

AFRIKANERS

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 newly arrived Afrikaner refugees in the U.S. This information does not represent the strengths and challenges of all Afrikaners. Providers should adapt their services to the individual needs of their clients.

3 Brief History

4 Resettlement in the United States

5 Culture

Languages and Communication Style.....	5
Religion.....	5
Family Dynamics.....	6
Holidays and Celebrations.....	6
Food.....	6

7 Key Considerations for Resettlement Services

Program Eligibility	7
Cultural Adjustment.....	7
Self-Reliance	8
Managing Expectations.....	9
Food Access.....	10
Housing	10
Employment	11
Education.....	13
Health and Mental Health.....	14

15 References



BRIEF HISTORY

Prior to Dutch settlement, South Africa was home to indigenous groups such as the Khoisan and Bantu-speaking peoples. In the 17th century, Dutch settlers arrived and laid the foundation for Afrikaner culture, identity, and language. These settlers' descendants came to be known as *Boers*, from the Dutch word for "farmer." At the turn of the 19th century, the British Empire took control of the Dutch Cape Colony. This prompted the Great Trek, during which thousands of Boers moved inland, displacing native peoples, to establish independent republics. During the Anglo-Boer War at the turn of the 20th century, the British interned around 145,000 Boers and 140,000 Black Africans in concentration camps, and upwards of 50,000 died. These events helped consolidate a concept of Afrikaner nationalism through collective suffering at the hands of the British. From 1948 to 1994, Afrikaners participated in establishing and implementing the South African government's system of Apartheid, a regime of racial segregation. In the post-Apartheid era, South Africans including Afrikaners continue to grapple with issues of identity, reconciliation, and socio-economic transformation.

RESETTLEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

In February 2025, the President of the United States issued a presidential action prioritizing humanitarian relief, including admission and resettlement through the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), for people of Afrikaner ethnicity and other racial minorities in South Africa.¹ The vast majority of South Africans under consideration for U.S. resettlement identify as Afrikaner.



AFRIKANER CULTURE

LANGUAGES AND COMMUNICATION STYLE

South Africa recognizes 12 official languages, including Afrikaans and English. Speaking Afrikaans, developed from Dutch, is a defining feature of Afrikaner identity. While the ability to speak Afrikaans often signifies cultural belonging, approximately 90% of Afrikaners also speak English as a first or second language, as it is widely taught in schools and serves as the country's primary language of business.

Generally, South Africans speak confidently and directly, similar to how most Americans communicate, though this of course may significantly vary from person to person. When speaking with Afrikaner clients, it is best to be clear and succinct, focusing on the main points of the message. It is common to shake hands during professional meetings, while other gestures of warmth and affection are common among friends and family.

RELIGION

Many Afrikaners identify as conservative Christians. Calvinism, especially the Dutch Reformed Church, has historically played a significant role in shaping Afrikaner beliefs and values. While Christian faith remains strong within the Afrikaner community, some generational changes have led to a decline in traditional religious practices and a diversification of beliefs.

Afrikaners often jest that their other religion is rugby. American football shares some similarities with this sport, as does soccer. The South African national team is called the Springboks, or the Bokke. On dates when the team is playing key matches, some South Africans wear the Springbok jersey, sometimes even to work.



FAMILY DYNAMICS

Afrikaner families are generally affectionate, protective, and expressive. They tend to be small and close-knit, though some may live with extended family members. In urban areas, both women and men work outside the home, but women are often responsible for household duties and raising children. Among older generations, family values are generally conservative and patriarchal, premised on the father being the head of the household, while younger generations may have a more modern and egalitarian approach to family life.

HOLIDAYS AND CELEBRATIONS

South Africa's official holidays are New Year's Day; Easter; Human Rights Day (March 21); Freedom Day (April 27), Workers' Day (May 1); Youth Day (June 16); National Women's Day (August 9); Heritage Day (September 24); Reconciliation Day (December 16), Christmas, and Day of Goodwill (December 26). For more information, see [*Public Holidays in South Africa*](#).

