

# Final Report

## New Americans Initiative Safety Net Research

PREPARED FOR  
Colorado Department of  
Labor and Employment



*December 2021*



GROWING IDEAS INTO SUCCESS  
[koneconsulting.com](http://koneconsulting.com)

# Table of Contents

<b><i>Introduction</i></b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Background</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Study Objectives</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b><i>Methodology and Data Sources</i></b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Methodology</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Data Sources</b> .....	<b>6</b>
“Mystery Shopper” – Online Application Assessments.....	6
Key Informant Interviews .....	7
Focus Groups.....	7
Survey of County Agencies and Community Organizations .....	8
<b><i>Cross-Program Themes</i></b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>Primary Access Mode Preferences</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>Responsibility for New Americans Access to Programs</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b><i>Global Recommendations</i></b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>1. Engagement and access to information from trusted community leaders and organizations</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>2. One-door portal for applications/information (online and/or by phone) with multi-language support for creating an accessible, seamless experience</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<b>3. Digital skills training with financial stipend is needed to support New Americans</b> .....	<b>16</b>
<b>4. State inter-agency collaboration through the Office of New Americans is essential for pulling and leveraging resources to meet the needs of New Americans.</b> .....	<b>18</b>
<b><i>Considerations for Implementation of Recommendations</i></b> .....	<b>20</b>
<b><i>Other Issues to Consider in Studying Programs Access for New Americans</i></b> .....	<b>21</b>
<b><i>Conclusion and Next Steps</i></b> .....	<b>22</b>

# Introduction

## Background

The New Americans Initiative, now called the Office of New Americans, the first of its kind in Colorado, has broad goals to identify and address issues related to integration; foster enhanced inclusion of New Americans in Colorado's civic, social, and economic life; and ensure equitable opportunities for newcomers<sup>1</sup>. In early 2020, the Initiative held over 50 stakeholder interviews with individuals and entities as diverse as business coalitions, state and local government agencies and immigrant rights advocates. Major themes emerged, including the need for equitable economic opportunity, data protections, language justice, skills recognition and enhanced access to state-funded programs. Stakeholders, both internal to government and external as part of the larger ecosystem, conveyed eagerness for short-term outcomes and recognition that short-term successes will drive consensus for longer-term efforts for state and system-wide change.

New Americans are Coloradans who came to the US as immigrants and their children. This population includes refugees, asylees, Special Immigrant Visa holders, victims of trafficking, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA) recipients and all other immigrants and aspiring citizens seeking opportunity, safety or reunification of family. New Americans are children, parents, teachers, students, patients, doctors, contractors, homeowners, entrepreneurs, consumers, family members, friends and neighbors.

Integration is a dynamic two-way process in which newcomers and the receiving society work together to build secure, vibrant, cohesive communities (Source: Grant makers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees). Colorado believes that immigrant integration benefits society as a whole, and an intentional, responsive process to engage and welcome transforms all community stakeholders, enriching the state's collective social, economic and civic life.

As a result of the discussion with stakeholders and an assessment of opportunities within state government, the overall priority projects for the New American Initiative fall into three categories: Economic Opportunity; Access; and Outreach and Inclusion. The State of Colorado has chosen to focus on access. Equitable access to opportunities is vital for newcomers to feel welcome and to foster a sense of belonging. Access is complicated; many newcomers face cross-cutting barriers that affect all Coloradans, lack of childcare for example, and additional barriers, including lack of digital literacy, language proficiency, or requisite paperwork, such as high school diplomas from their home countries. There is not a current catalog of specific barriers to specific programs on a program by program, issue by issue basis.



The New Americans Initiative was codified into the Office of New Americans at the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment through House Bill 21-1150, signed by Governor Polis on June 25, 2021. As the work that culminates in this report began before the codification, both terms (New Americans Initiative and Office of New Americans) are used but can be considered interchangeable.



## Study Objectives

The Office of New Americans at the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment (CDLE) sought to identify and recommend changes to program access points to facilitate the ability for New Americans to benefit from programs for which they are eligible. The Office works cross-collaboratively with other state agencies and programs.

This study focuses on state government programs that aim to meet basic needs (e.g., housing, food, benefits, unemployment insurance) and provide economic opportunity for newcomers (career services, job training programs, etc.). Program access barriers include administrative barriers (such as cumbersome paperwork or reliance on digital literacy) and communication barriers that inhibit knowledge of available services (including confusion around local, county, state and federal differences).

Koné Consulting, LLC (Koné Team) was chosen to conduct this study. The study relied on information from primary and secondary data sources, both from Colorado state and county agencies, community organizations and New Americans.

