Primer for Refugee Service Providers ☐ Watch: Trauma-Informed Care in Case Management ☐ Read: Understanding Refugee Trauma: For Mental Health Professionals For Expanded Skill Building: ☐ Watch: Stress, Trauma and the Brain: Insights for Educators ☐ Watch: Types of Trauma <i>[Warning: This video contains details of torture and abuse that may be disturbing or upsetting.]</i>	☐ <i>Reflect: How might a client's experiences with traumatic events impact their current actions?</i>
Ethical Considerations	☐ Read: The ethical guidelines for your professional practice or discipline.	☐ <i>Discuss with your supervisor: How will you handle common ethical dilemmas with refugee clients, such as accepting gifts and invitations to social events?</i>

Client Confidentiality & Boundaries	☐ Watch: Creating Balance in Case Management ☐ Watch: Client Boundaries ☐ Watch: Boundaries in the Electronic Age ☐ Discuss with your supervisor: How will you maintain client confidentiality during the course of your work? Consider written, electronic, and verbal communication. What are the limits to confidentiality? ☐ Discuss with your supervisor: What organizational policies exist regarding client behavior and expectations? For example, how do we respond if a client comes to the agency intoxicated?	☐ <i>Discuss with your supervisor: What are some challenges you anticipate with setting client boundaries? How can your supervisor assist with these challenges?</i> ☐ <i>Discuss with your supervisor: How will you navigate unanticipated interactions with clients in the community? How do you prepare your clients for unanticipated interactions that might occur in the community?</i>
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Cultural Context		
The following section introduces cultural background information on some of the largest recently resettled populations, as well as some information about working successfully with interpreters.		
Due Date: Completion Date:		
Cultural Expressions of Mental Health and Background Information	☐ Read: Cultural Backgrounders for the most commonly served populations at your location (Afghan , Ukrainian , Afrikaner , Haitian , Cuban , Rohingya , Congolese , Somali , Iraqi , Burmese (Myanmar) , and Bhutanese .) ☐ Watch: Mental Health in Context: Afghan Newcomers or Read: Mental Health in Context: Afghan Newcomers	☐ <i>Reflect: What are some contextual and cultural factors you should consider as an MHPSS provider?</i>

Working with Interpreters	☐ eLearning: Introduction to Working with Interpreters and Overcoming Challenges in Interpretation ☐ Review: Scripts for Working with Interpreters For Expanded Skill Building: ☐ Read: Language Access in Times of Crisis: Getting Started with Video Remote Interpreting ☐ eLearning: Not Lost in Translation: The Clinician-Interpreter Dyad in the Mental Health Setting ☐ Read: A Socio-Culturally, Linguistically-Responsive, and Trauma-Informed Approach to Mental Health Interpretation	☐ <i>Reflect and discuss with your supervisor: What are best practices in MHPSS interpretation? When can your agency use in-person interpreters and work to schedule the same interpreter throughout a client's course of services?</i> ☐ <i>Reflect and discuss with your supervisor: How will you prepare and support interpreters after providing interpretation for traumatic content?</i>
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Identifying Client Needs and Making Successful Referrals

The following section provides resources to help MHPSS service providers identify clients in need of support, find additional community resources, and make successful referrals.

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Screening and Assessment	☐ Read: Opening Doors to Mental Health Support: A Screening Guide for Resettlement Providers ☐ Watch: Effective Practices for Mental Health Screening Across Cultures For Expanded Skill Building: ☐ Review: Measures that are Appropriate for Refugee Children and Families ☐ Read: Considerations in Using Mental Health Screening Measures with Afghan Clients	☐ <i>Activity: Review the screening tools your agency uses and determine how you can employ them in your work.</i>
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Service Mapping and Making Referrals	☐ Read: Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Service Mapping ☐ Watch: Strengthening Refugee Integration through Community Resource Mapping For Expanded Skill Building: ☐ Review: Community Resource Mapping Templates ☐ Review: Mental Health Referral and New Provider Inquiry Forms	☐ <i>Reflect: What role will you play in making outside referrals and coordinating care for your clients? How will you follow up with clients and external agencies after making a referral?</i> ☐ <i>Discuss with your supervisor: How will you effectively communicate the triage process with your clients?</i>
Reducing Mental Health Stigma	☐ Read: Helping Clients to Overcome Stigma to Access Mental Healthcare with Dr. Debra Stein	☐ <i>Discuss with your supervisor: How can you discuss mental health topics with clients from different cultures? What approaches can you take to help reduce stigma?</i>

