

Best Practices for Framing Economic Contributions: Advice from Refugee Leaders to Advance Inclusive Narratives



Featured Image: Refugee Congress Delegates have a conversation in the United States Capitol between meetings with their members of Congress during RCUSA 2023 Advocacy Days in Washington, D.C. Photo by Waqif Shenwari.

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“When I was 18 and fled the civil war in my native Liberia, I had no idea the resilience I built would prepare me to one day become a registered nurse fighting COVID-19. This work is how I give back to the country that welcomed me as a refugee two decades ago, and it reminds me that no matter how different we may look from one another, we share powerful human bonds.”

– [Saymu Sackor, registered nurse at Jefferson Health in Pennsylvania](#)

From [data-driven analysis](#) on the ways that forcibly displaced people can fill critical workforce shortages across the United States, to [heart-warming features](#) on beloved refugee-owned local businesses, sharing stories and statistics that show how much people seeking safety contribute to our communities and economies when given the chance are powerful in moving the needle on pro-refugee sentiment and promoting more welcoming policies.

The majority of U.S. likely voters are supportive of programs and policies that [resettle refugees](#) and offer [protection to people seeking safety](#) at the border. But public opinion research, including a study from the Refugee Advocacy Lab and Goodwin Simon Strategic Research, has found that diverse U.S. audiences—and even people who support refugee resettlement—oftentimes hold concerns about welcoming newcomers in the context of resource or job scarcity.¹

The fact of the matter is that the American economy is currently experiencing [historic labor shortages](#), and people experiencing displacement, including refugees and asylum seekers, are [critical to filling those gaps](#). Thus, using a messaging framework that emphasizes the myriad economic contributions that refugees and other newcomers can make—as business owners, taxpayers, and as part of the labor force—can highlight this reality, offset flawed assumptions that audiences might hold, and help garner support for welcoming refugees.

While the economic contributions frame is powerful, it should be nuanced with another truth: people seeking safety should be welcomed into the United States not just because of their economic potential—but because of our shared humanity and the right to protection. This is as true for an [Afghan refugee who founded a tech startup](#) as it is for someone who is not able to work due to a disability or illness or any other matter. It is also worth noting that vulnerability is one of the considerations for [refugee admissions](#).

¹ Lab/GSSR research findings are not publicly available but are available to partners upon request.

The Refugee Advocacy Lab and Refugee Congress partnered to gather advice from displaced leaders across the United States on how to use the economic contributions narrative in a way that uplifts the many experiences of people seeking safety and the diverse ways they make U.S. communities and economies stronger—while not losing sight of their rights and dignity.

1. Do not be afraid of using the economic contributions narrative.

“It’s easier to use a rights-based approach when speaking to champions. When you need to convince and persuade, you have to lean into the contributions framing.”

Especially when speaking to audiences who might not be familiar with refugee issues, do not be afraid of emphasizing the critical economic contributions refugees and other newcomers make. Refugee Congress leaders shared that they often use the contributions frame when speaking to audiences who need to be persuaded, and noted that doing so is powerful. It is also an important reminder to employers that likely have a talent base in their communities that they have overlooked, and the benefit of proactively offering opportunity to refugees to join their workforce.

Consider sharing statistics, such as the fact that [refugees earned](#) \$93.6 billion in household income and contributed \$25 billion in taxes in 2019, or share economic and workforce contributions specific to your state by exploring [this resource](#) from the American Immigration Council.

2. Remind your audience that refugees do not just offer economic contributions—they offer much more.

“We need to talk about the good and the not good – the whole story of where we’ve been and how that has taken them to where they are now.”

When displaced people restart their lives in the United States, they not only bring skills and experience but also contribute to their new communities in many ways that people across the United States value.

Consider sharing anecdotes about how much refugees value the ability to raise their family in their new community in safety, stories about displaced people volunteering in their communities or stepping up to help a community recover from a disaster, and stories about how a community came together to celebrate cultural diversity, such as learning together about a new type of food or a holiday celebration.