Based on a preliminary program access assessment, the study refocused on 7 (seven) selected state government programs that aim to meet basic needs (e.g., housing, food, unemployment insurance) and provide economic opportunity for newcomers (career services, job training programs, etc.). These were chosen through the Office's work with the New Americans COVID-19 Committee, which worked in the first year of the pandemic to respond to real-time challenges experienced by the immigrant community. Committee members primarily were representatives of community-based organizations serving New Americans. The programs that are the focus of this study are:

- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), also known in Colorado as food assistance
- Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), also known in Colorado as Colorado Works
- Childcare Assistance Program (CCAP), also known in Colorado as childcare assistance
- Unemployment Insurance
- Workforce Centers
- Housing Choice Vouchers (Section 8) known in Colorado as the HCV program
- Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP)

The ultimate objective of the study is to provide a catalogue of the issues and recommendations by department/program. The Koné Team also provides an assessment of the perceptions of a broader set of stakeholders who should be responsible for supporting access to public benefits for New Americans, and that of the state and the county governments or the community-based organizations.

# Methodology and Data Sources

## Methodology

In order to answering these study objectives, the Koné Team collected information during key informant interviews, surveys, literature review, document review, web-based surveys of county agencies and community-based organizations and (on the final draft) from focus groups with New Americans (Spanish- and Sango- speaking communities<sup>1</sup>) with the support of community organizations.

The Koné Team sought to understand the specific needs of the New Americans population. A key component of the analysis was addressing the diverse needs of the communities in Colorado. Thus, as the Koné Team has done in similar work, we implemented a well-delineated approach that is inclusive of Colorado's diverse communities, including in rural and urban areas. This study also asked for information on any existing access barrier differences between rural and urban areas.

An important point made throughout the data collection and analysis is how some of the experiences of New Americans also could be part of what other Coloradans live when they seek to access public programs. Thus, the study recommendations could have broader acceptance and wider impact.

The main data source to support the findings below is a web-based survey (see New Americans survey, Appendix B) which includes questions on communication or messaging plans or partnerships with entities that may support the state and county government efforts to improve program access. This report relies primarily on the survey to build the catalogue of issues and -recommendations.

Study participants in the survey were probed about issues and solutions to seven programs in three State departments (CDLE, Colorado Department of Local Affairs (DOLA), and Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS)) about multiple barriers. In order to guide the data collection, the Koné Team concentrated on five potential barriers, followed from the preliminary assessment, such as:

---

<sup>1</sup> Sango, a creole language derived from Ngbandi (a Ubangi language) that is spoken by about five million people primarily in the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Sango-speaking refugees are clients of the Colorado Refugee Wellness Center.

- Language barriers
- Digital illiteracy and lack of digital access (i.e., not having access to a computer/Internet or not knowing how to navigate a website)
- Administrative burden and paperwork
- Lack of outreach programs
- Stigma and lack of government trust
- Other

The details of each barrier were then broken down into several (over five) potential issues within those barriers. For example, if a county or community organization were asked to identify the issues (obstacles) preventing or limiting a New American access to a program, say TANF, the survey would ask if the main issue was:

- Lack of understanding how to use physical devices, such as phones and computers
- Lack of understanding how to use the Internet
- No access to a mobile device (example: owning an iPhone or iPad or being able to regularly use one)
- No access to a computer, such as a laptop or desktop computer,
- No access to the Internet
- Lack of an email account
- Difficulty navigating new online applications or other processes online
- The combination of the needed skills of digital literacy and resources of digital access

The survey asked about current interventions by state or county governments to identify potential mitigation factor(s) to an obstacle, and to learn if a particular program or agency is implementing a solution that can be replicated elsewhere. In the case of the reference to an impact, our team focused on whether this solution will benefit all Coloradans or was a solution to a major obstacle for New Americans (over 75% of respondents highlighting it as an issue).

The information gathered through key informant interviews, focus groups and surveys indirectly provided a glance of the issue of outreach and inclusion as respondents shared their thoughts on how outreach issues (or lack of) are important for how state agencies should consider the ways they can improve their services for newcomers. The discussion in 2020 concluded that currently there was not a way to effectively and cohesively involve New American voices across state agencies.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> This work in this report predates the implementation of the New American Advisory Committee, which advises the Office of New Americans and the state on issues related to immigrant integration. The Committee had its first meeting in December 2021.