Practical Skills		
The following section is intended to increase MHPSS service providers' skills in providing trauma-informed, strengths-based clinical and non-clinical services to refugee and newcomer clients.		
Due Date: Completion Date:		
Approaches to Client Care	☐ Watch: Psychological First Aid to Support Clients Affected by the Crisis in Afghanistan ☐ Watch: Approach to the Patient ☐ Watch: Demystifying Strengths-Based Services to Foster Refugees' Resilience	☐ <i>Activity: Role play providing psychological first aid to a newcomer from Afghanistan who is experiencing emotional distress.</i>

Clinical Mental Health Services	☐ Read: Walking Together: A Mental Health Therapist's Guide for Working with Refugees ☐ Read: What Works to Improve Mental Health of Refugee Children and Adults?	☐ <i>Discuss with your supervisor: How will your approach to services take your client's culture and language into consideration? How might you adapt traditional/Western approaches to treatment?</i>
Psychosocial Support Groups	☐ Watch: Understanding Psychosocial Support Groups: Three Successful Models ☐ Review: HIAS Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Curriculum: Promoting Newcomer Mental Health and Wellness through Support Groups ☐ Read: What is the impact of peer support groups on refugees' mental health?	☐ <i>Activity: Observe a group session (with consent/permission from all involved). Notice how the facilitator keeps clients engaged. What activities/strategies seem to connect clients the most?</i>
Psychiatry and Medication Management	☐ Watch: Psychiatric Care	☐ <i>Discuss with your supervisor: How can learning more about psychiatric medications improve your client care? When and where do you refer clients for medication management?</i>
Alternative Healing Modalities	☐ Read: Traditional Embroidery as a Settlement Mental Health Modality ☐ Watch: Yoga for Refugees: Shifting out of Survival Mode and into Interoception	☐ <i>Reflect and discuss with your supervisor: How can you implement alternative healing modalities in your work?</i>

Challenges in Service Delivery		
This section provides resources to help MHPSS service providers overcome common challenges in service delivery with refugee and newcomer clients.		
Due Date: Completion Date:		
Overcoming Barriers to Care	☐ Watch: Access to Mental Health Services for Refugees and Other Vulnerable Immigrants in the U.S.: Overcoming Barriers and Strengthening Enabling Factors ☐ Read: Helping Clients Prepare for Initial Medical Appointments	☐ <i>Reflect: What are the most common barriers for refugee clients to receive mental health care? How might you help clients overcome these barriers?</i>
Crisis Intervention and Suicidality	☐ Watch: De-escalation in Practice: Strategies for Supporting Newcomers Experiencing Crises ☐ Watch: Suicide Prevention and Safety Planning ☐ Read: Preventing Crises and De-Escalating Difficult Situations with Newcomer Clients ☐ Discuss with your supervisor: What organizational policies exist regarding common client crises? If policies are in development, Read: Critical Incident Response: Toolkit for Developing Organizational Policies and Procedures For Expanded Skill Building: ☐ Read: Introduction to Safety Planning and Review: Low-Risk Safety Plan Template ☐ Read: Safety Planning for Suicidal Ideation and Review: Safety Planning for Suicidal Ideation Template	☐ <i>Activity: Role play providing trauma-informed de-escalation to an escalated client.</i> ☐ <i>Activity: Review your program's safety plan templates and critical incident reporting procedures.</i>

