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Alaska News

Influx of Ukrainian refugees prompts state to relaunch job placement office

By Iris Samuels

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The Alaska labor department said Tuesday that it is reopening a long-closed office to assist refugees and immigrants seeking employment in the state, spurred by an influx of refugees from Ukraine.

The Office of Citizenship Assistance will provide job placement services for legal residents of Alaska who are not citizens of the United States. The office was already previously established under state law, but closed in 2008 “due to lack of funding,” according to a department announcement at the time.

Interim Labor Commissioner Cathy Muñoz, who assumed the post after the former commissioner abruptly left earlier this year, said she decided to reinstate the office after meeting with Issa Spatrisano, refugee assistance and immigration services director for Catholic Social Services, in response to a sharp rise in the number of refugees coming to Alaska.

More than 500 refugees moved to Alaska in 2022, and hundreds more are expected this year, compared to what Spatrisano said was an average of 130 refugees coming to Alaska annually in preceding years.

"She and I were talking and thinking about ways that the Department of Labor could support individuals as they're getting their feet on the ground and getting resettled in Alaska to be successful," said Muñoz, describing her conversation with Spatrisano. Muñoz then discovered such an office already existed in state law.

"I thought, 'This is great. I have the framework in law for this type of work.' I see a lot of opportunity, using that framework to assist individuals as they're getting resettled," said Muñoz.

Jeff Turner, a spokesman in the governor's office, said in an email that Gov. Mike Dunleavy "absolutely believes" that increasing the number of migrants and refugees participating in the labor market "can help ease the state's labor shortage."

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Muñoz and Turner said the Office of Citizenship Assistance was briefly staffed in 2011, but did not know why it had not been active since then.

The office will be led by Deputy Commissioner Nelson San Juan, who immigrated to the U.S. from the Philippines, and had worked for the Department of Labor from 1995 until his retirement last year. San Juan came out of retirement for the position. Muñoz said that other than San Juan's salary, there are no new state expenses associated with the office.

"When you're new from another country, sometimes they have some hesitations or they are afraid to ask or they are afraid to approach state agencies," said San Juan. "I came from that status."

The office is being reopened at a time when demand for labor is high and the state is facing steep outmigration of working-age adults. Muñoz said that this can present "a win-win" opportunity for the individuals coming to Alaska as refugees and for the state's economy.

“Our hope is that families that are resettling are successful, and that they will make Alaska their long-term home. That benefits the state in immense, immeasurable ways,” said Muñoz.

Even as more working-age adults in Alaska are leaving than arriving, the state saw a rise in the number of refugees at the onset of Russia’s war in Ukraine. Since October 2021, Catholic Social Services has counted 743 refugee arrivals, 574 of them from Ukraine.

“Historically, Alaska receives about 130 arrivals per year and last, we received 500,” said Spatrisano. “With that significant increase come some really important job skills and talents from refugee arrivals.”

A majority of those arrivals are of working age. According to the Catholic Social Services figures, 55% are between the ages of 19 and 64.

“It’s sort of a perfect marriage that’s happening. The state needs workers. The state’s losing population, historically, especially working-age adults, and the refugee arrivals to the state are working-age adults with job skills,” Spatrisano said. “Refugees come here for a lot of reasons, and they contribute much more than just economic gains to our state. And what a great gift when refugees can also be part of the solution to help move our state forward through challenging times.”

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Since October of 2022, Catholic Social Services has assisted 135 refugee clients in finding full-time employment, with an average wage of \$18.49 per hour. They have also assisted 53 clients in finding part-time employment with an average wage of \$14.42 per hour.

Spatrisano said the goal is to place refugees in jobs that match the skills they bring and their previous work experience.

“It’s like, what does the average American do for a living? Well, look at your resume and see what you can get. I think it’s no different for refugees,” she said.

Catholic Social Services will continue to provide resettlement assistance to refugees, but the new office in the Department of Labor and Workforce Development will “build a greater outreach network” to connect employers with potential workers, according to Spatrisano, because the department can “bring resources that traditional refugee resettlement services have not been historically been able to do.”

Of the refugees who have arrived in Alaska in the past year, more than 90% have come through the new federal Uniting for Ukraine program, which launched a year ago to allow Ukrainian citizens to come to the U.S. for a temporary stay of two years. The program is different from the typical asylum process, which eventually offers refugees a path to U.S. citizenship.

Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, more than 271,000 refugees have come to the U.S. Of them, more than 117,000 have come through the Uniting for Ukraine program.

While all states have accepted refugees from Ukraine, Alaska has seen a “disproportionately higher amount” due in part to existing Ukrainian immigrant communities in Anchorage, the Mat-Su and Delta Junction.

“Typically in refugee resettlement, Alaska is usually in 45th (place) or below, because of population, because of our size,” said Spatrisano. “But with Ukrainians, because of the heavy family ties, and because of the community that already exists here because of the support, we are seeing a much higher arrival of Ukrainians in Alaska, which has put us in probably 25th (place) and up – the top 25 states.”

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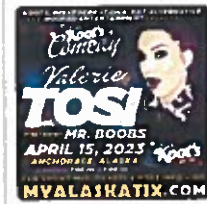
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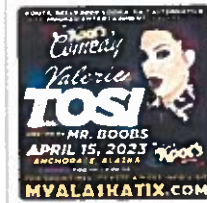
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