In summarizing our findings, we will produce a report cataloging barriers by program and by issue. The report includes recommendations as to which department/program changes are necessary to improve access for New Americans and a reasonable timeline for the State to implement comprehensive changes. The recommendations are specific, doable, targeted, and, above all, impactful. Of particular focus in this study are recommendations for administrative or communication changes, where possible, which may be more easily implemented by state and county agencies. We support the narrative by including quotations from individuals who have participated in the study.

The resulting findings, presented primarily in a table, responds clearly and succinctly to the question "what challenges must we address to make progress?".

## Data Sources

This study collected data about access points and how New Americans interact with selected public programs using a variety of data sources. Data collection instruments and approaches are detailed below.

### **"Mystery Shopper" – Online Application Assessments**

A key element of this effort consisted of documenting the access points to Colorado's public assistance programs, in particular online access to program applications. A couple of the programs under this study have applications that are publicly available, and accessible via PEAK, the online application platform in Colorado. In addition to the PEAK site, Koné staff looked for other access points. Our team looked at some of the following features:

- whether there were alternate language options beyond Spanish in navigating websites (which included documents which could be found online and whether they were screen reader compatible),
- availability of translation tools or translated materials (judged by whether the content was translated in-house or by an automated Google translate option), and
- whether there were linguistic drop-offs (for example, a user clicking a link on a translated page that brings them to an untranslated page).

Below is the list of findings by study program or by online portal featuring multiple programs:

- [Colorado PEAK](#)
- [Unemployment Insurance](#)
- [Colorado Workforce Centers](#)
- [Colorado SNAP](#)
- [TANF](#)

The review of the online applications indicates a common requirement to have an email address to create a new account, which may hint at access barriers for individuals with low digital literacy; Social Security Number (SSN) required to apply for several applications<sup>3</sup>; challenges with translated forms or translation of information as, in many instances, the translation assistance with online applications breaks down following the main page or when there is a link to another site or a PDF.

## **Key Informant Interviews**

This study conducted 10 interviews with a variety of service providers and human services agencies at the state and county level. These interviews revealed common themes around lack of New American digital skills and lack of language support for New Americans who cannot speak English or Spanish.

Lack of language support was a pervasive theme across interviews with variability in Spanish support. Language support in general was noted as patchwork, limited and inconsistent in terms of translations and interpretation services.

## **Focus Groups**

This study conducted two focus groups of two different New American populations; a total of 18 New Americans. Though the backgrounds and literacy levels varied between the focus groups, common themes emerged around education, language barriers, program complexity and lack of knowledge of services.

Members of both focus groups expressed an interest in fostering their own autonomy through education. They indicated a sincere desire for educating themselves, in terms of English training and digital skills training. They also indicated that, in order to make the commitment to educational training, they would first need some form of compensation to reduce the financial impact of missed time that could be spent working.

Both focus groups indicated language barriers in accessing services. When asked about their experience with public services, one respondent said, "The website is all in English, there is no Spanish page, you can get the page translated by Google, but Google is not accurate... the forms you need to complete are only in English and there is no way to translate that." Focus group participants indicated that, in addition to

---

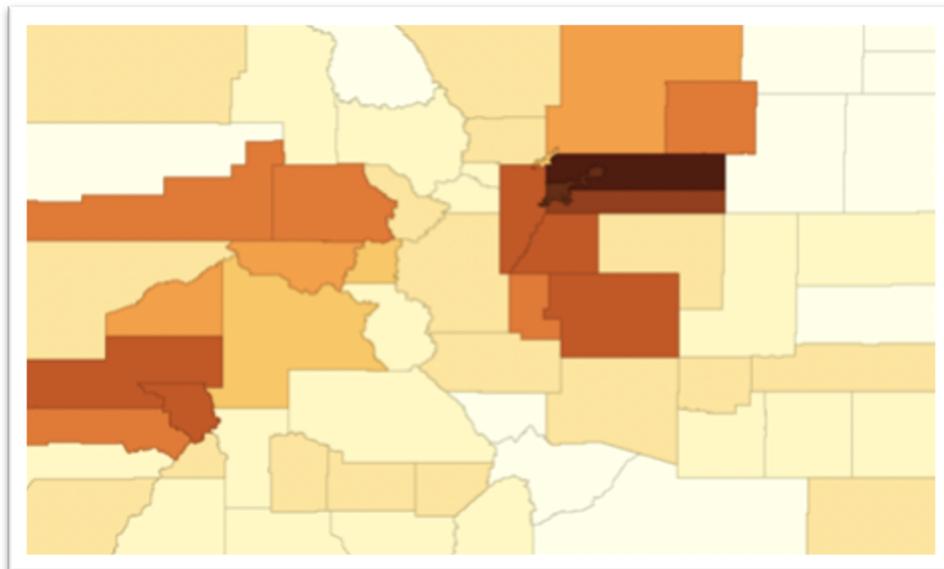
<sup>3</sup> PEAK requires an SS number; if you don't have one, you need to contact your local county office for assistance. This creates a barrier for immigrant filers.  
<https://coloradopeak.secure.force.com/AMHLP?PageId=ASSAC&Lang=EN&selectedModule=AM&acsUserID=&appliedMA=&userModule=>

lack of language access, program complexity and lack of plain language is itself a barrier in accessing programs.