Providing Services via Telehealth	☐ Read: What works in providing telehealth services to newcomers? ☐ Watch: Telemedicine in Mental Health ☐ Watch: VAST Experiences of Providing Virtual Individual Therapy and Trauma-Informed Support Groups	☐ <i>Activity: Practice using your agency's telehealth platform for virtual sessions. Consider how you will teach clients to use this platform. How will you address common barriers such as lack of technology, limited digital literacy, and language barriers?</i>
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Population-Specific Information		
This section provides helpful information specific to working with different sub-populations.		
Due Date: Completion Date:		
Children and Families	☐ Watch: Traumatic Stress Among Children and Youth Series: Viewing Trauma Through a Developmental Lens and Responding to Abuse, Exploitation and Trafficking ☐ Read: Fundamentals of Mandatory Reporting: A Guide for Refugee Service Providers in the U.S. or Watch: Foundations of Mandatory Reporting for Refugee Service Providers For Expanded Skill Building: ☐ Watch: Best Practices for Working with Refugee and Immigrant Youth Webinar Series ☐ Visit: nctsn.org ☐ Visit: carreirc.org	☐ <i>Reflect: What are some common forced migration experiences of refugee children and youth?</i> ☐ <i>Activity: Review your agency's protocols for reporting child abuse and/or neglect.</i>

Survivors of Family Violence	☐ Watch: Family Violence: Core Concepts for Newcomer Serving Organizations or Read: Family Violence: Core Concepts for Newcomer Serving Organizations For Expanded Skill Building: ☐ Read: Safety Planning for Family Violence: Guidance for Service Providers and Review: Family Violence Safety Plan Template ☐ eLearning: Safety Planning in Resettlement, Asylum, and Integration Settings	☐ <i>Activity: Look through your agency's tools for safety planning with survivors of family violence. What options for additional support are available?</i> ☐ <i>Discuss with your supervisor: What are your office's policies for working with family violence?</i>
Older Adults	☐ Watch: How to Provide Person-Centered, Trauma-Informed Care for Older Refugees ☐ Watch: Providing Trauma-informed Services to Older Survivors of Torture ☐ Watch: Working with Newcomer Seniors and their Mental Health Issues	☐ <i>Reflect: What are some of the unique challenges that contribute to the mental health needs and resiliencies of older adults?</i>
Afghan Newcomers	☐ Watch: Mental Health in Context: Afghan Newcomers or Read: Mental Health in Context: Afghan Newcomers ☐ Read: Supporting Resettled Afghan Children and Adolescents Experiencing Grief-Related Distress ☐ Read: Facilitating Discussions About Mental Health with Afghan Newcomer Communities ☐ Read: Faith-based Healing among Afghan Muslims: Guidance for Refugee Service Providers in the U.S.	☐ <i>Reflect: What is one takeaway you learned to guide your work with Afghan newcomers in MHPSS settings?</i>

Individuals with Serious Mental Illness	☐ Read: Supporting Newcomers with Serious Mental Illness: Guidance for Service Providers	☐ <i>Reflect: How can your agency be prepared to support newcomers with serious mental illness?</i>
Individuals with Substance Use Disorders	☐ Read: An Introduction to Substance Use: Guidance for Refugee Service Providers ☐ Read: What works to prevent or reduce substance use among newcomer populations? ☐ Watch: Substance Use among Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Youth (URM)	☐ <i>Discuss with your supervisor: What are some of the largest populations of newcomers your agency serves? What substance use concerns should you be prepared to address?</i>

Supporting Complex Client Needs		
Refugee and newcomer clients often present with multi-faceted and complex needs. This section offers resources for providing holistic services to support refugee and newcomer clients' unique needs.		
Due Date: Completion Date:		
Case Management	☐ Watch: Case Management Foundations ☐ Read: Supplemental Security Income (SSI): Answering Frequently Asked Questions for Service Providers ☐ Read: What is Health Case Management?	☐ <i>Reflect: What are some practical ways you can support clients' well-being?</i>
Legal: Naturalization and N-648s	☐ Review: Disability Exception for Citizenship (N-648)	☐ <i>Reflect: Why is it important for MHPSS service providers to be informed about disability waivers for citizenship?</i>

