

From nonprofit to state control: Refugee support funding moves to Alaska office

U.S. Department of Health refugee support services funding transitions from longtime administrator Catholic Social Services to new Alaska immigration office

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Published: Jan. 7, 2026 at 2:13 PM AKST | Updated: Jan. 8, 2026 at 6:59 PM AKST

ANCHORAGE, Alaska (KTUU) - The Alaska Office of Citizenship Assistance, which opened in Anchorage nearly a year ago to help immigrants access job training, language classes and other local resources, will take on additional responsibilities beginning in early 2027: administering federal refugee support dollars that currently go to Catholic Social Services.

The office has served about 300 people since it opened and provides a one-stop resource for people with legal status in the state — including Ukrainians, people on employment or family visas and other communities — helping clients navigate employment services, interview preparation and English practice.

Deputy Labor Commissioner Nelson San Juan said immigrants often struggle to navigate employment resources.

“It’s not that easy to figure out, for them, how to get help,” he said.

Adam Weinert, special assistant to the Commissioner, said the office serves a broad range of legally present residents.

“Whether they are Ukrainians who are here in the state, or folks who are here on an employment visa, or family visa, anybody who has legal status to be in Alaska, they can be served by the office, so we have folks from a lot of different communities,” Weinert said.

The office also teaches clients about the protections they are entitled to as a worker in the United States.

Funding for the Office of Citizenship Assistance was included in Gov. Mike Dunleavy’s FY2025-26 budget and approved by the Legislature.

Weinert said staff began setting up a framework for the office in late 2024, and it was open for clients by April 2025.

The planned shift in administration of federal refugee support dollars follows a [policy letter](#) issued by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Office of Refugee Resettlement on March 14.

The federal policy change stems from a legal interpretation that the Refugee Act requires refugee support services formula grants be allocated to state governments, not nonprofit organizations. The Office of Refugee Resettlement said 14 nonprofit agencies nationwide

currently receive these formula grants, but beginning in fiscal year 2026, only states will receive the funding.

Weinert said the state is embracing the decision to take on the funds in order to avoid gaps in services.

“That is a decision that we embrace, to take over, because we want to ensure that there is no gap in services for folks who are here,” he said.

What this means for current service providers

Weinert said the state will administer the federal funding, but Catholic Social Services and other nonprofits will continue providing direct services like placement and case management. State officials say the transition is intended to be seamless to avoid interruptions in the services refugees receive.

He said refugee support services are expected to be fully transitioned from Catholic Social Services to the state by early 2027, but it’s unclear how much federal money will be appropriated for the program at that time.

Statement from Catholic Social Services

Catholic Social Services will continue facilitating refugee placement in Alaska, while representatives say they are looking forward to partnering with the state to transition support services for refugees to the Department of Labor and Workforce Development.

“The newly established Office of Citizenship Assistance is an important step toward continuing the longstanding tradition of a welcoming Alaska. Catholic Social Services’ Alaska Office for Refugees and its Refugee Assistance and Immigration Services (RAIS) program are proud to collaborate in this work,” said David Rittenberg, Catholic Social Services Chief Program and Impact Officer, in a statement.

He says the federally funded Refugee Support Services program, currently administered by the Alaska Office for Refugees at Catholic Social Services, provides employment-focused case management and other supports to help refugees and other eligible newcomers work toward self-sufficiency.

“In FY 2027, this program is planned to transition to the State of Alaska. There it will be administered by the Department of Labor and Workforce Development and supported by the Office of Citizenship Assistance.

“As Catholic Social Teachings directs us to welcome the stranger, uphold the oppressed, and serve the needy and vulnerable, CSS is committed to working with the State of Alaska and the Office of Citizenship Assistance to ensure that our community continues to be a place that welcomes, supports, and helps refugees from all over the world join and contribute to our community,” Rittenberg said.

Resettlement numbers

Catholic Social Services says 42 refugees were resettled in 2025, eight of whom were from South Africa.

Alaska's office opened amid a shifting federal immigration landscape. Since President Trump returned to office in January, his administration has prioritized enforcement and restrictions, including travel bans and stricter visa screening. The state's Citizenship Assistance Office, by contrast, focuses on immigrants already legally present in Alaska — helping them find jobs in a state where every industry needs workers.

The OCA was codified in Alaska in 2004 by the legislature, but lost funding after a couple of years, Weinert said. The office, he added, opened at a time when Alaska employers needed workers.

“Every industry is looking for somebody,” he said, citing healthcare, education, construction and seafood processing among the sectors seeking employees.

Alaska's Workforce Investment Board will receive the federal refugee dollars when the transition from CSS is complete.

The OCA is currently staffed with three full-time positions and received less than \$500,000 in general fund dollars to operate during FY 2025-26.

What to expect next

State officials say they will provide more details about the transition timeline, service contracts and partnership arrangements as planning continues. The change is expected to go into effect in early 2027.