Within focus groups, a theme emerged around lack of knowledge of services. According to one focus group participant, “Communities do not know about these programs, that is the problem.” Another saying from a different focus group, “we don’t know where those benefits you mentioned are; which way do we need to access in order to have those benefits... through word of mouth, you won’t get complete information sometime; if you go and ask them at the office, they say we don’t know nothing about that; it is a challenge.” These quotes seem to support a lack of knowledge of services with doubts about the efficacy of word-of-mouth information spread.

### **Survey of County Agencies and Community Organizations**

There are 52 county agencies and community organizations that provided responses to the survey. Most respondents were associated with government agencies (41%), nonprofits (40%) and school or education related organization (11%). Most respondents (64%) were not from statewide community-based organizations. In terms of geographic representation, the top five counties for which respondents could speak about the conditions for New Americans were: Adams, Denver, Arapahoe, Douglas and Ouray. The map below shows respondents by county with the darker colors indicating more representation in the survey.



Source: Question 4 – Question 13



The numbers of respondents who chose to provide feedback about the Housing Choice Vouchers (HCV) program was too low (<5 respondents) to provide enough information to develop targeted recommendations on the program.

Program	Respondents
Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP)	54
Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)	44
Childcare Assistance Program	35
Unemployment Insurance (UI)	11
Workforce Development Centers (WC)	28
Housing Choice Vouchers (HCV)	4
Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP)	29

Findings from the survey ultimately produced a catalogue that present targeted solutions for access issues in a program and for themes across programs. For example, most respondents in SNAP, TANF, Workforce Centers, and ERAP noted that **in-person** was the preferred method of accessing services for New Americans. More details on access modes can be found in the individual program analyses submitted under separate cover.

The next section will display a summary of respondent strength as well as access mode preferences and then the report will offer program by program issues and targeted solutions to highlighted issues.

# Cross-Program Themes

## Primary Access Mode Preferences

Survey respondents provided a complete picture of how all Coloradans and New Americans in specific access the programs under study. There is a consistent preference for In-person access followed by over-the-phone by New Americans across programs. As we discuss below, any actions to facilitate access to program benefits or services must take into account the access mode for each population and program.

Population	In-person	Over-the-phone or call center	Online	Paper/Mail
<b>SNAP</b>				
All Coloradans	46%	<b>39%</b>	19%	15%
New Americans	50%	15%	19%	13%
<b>TANF</b>				
All Coloradans	36%	<b>27%</b>	27%	5%
New Americans	<b>50%</b>	18%	20%	5%
<b>CCAP</b>				
All Coloradans	31%	20%	26%	3%
New Americans	37%	20%	20%	3%
<b>UI</b>				
All Coloradans	27%	<b>27%</b>	<b>27%</b>	18%
New Americans	<b>45%</b>	36%	0%	18%
<b>Workforce Centers</b>				
All Coloradans	29%	25%	<b>39%</b>	0%
New Americans	<b>54%</b>	21%	14%	7%
<b>ERAP</b>				
All Coloradans	21%	24%	<b>31%</b>	0%
New Americans	<b>38%</b>	28%	14%	7%

**Note:** Bolded cells represent percentage point differences over 8 percent points between All Coloradans and New Americans.

## Responsibility for New Americans Access to Programs

A component of the survey mentioned above asked staff of county government agencies and Community-based organizations (CBOs) **who had the primary responsibility to ensure equitable access to program benefits for New Americans in Colorado, a state where most programs are county administered. The response was definite: the state government.**



Of interest, some state government interviewees, specifically at CDHS, noted that in a county-administered state, such as Colorado, their ability to impact inclusion of New Americans was quite limited. County and community based partners disagreed.

Study participants highlighted more resources (such as funding, technology and staff training) as the main conduit to expand or strengthen access to public benefit (service) programs. When asked what immediate change in program access would look like, the main theme across programs was greater focus on staffing, which may include better training. The ultimate outcome would be New Americans having access to (more) staff who possess the training or background to help them navigate the system.