Physical Health and Medical Needs	☐ Read: An Introduction to Refugee Health ☐ Watch: Understanding U.S. Domestic Medical Screening for Refugees and Other Newcomers ☐ Read: Assisting Newcomers with Navigating the U.S. Health Care System	☐ <i>Reflect: How do you explain the mind-body connection in your work? How might mental health symptoms present physically for clients?</i>
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Coping with Burnout and Secondary Traumatic Stress Reactions

Burnout and secondary traumatic stress reactions are common occupational hazards for MHPSS service providers. It is critical that new staff inform themselves about these risks and develop proactive plans for personal support early in their training.

Due Date:

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Understanding Occupational Hazards	☐ Read: Self-Care Tools: Core Concepts ☐ Read: What works to reduce burnout and vicarious trauma among refugee service providers?	☐ <i>Reflect: How might occupational hazards impact you and your work?</i>
Tools for Self-Care	☐ Watch: “I Was Already Burned Out, and Now This...” Strategies for Staff and Supervisors to Mitigate Burnout, Vicarious Trauma, and Other Occupational Hazards ☐ Read: The Well-Being Guide ☐ Listen: Ask an Expert: Self-Care Q&A For Expanded Skill Building: ☐ Complete: Professional Quality of Life (ProQOL) ☐ Review: Fundamental Skills for Self-Care	☐ <i>Activity: Create a self-care plan to proactively address the occupational hazards of this work.</i> ☐ <i>Activity: Complete the ProQOL to increase self-awareness of the impact your work might have on you.</i>

Staff and Community Care	☐ Watch: Organizational Approaches to Staff Care and Retention in Resettlement ☐ Read: Preventing Occupational Hazards by Promoting Organizational Resilience ☐ Listen: How Can Supervisors and Organizations Support Staff Care?	☐ <i>Discuss with your supervisor: What supports does your agency have in place to support staff?</i>
Supervision and Case Consultation	☐ Read: Effective Case Consultations and Case Conferences ☐ Review: Secondary Traumatic Stress Core Competencies for Trauma-Informed Support and Supervision	☐ <i>Reflect: Why is it important to seek supervision around complex cases?</i>

Resources to Share with Clients

Many new and existing MHPSS service providers find resources in client languages beneficial to supporting client's mental health and well-being.

Due Date:

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	☐ Watch: Supporting Afghan Newcomers' Mental Health Through Digital Literacy ☐ Watch: Emotional Health and Wellness or Review: Emotional Health and Wellness (available in 10 languages) ☐ Watch: Managing and Coping with Stress or Review: Managing and Coping with Stress (available in 10 languages) ☐ Watch: Mental Health in the U.S. or Review: Mental Health in the U.S. (available in 10 languages) ☐ Review: Mental Health Workbook (available in English and Ukrainian) ☐ Watch: Mental Wellness and Stress (available in 9 languages) ☐ Watch: Substance Abuse Disorder (available in 10 languages) ☐ Read: Doing What Matters in Times of Stress (available in 34 languages) ☐ Read: Age-Related Reactions to a Traumatic Event (available in 10 languages) ☐ Read: After a Crisis: Helping Young Children Heal (available in 11 languages) ☐ Read: Talking to Children about War (available in 7 languages)	☐ <i>Reflect: Consider how you might incorporate client-facing resources in your work.</i>
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We encourage you to continue learning as you progress in your role within MHPSS. Please consult your supervisor or training officer about additional opportunities to grow within your role. Social learning opportunities, such as communities of practice or working groups, can also be a great way to exchange knowledge and learn from others!

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