



Welcoming Falls Church

Building a community of neighbors

Welcoming Refugees: “Renting to Refugees” Initiative in Falls Church Welcoming Falls Church

Many in Falls Church support the resettlement of refugees in the area. Falls Church’s Eden Center testifies to the ways in which our area can successfully welcome refugees. Many Southeast Asian refugees settled in the area in the 1970s and 1980s. Originally concentrated in Clarendon, that wave of resettlement eventually led to Eden Center becoming the center for Vietnamese culture and commerce on the East Coast. This is [fascinating local history](#), worth exploring, and inspiring for those that would like to see the community welcome more refugees.

This backgrounder is intended to present a model – “Renting to Refugees” – that would encourage local landlords to support refugee resettlement in Falls Church through a public-private initiative *to place them in affordable housing*.

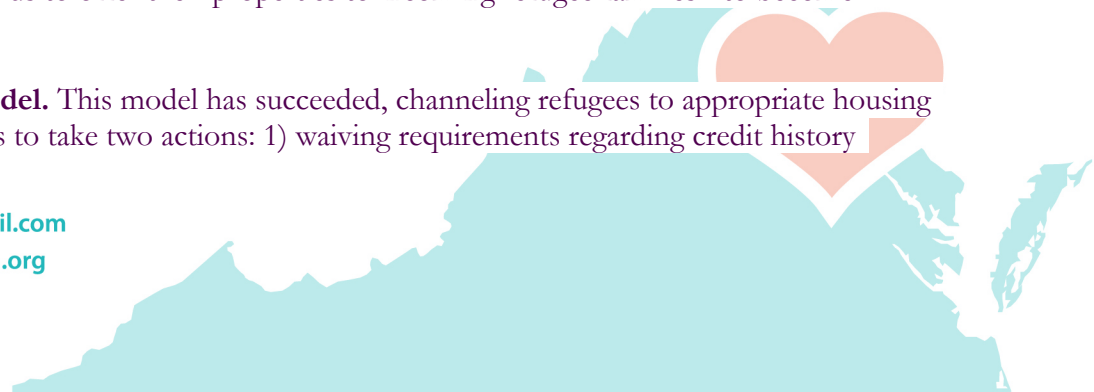
Introducing the “Renting to Refugees” Model

The High Cost of Housing. The high cost of housing is a major issue confronting refugee resettlement agencies in Northern Virginia. The Washington Post [covered this issue](#) in September, commenting on how it affects resettlement of Afghan evacuees. Falls Church’s limited supply of affordable housing is well-documented. This is to some extent an issue specific to the City of Falls Church but affects Falls Church/Fairfax County as well. This is leading to many refugees being resettled in exurbs, where limited public transportation and a more limited local labor market will make resettlement and refugees’ transition to life in the U.S. more difficult.

The high cost of housing means that public and private actors need to take action to make refugee resettlement work in an area like Falls Church.

The City of Pittsburgh Model. The City of Pittsburgh has developed a model to make resettlement easier not through public subsidies but through a public-private initiative to engage landlords. “Renting to Refugees in Allegheny County” is a collaborative effort between Welcoming Pittsburgh, the All for All Coalition, the Pittsburgh Field Office of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and Pittsburgh’s two refugee resettlement agencies, the JFCS Pittsburgh, and AJAPO RefugeeImmigrant Services. The stated purpose of the initiative – launched in early 2021 – is twofold: to “foster an intimate discussion between refugee resettlement agencies and regional landlords, and to encourage engaged landlords to offer their properties to incoming refugee families - to become ‘welcoming landlords.’”

Development of the Model. This model has succeeded, channeling refugees to appropriate housing and encouraging landlords to take two actions: 1) waiving requirements regarding credit history





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(refugees have none); and 2) waiving requirements for security deposits, to make resettlement work. The key learning from the Pittsburgh model is that landlords – once engaged and understanding of the dynamics of refugee resettlement – respond positively to renting to refugees.

Landlords who rent market rate affordable housing often view refugees, even recently-resettled refugees, as good tenants. Why? Refugees benefit from formal resettlement agency support, and communities (churches, synagogues, private non-profits like the [Vietnamese Resettlement Association](#) or Welcoming Falls Church locally) often rally around them. In the case of resettlement of refugees in Falls Church, Welcoming Falls Church will organize donation drives to help to furnish apartments leased through a Renting to Refugees initiative and will channel additional volunteer support (ESOL, etc.) to those families to support their resettlement.

Alongside this initiative, Welcoming Falls Church is launching an Adult and Family Literacy Center at Oak Street Elementary School, in partnership with the Northern Virginia Literacy Center and the Falls Church City Public Schools, in February 2022. Along with providing for housing, English language training is one of the top priorities for recently-resettled refugees -- adults and children alike.

Very importantly, the economic success of refugees over time is also [well-documented](#). It may take time, but refugees enrich our communities culturally and economically.

Landlord Response in Pittsburgh. The City of Pittsburgh held its first “Renting to Refugees” virtual session in May 2021 to educate landlords about the refugee resettlement process and recruit them to help house refugees in Pittsburgh. Over 140 local landlords registered to participate in the first online session. Around 70 attended, and 40 landlords had signed up as official contacts of Pittsburgh’s refugee resettlement agencies as of September -- and over 50 are participating in the initiative now.

The Welcoming America Role. Welcoming America is an Atlanta-based 501(c)(3) that champions best practices in welcoming immigrants and refugees at the community level. Welcoming America has documented the “Renting to Refugees” model, producing a [webinar](#) in September 2021 that details the model, its development, and positive responses on the part of landlords. Welcoming America has also produced an 18-page guide to creating a network of “Welcoming Landlords” which we are following to adapt this model for our area. ([Email us](#), and we’d be glad to send you a copy of this guide if you’d like to learn more.)

Adapting This Model for Falls Church. Falls Church is a much smaller community than Pittsburgh. The City of Falls Church has a population of only 15,000, and with Falls Church/Fairfax County the population of Greater Falls Church is not even 100,000. So the scale of any local “Renting to Refugees” initiative will be far *smaller* than in the City of Pittsburgh but the basic premise of



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the Pittsburgh experience works here. Our initial goal: to identify three to five participating landlords, to make 15-20 units available for the program in its first year.

What about the high cost of housing? It's true that there is not much "market-rate affordable housing" in the City of Falls Church, but there are a number of buildings in the City with lower rent levels – and lots more in Falls Church/Fairfax County. In addition, maybe there are creative ways that the community could support this type of initiative, as part of its broader affordable housing strategy, through modest subsidies to make housing even more affordable.

Where Could This Lead? This is a long-term effort. The wave of the resettlement of Afghan evacuees will continue through early 2022; but all signs are that even beyond that the U.S. will again be resettling refugees at more customary levels, not the unusually low numbers recorded in 2017-2020. Importantly, this initiative is not focused solely on Afghan evacuees. They account for many of the refugees that are being resettled at the moment, but it's our hope that this is a long-term initiative that would support refugee resettlement on an ongoing basis.

A modest, well-coordinated, public-private initiative in Falls Church could over the years have a real effect on the community. The impact on the City of Falls Church could be relatively significant even if it reaches a very limited number of families; and Falls Church/Fairfax County's greater diversity and lower housing costs could make it a success there as well.

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