FOOD

Meat is a staple of the South African diet, although cuisine varies widely according to ethnicity. South Africans love to barbecue, or *braai*—slowly grilling steaks, chops, and sausages (*boerewors*) over hot charcoal, or as a stew in a three-legged cast iron pot on the coals. For Afrikaners, the concept of making a fire and cooking meat on it is not merely a means of cooking, but a key form of recreation, socializing, and identity. Other dishes enjoyed by South Africans include wild game and a dried meat snack called *biltong*, which can be accompanied by potatoes, bread, or rice as a starch. Milk tart, a custard-like pie, is a favorite dessert among Afrikaners, with *koeksisters*, a deepfried braid of dough infused with syrup, being a favorite accompaniment to coffee or rooibos tea.



KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR RESETTLEMENT SERVICES

PROGRAM ELIGIBILITY

Afrikaners and other South Africans who resettle through the USRAP arrive with refugee status and are eligible for the Program of Initial Resettlement (PIR). They also qualify for other services through the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), including Preferred Communities (PC) and Matching Grant (MG). Through PIR, Afrikaners receive initial resettlement services for at least 30 days and for up to 90 days after arrival in the United States. These services include arrival and housing support, direct assistance, referrals for employment services and English language classes, assistance accessing benefits, school enrollment, and cultural and community orientation to life in the United States. Afrikaner refugees are also eligible for some “mainstream” (non-ORR funded) federal benefits, such as cash assistance through Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

Although South Africa shares some similarities to the U.S. in terms of economic development and technological advancement, cultural adjustment remains a consideration, as with any arrivals to a new country.

Prior to departing South Africa, resettling Afrikaners who are 18 years of age and older are required to participate in a remote cultural orientation (CO) session. This orientation is about five hours long and focuses on topics including the resettlement process, housing, education, employment, U.S. laws and rights and responsibilities. This orientation also prepares Afrikaners for travel and entry to the United States by covering pre-departure requirements, travel logistics, and required documentation. Afrikaners are also advised how to protect themselves against fraud and human trafficking.

Under PIR, local resettlement providers (LRPs) must orient Afrikaner clients to their new community and life in the United States. Post-arrival, providers should cover topics such as the role of the LRP, employment, housing, U.S. laws, public education, transportation, English language learning (as relevant), financial management, and benefits and health care access. To encourage relevance, providers should plan which CO topics to emphasize after the case's initial needs assessment. While there is no required curriculum for CO, useful client-facing resources are available on the [*Settle In website*](#). Provider-facing resources can be found on [*SwitchboardTA.org*](#).



SELF RELIANCE

Some Afrikaners resettled in the U.S. come from agrarian backgrounds and are known for their independence. This characteristic may make them less likely to seek or accept assistance, even when needed. Afrikaners may arrive with a strong work ethic and a desire to settle quickly; they may expect services like documentation and benefits to be processed promptly, potentially leading to frustration when delays occur.

Afrikaners tend to avoid interactions with police or local authorities and prefer to handle situations on their own. Some have had prior experiences where they received inadequate protection from the state. Post-arrival, Afrikaners may hesitate to engage emergency services, and only seek help in extreme circumstances. To help Afrikaners understand the role of law enforcement in the U.S., share resources such as Settle In's [*How to Interact with Police in the United States*](#).

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

Clearly outlining service timelines upfront can help manage expectations and ease the adjustment process. Some key points you may want to explain are:

- Resettlement assistance is time-limited and is designed to support clients' first steps toward self-sufficiency, rather than to cover all expenses for the full PIR period.
- Direct assistance may be utilized on a client's behalf to cover client expenses (such as housing) rather than provided as a lump sum.
- Clients aged 65 and older may be eligible for Supplemental Security Income (SSI), but approval can take several months and is not guaranteed.

Communicating clearly and early on helps set realistic expectations.

FOUNDATIONAL CASEWORK SKILLS

Foundational casework skills help providers serve all clients, including Afrikaner newcomers. Skills to apply include:

- **Start with strengths:** Many Afrikaner clients arrive with strong English proficiency, work readiness, problem-solving skills, and a high motivation for self-sufficiency.
- **Remember that low vulnerability does not mean no vulnerability:** Even when needs are not immediately visible, clients may face stress from system navigation, housing challenges, loss of status, or past trauma.
- **Normalize support:** When newcomers are reluctant to seek support, it helps to frame services as standard program components rather than "charity" or "extra help."
- **Build trust through transparency:** Clearly explain rights, responsibilities, and available services. Set realistic expectations early—including timelines, role of the LRP, limits of assistance, and the need for difficult conversations.