When asked what the state could do to develop, improve or increase access for New Americans to the various programs, the common theme was that the state should provide more support for organizations serving New Americans, which may include funding, collaboration, technical expertise or establishing a clear mandate for access. The most common theme in the survey responses for 4 out of 6 programs was that the state should initiate a public relations campaign for increasing trust in government services, which may include more advocacy/targeted outreach for New Americans, partnering with non-traditional media outlets or clearer eligibility rules for New Americans.

These survey and interview results support a window for the state government to develop, improve or increase efforts for New Americans. Data gathered from study respondents and document review provided four themes across study programs which have the potential for high impact on New Americans and at some extent all Coloradans. These cross-program themes are reported in this section.

# Global Recommendations

Individual program analysis across all programs under review also has been shared with CDLE under separate cover.

## 1. Engagement and access to information from trusted community leaders and organizations

Efforts by state and county governments working to serve New Americans will undoubtedly require alternate engagement approaches and an extended network to achieve equitable access to public benefits. Current program outreach and program access support services are fragmented when it comes to New Americans for several reasons, among them: language barriers, close-knit communities, and a different cultural experience in dealing with government in the New Americans' country of origin, and lack of understanding of how to get assistance in the US and in Colorado specifically. Being able to get to the ears of the New American communities, for them to listen and to understand what assistance is available to them, will require solutions that are developed in a culturally competent environment across all access points:

- communication and outreach materials,
- service delivery (in-person), and
- language-based options.

As mentioned above, there is a need for additional interactions with New Americans. **However, it is also important to understand who New Americans trust and from whom they get their information.** Government should understand its customer in order to ensure effective communication. A recent study by the Urban Institute on trusted sources related to public charge, and the data gathered for this study suggest that information must be coming in a way that is digestible, easy to access and from a trusted source<sup>4</sup>. All these elements require collaboration or coordination to deliver program eligibility, access and other relevant information. New Americans trust the federal, state and county government in the US, and lawyers or legal aid organizations. However, government agencies are not effective in reaching this audience. New Americans are receiving information from TV news and social networking sites, and CBOs. CBOs present a significant ally for increasing access (and potentially the effectiveness of state and county governments' outreach). Government and CBOs could partner where information is produced by the state

---

<sup>4</sup> Bernstein, Hamutal, et al. "Amid Confusion over the Public Charge Rule, Immigrant Families Continued Avoiding Public Benefits in 2019." *Urban.org*, Urban Institute, May 2020, [https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/102221/amid-confusion-over-the-public-charge-rule-immigrant-families-continued-avoiding-public-benefits-in-2019\\_3.pdf](https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/102221/amid-confusion-over-the-public-charge-rule-immigrant-families-continued-avoiding-public-benefits-in-2019_3.pdf).

and county agencies, and where government staff engages and collaborates with CBOs to attend and deliver program information with local communities.

**According to one focus group participant, “you mentioned all those benefits... we don’t know where those benefits you mentioned are; which way do we need to access in order to have those benefits.”**

Other focus group participants noted not knowing where the starting point is in accessing benefits. Program administrators should work more closely with community-based organizations, but their work should not end there. If the state or county is recruiting community-based organizations to do this vital work, they need to be compensated accordingly. Unfunded partnership networks only ensure the participation of CBOs with the resources to participate. For New Americans, it’s more likely that they will interact with unfunded, informal support organizations. Low-income immigrant families are less likely than many other low-income populations to access formal service organizations. However, they may be more likely to interact with other kinds of organizations, such as faith-based ones. In a New York City study of immigrant families from Latino and Asian backgrounds, mixed-status immigrant families were more likely to attend church regularly than native-born families. In addition, national faith-based associations regularly call for more immigrant access to public health and human services programs. The potential for networks of churches and faith-based organizations to provide outreach to immigrants is high<sup>5</sup>.

In Massachusetts’ Department of Transitional Assistance, the 51 grantees funded to provide outreach to immigrant populations under Massachusetts’s universal health care policy are brought together regularly in Massachusetts Health Training Forum meetings. During these meetings, grantees learn about new provisions in state health care and receive technical assistance. In addition, CBOs provide state health care administrators with valuable information about their experiences with immigrant families and children. CBOs are thus able to blend the service and advocacy aspects of their work by leveraging their knowledge from providing direct services to affect state policy<sup>6</sup>.