3. Highlight the diverse skill sets and deep expertise refugees bring.

"I'm an educator at a historically Black university building the future leaders of America."

While refugees and forcibly displaced people contribute to many key sectors that are facing critical labor shortages, including education, manufacturing, healthcare, hospitality, and agriculture, they also bring many diverse talents, skills, and perspectives to the U.S. talent pool.

Consider sharing anecdotes that highlight the diversity of experiences, backgrounds, and skills that refugees bring when they restart their lives in their new communities. In Akron, Ohio, for example, Bhutanese refugees have [revitalized the North Hill neighborhood](#) by opening more than two dozen groceries, shops, and restaurants.

4. Be mindful of the fact that refugees are often not in jobs that match their credentials and experience because of the barriers they experience in the workforce.

"When I was working as a waitress, it was hard to face that reality."

When people fleeing persecution restart their lives in U.S. communities, they can face significant obstacles reentering the workforce, particularly when seeking work within their field of expertise and education. Onerous policies around recertification and licensing for foreign-trained professionals, language barriers, and barriers to accessing higher education are just a few examples. Refugee Congress leaders noted that oftentimes displaced people are underemployed, working in jobs that don't utilize their educational creden-

tials, and could be contributing so much more if given the chance.

Consider sharing stories about the untapped talent of refugees and other newcomers in their communities, like [Lubab](#), who was a physician in Baghdad. When Lubab was forced to flee her home in Iraq and restart her life in New Jersey, she ended up working at a fast food restaurant while trying to get her medical credential recertified. Despite facing these barriers, Lubab still wanted to practice her profession—even in an entry-level or volunteer role—and provided [significant support to her community](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic. These stories are particularly powerful when shared in the context of fields that are experiencing severe workforce shortages, such as healthcare.

5. Do not be afraid to emphasize the need for funding and policy change to enable refugees to contribute more fully.

“Refugees only need a hand up, not a hand out.”

While refugees may face barriers to recertifying their professional credentials or other challenges that prevent them from contributing to their new community to their full potential, there are legislative, policy, and funding options available to reduce these barriers.

Investigate the barriers and [opportunities for change](#) in your state or community, and offer solutions, explaining that refugees bring a wealth of untapped potential to our communities.

6. Remember that many refugees are not just economic assets—they are constituents.

“One contribution we make is as constituents.”

Consider reminding your audience that many displaced people are not just visitors— they are also long-term residents and [citizens](#) who vote, pay taxes, own homes, start businesses, and lay down roots for generations to come. Not only do refugees become vital to our communities’ social, economic, and political fabric, they become civically engaged, improving our communities by volunteering in schools, engaging in neighborhood associations, and contributing to our democracy by participating in it.

7. Don't lose sight of the rights-based message.

"The right to seek refuge is not a statement of profit or loss."

While people seeking safety make critical contributions to their local economies and communities, the bottom line is that everyone—regardless of their economic potential—has the right to live in safety and dignity.

Consider sharing that Americans are deeply proud of the idea of the United States being a beacon of hope and safety for people fleeing persecution, and that [more than two-thirds of U.S. likely voters](#) – 71 percent – support the U.S. refugee resettlement program. That jumps to 87 percent support when voters say that they personally know someone who is a refugee.

Additional Resources

For more information on the economic contributions refugees make in the United States, including an in-depth look at refugee contributions to economies [state-by-state](#), read "[Starting Anew: The Economic Impact of Refugees in America](#)," from our partners at the American Immigration Council and "[Refugees Are a Fiscal Success Story for America](#)" from our partners at the National Immigration Forum. For data on the economic impact of Afghans specifically, see Upwardly Global's report "[Afghan Newcomers Bring Critical Value to the U.S. Economy and Society](#)" and [critical data](#) from the International Rescue Committee.

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