For additional resources, see Switchboard's webinar on [*Practical Guide to Working with Refugees*](#).

FOOD ACCESS

Under PIR, upon arrival in the U.S., Afrikaner clients must be provided a culturally appropriate, ready-to-eat meal. For this meal, providers may consider offering grilled meat such as chicken or beef, a starch such as potato or rice, and a vegetable or salad. New arrivals are likely to be familiar with fast food chains including KFC, McDonald's, and Nando's, which are popular in South Africa. In general, Afrikaners are not likely to need specialized ingredients beyond those available in a mainstream grocery store. Given the importance of self-reliance in Afrikaner culture, clients may be reluctant to seek support from service providers with food access. However, providers should screen for Afrikaner families' food security during intake and as appropriate throughout the service period.



HOUSING

Access to safe and stable housing is key to successful resettlement. Under PIR, Afrikaners will receive assistance to decent, safe, and sanitary housing in their new community. Afrikaners are also eligible for other ORR-funded programs, such as Preferred Communities (PC) or Refugee Support Services (RSS), that can provide ongoing support to Afrikaner clients after the initial 90-day PIR period if needed. The additional support may include rental assistance, housing orientation, and referrals to community-based housing providers.

Many new arrivals may have high expectations for their new living situations, which will need to be balanced with available resources and the practical realities of resettlement. The cost of living and housing in the U.S. is generally higher than in South Africa. Afrikaners may find that expenses for rent, utilities, and everyday necessities are significantly greater in the U.S., impacting their budgeting and financial planning. Afrikaners may also arrive in multigenerational families and prefer to live all together, or may hope for a standalone home rather than an apartment. Meeting these expectations may be challenging due to higher housing costs and limited availability in the U.S. In addition, longer-term housing leases in the U.S. may cause frustration for clients who are not accustomed to extended commitments. Providing clear guidance on lease terms and costs can support informed decision-making and smoother transitions.

It may be helpful to explain that a fixed-term lease, typically 12 months, provides the stable address clients need to access benefits and build credit. Providers can also clarify that a client's first home may not be their long-term home, and that housing options depend on factors such as a landlord's willingness to rent to newcomers with limited credit history in the U.S.

Some clients may expect placement in a neighborhood entirely free of crime. Providers can acknowledge safety concerns while explaining that no location can be guaranteed crime-free, and that placement depends on housing availability and affordability.

To help newcomers manage the differences between housing in South Africa and housing in the U.S., include topics on housing during cultural orientation. Direct Afrikaner newcomers to resources related to housing on [*Settle In*](#). LRP should also prioritize self-sufficiency through referrals to employment services and job readiness training. For more information, see Refugee Housing Solutions' [*Engaging with ORR-Eligible Populations: A Housing Stakeholder's Guide*](#).

EMPLOYMENT

Afrikaners come from a variety of employment backgrounds, with experience across all sectors of the economy at all levels. Some may have experience in skilled trades (electrician, welder, industrial mechanic, etc.), or in farming. Others may possess backgrounds in financial services, hospitality, or office administration.

Many Afrikaner clients bring a strong emphasis on self-reliance, responsibility, and work, which can be leveraged to support rapid and successful integration into the U.S. workforce. Additionally, widespread competence in English will improve employment opportunities for newly arriving Afrikaners.

Some Afrikaners resettling in the U.S. may have high expectations of very quickly securing employment. To help set realistic expectations, service providers can offer practical guidance on the job market and timeline, describe potential documentation delays that may impact early employment, and support with navigating the employment process.

In comparison to the U.S., South African labor laws generally offer stronger protections for workers in areas including paid leave, working hours, and collective bargaining. For example, Afrikaners may be accustomed to standardized access to paid sick, vacation, and parental leave. Additionally, in South Africa, working hours are legally capped at 45 hours per week. Resettled Afrikaners should be prepared for a more flexible and employer-driven work schedule. Review common labor practices on the federal and state level to help manage employment expectations for this population.



DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS WITH CLIENTS

When serving Afrikaner clients, providers may need to address sensitive topics, such as:

- **Working with caseworkers from different backgrounds and communities** (including staff of faith-based LRPs who do not share that faith, staff who are former refugees, staff whose first language is not English, etc.).
- **Respecting caseworkers' limited time** (communicating only during business hours, meeting during set appointment times, supporting multiple cases concurrently, etc.).
- **Understanding that certain tasks require provider involvement** and cannot be completed by clients on their own.

When addressing sensitive topics, use reflective, open-ended questions to explore client perspectives and experiences. Communicate as clearly and directly as possible, while remaining mindful of your own reactions and body language. Do your best to maintain a calm presence and remember that whenever necessary, you have the option to pause, end, or reschedule conversations.

It is also helpful to consistently refer to your program's *client rights and responsibilities* policy. Your policy should clearly convey standards around mutual respect, communication, and behavior toward staff and others. Share these expectations early and revisit as situations arise.

Across all interactions, seek to reinforce a client-centered, strengths-based approach, as you would with any client population. For more, see Switchboard's *information guide* and *webinar* on Navigating Difficult Conversations with Clients.





EDUCATION

The education system in South Africa consists of early childhood education, primary and secondary schooling, and higher education and training. According to the South African Schools Act 1996, compulsory education in South Africa starts at the age of six and continues until 15. Primary education in South Africa spans from Grade R (Reception Year), for children aged five, to Grade 7, for 13-year-old students. Secondary education spans Grades 8 to 12, catering to students aged 14 to 18 years old. Higher education includes universities and vocational training institutions. The academic year in South Africa commences in January and continues until December.

Most Afrikaner adults arriving in the U.S. are likely to have completed at least secondary education, though levels of higher education and vocational training vary. Digital literacy is likely to be moderate to high, differing based on age, prior access to technology, and work experience.

While the U.S. and South African school systems share similarities, newly arrived Afrikaner families should receive orientation on the U.S. school system including enrollment requirements, timelines, and expectations of students and caregivers. Parent involvement in school is common in South Africa and should be encouraged for new families resettling to the U.S.

Some Afrikaner families may be interested in homeschooling. In these cases, discuss the family's motivations and goals for homeschooling, as well as potential advantages and disadvantages. The American Psychological Association outlines ***four key considerations*** for families considering homeschooling: child needs, family and community resources, educational resources, and government regulations.

HEALTH AND MENTAL HEALTH

South Africa's health care system uses a hybrid approach between the public and private sectors. The public universal health care system is managed by the government and serves the majority of the population, especially in rural areas. It is based on a primary health care approach, where patients first visit local clinics for basic health care and then receive referrals to district hospitals, provincial hospitals, or specialized facilities for more advanced care. Private health care ranges from general practices to large hospitals. The private health care sector is funded through private insurance and out-of-pocket payments. Private health care may provide high-quality care with shorter wait times but comes at a higher cost to patients.

As a result of this system, many Afrikaners are familiar with both public and private health care systems. Co-pays are much lower in South Africa and out-of-network providers are usually upfront about this, as is typical in the U.S. However, a key difference is that private hospitals in South Africa transfer uninsured patients to free public care. Providers should inform clients that this will not take place in the U.S., and that, in emergency situations, private hospitals will still treat and bill uninsured patients.

Afrikaner refugees are eligible for health coverage upon arrival through Refugee Medical Assistance (RMA) and, until October 1, 2026, through Medicaid. Beginning October 1, 2026, refugees will no longer be eligible for Medicaid until they become Lawful Permanent Residents (LPR), typically one year after arriving in the U.S. Exploring clients' health needs and previous experiences with health care and providing orientation to the U.S. health care system and health insurance options may help manage expectations and provide appropriate support.

Mental health and wellness are also important considerations. Some Afrikaners have witnessed or experienced acts of extreme violence. Use a trauma-informed care approach as a best practice. For more information, see Switchboard's guide [*Trauma Informed Care: A Primer for Refugee Service Providers*](#).

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Recognize that **strength and vulnerability often coexist** during the resettlement process, even when needs are not immediately visible.
- Applying a **client-centered, strength-based lens** is key to improving outcomes when working with all clients.
- While cultural context provides helpful insight, it should inform, not define, your approach. Remember that **every client's experience is unique**.

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