

As Alaska welcomes Ukrainian refugees, state resurrects program to help immigrants get jobs

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A Ukrainian man embraces a loved one upon arriving at Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport on May 21, 2022. (Shiri Segal/Alaska Public Media)

State officials are resurrecting a labor department program to help immigrants gain employment in Alaska, as hundreds of Ukrainian refugees are resettling here after fleeing their war-torn homeland.

The Legislature passed a law more than 20 years ago establishing the Office of Citizenship Assistance within the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, but it closed after a few years.

Acting Labor Commissioner Cathy Muñoz said Tuesday the office is back, after refugee assistance providers at Catholic Social Services had asked for help from the state.

"I think it's a really unique opportunity to really connect individuals to training and employment resources, and really trying to help coordinate those activities," Muñoz said.

The state is in need of skilled workers, particularly those with certifications for commercial driving, as federal infrastructure funds flow to Alaska and construction ramps up, Muñoz said.

But there are often barriers, bureaucratic or otherwise, for immigrants seeking employment after arriving in the state. The Office of Citizenship Assistance will help them overcome those hurdles, as well as other challenges that come with resettling to a new country, Muñoz said.

Deputy Commissioner Nelson San Juan is leading the office and said, as an immigrant himself, originally from the Philippines, the work was important enough to lure him out of retirement.

"For them to see me leading this thing, it means a lot to them," he said. "It gives them hope that, 'Oh, OK, I can see myself in this guy,' you know."

About 500 Ukrainian refugees have already settled in Alaska, with another 250 expected this year and 200 more next year, Muñoz said.

The Office of Citizenship Assistance aims to help any immigrants to Alaska, whether they're from Ukraine or anywhere else, Muñoz said.

According to new census data, more than 2,000 people moved to Alaska from other countries last year.



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