CBOs are working with and within the New American communities (Latinx and Somalian, among others) and some of the organizations employ individuals with living experience from these communities, which allows the State of Colorado to foster a culturally competent environment. However, CBOs’ capacity is limited when supporting individuals access to services. Collaboration with CBOs, which is supported by comments from staff in state agencies and county governments, is critical for reaching out and educating New Americans. To ensure a sustainable partnership with CBOs doing this critical work, state agencies and county governments will need to provide targeted funding for CBOs’ outreach. Funding, especially for hyper-local CBOs, will be especially important. According to the Urban Institute roundtable with decision

---

<sup>5</sup> Chaudry, A., Fortuny, K., & Pedroza, J. (2020, May 4). *Improving access of low-income immigrant families to health and human services*. Urban Institute. Retrieved November 12, 2021, from <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/improving-access-low-income-immigrant-families-health-and-human-services>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

makers from the White House and immigrant-serving organizations, many scalable and successful integration efforts are highly local, serving immigrants in a particular neighborhood or community, and often fall outside traditional organizational structures and funding streams<sup>7</sup>.

## 2. One-door portal for applications/information (online and/or by phone) with multi-language support for creating an accessible, seamless experience

The strong support as an access solution for multilingual language lines staffed with real people found in the survey and the uncertainty described about accessing benefits in focus groups reinforces the potential benefit of a one-stop portal for applications and/or information with multi-language support. For online access, a platform like PEAK, with application capability and/or information for all programs covered in this study. However, as mentioned in the individual analyses, PEAK still has several gaps and glitches preventing it from providing full and consistent language support to New Americans.

The solution for online access is important. However, the lack of digital access and low digital literacy, as well as the variability in literacy levels in the New American population, limit the overall impact of the online platform. Research in this study suggests that New Americans have access to mobile phones and, even though the survey suggests New Americans prefer in-person access, access to over-the-phone support services is welcome and assists subgroups of New Americans. Over-the-phone access to benefits information and/or application assistance increases access to all New Americans, regardless of literacy levels and educational background. A single phone number for benefits information or application assistance could offer the customized level of attention of in-person services while providing the convenience of a remote access mode, which can better accommodate New American's irregular working schedules. When implementing a number like this, the state should conduct further study to establish a local population threshold over which they must provide that level of interpretation.

In fact, according to a study by New America of immigrant access to public health information in Colorado, reading isn't the most comfortable way to learn for many immigrants. Community-based organizations know this, which is why they've dedicated resources to translating videos rather than blast newsletters, and use word of mouth to spread updated program information. Several participants in that study also indicated that they preferred to speak to someone on the phone but had difficulty finding call center information on state websites. Colorado, like many states, invested in community-based

---

<sup>7</sup> Bernstein, Hamutal, et al. "How Communities Can Support Immigrant Families." *Urban Institute*, Urban Institute, 25 Mar. 2016, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/how-communities-can-support-immigrant-families>.

organizations for this purpose, but the sheer amount of information made it difficult to meet the information needs of all, especially as these were new duties to nonprofit partners.<sup>8</sup> According to one focus group participant, “when I call, if I knew the person in the other side speaks my language I will rather do it by phone because it is easier... it depends in what context you are seeking assistance... if documents need to be filled out, then in-person.”

One potential solution is the AT&T partnership with Language Line which, according to interviews, seems to be in practice in certain programs with varying degrees of success. The AT&T partnership with Language Line is a service which provides professional interpreters skilled in more than 170 languages that can be reached any time day of day and is designed to enable users to communicate with limited or non-English speakers in their native languages. However, it is unclear how widespread use of this service is and it is not without its problems. Key informants in Arapahoe County requested more language lines but doubted it would be affordable. Government agencies that receive federal funding, such as counties and workforce centers, have federal laws, rules, or regulations requiring language access. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act requires recipients of federal funding to take reasonable steps to ensure meaningful access to individuals who have limited English proficiency. This, combined with key informant’s input, reveals that even though access to a language line is often required, internal policies and practices, formal or informal, do not always support compliance and access. Another key informant said, “Sometimes when a person who doesn’t speak English as their primary language, when they get language line services, it doesn’t have that cultural competency piece” with another saying, “sometimes the lines are limited on time, forces them to get another person on the line if it goes over 2 hours.” Across all key informant interviews, language line services were only mentioned a handful of times and when mentioned, qualifications and limitations were described. We offer the following recommendations. We recommend a study to dig into why current Language Line services are not being used widely, what the limitations are and whether the state should take an active approach is developing its own unique Language Line service for statewide use. If the state aimed at developing its own Language Line type service, it should consider the following factors.

Since knowledge of services in each geographic area is important and there is a need for staffing capacity to handle the alternate language calls, 211 would be vital. 211 is a strong candidate for a partnership in this recommendation. At a minimum, the state could offer briefings and tutorials on benefits (in order to provide up-to-date information on benefits and eligibility) and facilitate a closer partnership between call centers and public benefits agencies. Up-to-date information on benefits and eligibility could at least provide a 211 call center worker with the basic knowledge about whether it’s worth the effort to refer a client to the appropriate social service and for the client to call that number.

---

<sup>8</sup> “Communicating with Immigrant and Non-English Speakers about the COVID-19 Vaccine.” *New America*, New America, Feb. 2021, <https://www.newamerica.org/new-practice-lab/reports/communicating-with-immigrant-and-non-english-speakers-about-the-covid-19-vaccine/how-to-find-and-collaborate-with-trusted-messengers>.

A closer partnership could ensure that the referral for services is being executed properly and a potential applicant is not slipping through the cracks. According to one key informant from 211, "I would say it's pretty easy for people to call 211... the barrier lies in why they won't call the services we offer them... *sometimes* we can reach out and establish a connection between the agency and client; for me I think that's where the barrier truly lies." 211 employees note that the lack of that formal connection means that a caller can be referred services through 211 and the caller may not receive those services. The reason for this discrepancy could be confusion or additional unknown barriers. At the point of referral, there is both an opportunity to address a client's unmet needs and a potential danger of losing the client. Collaboration is crucial for preventing clients from "falling through the cracks" among independent and autonomous agencies.

Ideally, the state could ensure that eligibility workers are out-stationed at call centers (211 dispatch centers) to provide immediate application and eligibility assistance and subsequently forward or submit the application to the relevant state or county agency.

### 3. Digital skills training with financial stipend is needed to support New Americans

The strong support for education around digital literacy as well as English as a second language in both focus groups suggest a need and genuine desire for self-empowerment through skills training with a monetary compensation component.

There are resources and precedent for expanding digital literacy and digital access. The digital divide occurs across three lines (internet access, device availability and online learning resources) and states have used funds to address these issues in different ways. For example, Missouri is using nearly \$40 million in federal money to expand technology, including \$2.5 million to improve libraries' access to hotspots and Wi-Fi and \$20 million to reimburse broadband providers for construction costs in underserved areas of the state.

Most states are providing funds for districts to purchase and distribute devices to students. Illinois, Maryland, North Carolina and Tennessee are distributing a collective \$212.5 million for districts to purchase hardware for online learning. Other states are providing device and connectivity support directly to families. Alabama has allocated \$100 million for a public-private partnership, called Alabama Broadband Connectivity for Students, that provides vouchers for families to pay for equipment and high-speed internet service. Similarly, Maine's Department of Education bought nearly 15,000 internet service

contracts, most of which are through Wi-Fi-enabled tablets that can be used as hotspots<sup>9</sup>. Senior centers are potential sites for digital training classes.

The most recent national data show that 67 percent of adults were not digitally literate in 2012; with even higher shares of adults who do not have a high school diploma or who are older, foreign-born, or who are Black or Hispanic lacking these skills<sup>10</sup>. According to a discussion in a focus group, the support provided by the state for New Americans will have to be twofold: support to receive education (digital literacy), and support for people to get a stipend. Individuals argued, "most people in our community do not even know how to write in their native language, how can we ask them [New Americans] to come learn about computers and technology? They need money, that is why they work multiple jobs." In the other focus group, one New American said, "you still need help; at least like to help your rent or housing...so even if you work part time, you can have enough time to focus and learn." Survey data, focus group data and existing research confirm this digital skills gap and focus groups themselves say the way to bridge this gap is through education and some form of compensation.

According to a report from the National Skills Coalition<sup>11</sup>, policymakers should support public-private training partnerships, invest dedicated funds in digital upskilling efforts, and identify incentives to advance short-term and nontraditional training and education programs that respond to jobseeker and employer needs. One interesting real-world model of a program integrating English and digital skills training comes out of Washington state with the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges' Integrated Digital English Acceleration (I-DEA) program. This program has learners participate in 31 one-week-long modules on topics ranging from information literacy and navigating the community to professional communication and interview skills. Performance results show that I-DEA student learning gains are 9 to 12 percent higher than the gains of English language learners in traditional programs<sup>12</sup>. Coupling digital literacy instruction with existing English language learner training is already a best practice as it helps maximize investments and drive efficiency.<sup>13</sup> In both focus groups, New Americans recognized the necessity of a digital and English education, as well as the constraints of an immigrant work schedule and the idea that unpaid educational participation translates to lost wages. To mitigate this barrier, the state should offer a flat amount, perhaps in the form of a gift card, that can reduce the participant's financial barriers (ex: transportation, childcare, etc.). Linkage to support services or

---

<sup>9</sup> Maher, Emily, and Lesley Kennedy. "State Uses of the CARES Act Coronavirus Relief Funds." State Uses of the CARES Act Coronavirus Relief Funds, <https://www.ncsl.org/research/fiscal-policy/state-uses-of-the-cares-act-coronavirus-relief-funds-magazine2020.aspx>.

<sup>10</sup> Mamedova, Saida, and Emily Pawlowski. "Stats in Brief - US Department of Education." *Nces.ed.gov*, Department of Education, May 2018, <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018161.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Bergson-Shilcock, A. (n.d.). *The new landscape of Digital Literacy*. nationalskillscoalition.org. Retrieved November 12, 2021, from <https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/05-20-2020-NSC-New-Landscape-of-Digital-Literacy.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Bergson-Shilcock, A. (2020, June). *Amplifying Impact*. nationalskillscoalition.org. Retrieved November 12, 2021, from <https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/06-25-2020-NSC-Amplifying-Impact.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Bashay, M. (2020, July). *Digital Skills for an equitable recovery*. nationalskillscoalition.org. Retrieved November 12, 2021, from <https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/07-22-2020-NSC-Digital-Skills-for-an-Equitable-Recovery.pdf>.

facilitating connections with existing services (such as housing, food and nutrition, clothing, physical and mental health) can also mitigate financial barriers, but gift cards (or similar monetary incentives) can allow New Americans to choose education over the opportunity cost of working. According to one study of job skills training, researchers<sup>14</sup> found that monetary incentives appeared effective in promoting engagement and achievement in a job-skills training program among individuals who often do not take advantage of training programs.

The state could take a three-part approach to address the digital gap by apportioning funding for digital skills training, English training and stipends for participants. Current providers of digital skills training recommend several ways to increase digital skills<sup>15</sup>:

- Integrate digital literacy into existing employment and training programs, particularly for adult learners and workers displaced from occupations.
- Explicitly assess digital skill levels to better understand needs.
- Account for and work to overcome barriers to accessing technology when teaching digital skills.

The state should work with counties to host these classes in local libraries to mitigate transportation barriers and accommodate in-person preferences. Participants noted a need for some form of compensation so skills training classes should offer one single flat amount to participants, perhaps in the form of a gift card, to cover the costs incurred by attending (e.g., transportation, childcare). While exclusively digital literacy and English training classes may only apply to New Americans of higher literacy levels, further study should examine whether resources or curricula exist to teach digital literacy for individuals lacking standard literacy in their native language.

## 4. State inter-agency collaboration through the Office of New Americans is essential for pulling and leveraging resources to meet the needs of New Americans.

In the body of this report and the individual program analyses, we highlight several program access issues and provide recommendations to address or mitigate access challenges. Each recommendation can be implemented individually for each program and department within the state government. However, the research team is also cognizant that state agencies will continue to observe an increase in service demands and requests for in-person support services, and the language barriers and technological divide will continue to deepen unless broader actions are executed. Based on the data gathered, we recommend

---

<sup>14</sup> Koffarnus, Mikhail N, et al. "Monetary Incentives to Reinforce Engagement and Achievement in a Job-Skills Training Program for Homeless, Unemployed Adults." *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, Aug. 2013, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5861723/>.

<sup>15</sup> Hecker, I., & Loprest, P. J. (2019, September 9). *Now hiring: Digital Literacy Skills Required*. Urban Institute. Retrieved November 12, 2021, from <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/now-hiring-digital-literacy-skills-required>.

that, to effectively address the current access challenges to public support programs by New Americans, state agencies must collaborate and build on the current resources, tools and networks developed for each individual program. The potential for success should increase substantially if state departments and program leads collaborate to support and meet all New American's access needs integrally. The three cross-program themes discussed here are a clear representation of where interagency collaboration could address or mitigate the access challenges by New Americans.

Improved resources and capacity in the Office of New Americans would be essential to carry this recommendation forward, as would be the established and formal sharing of staff and resources across program boundaries. Committees or interagency task forces in collaboration with the Office of New Americans at CDLE, with the appropriate resources and staff, could discuss an agenda to leverage resources and how to address the overarching challenges identified in this study or some of the more targeted solutions discussed in the individual program analysis.

One service for New Americans where inter-agency collaboration would be important and the State of Colorado could show a uniform front to support New Americans is a one-stop phone line services. Currently, New Americans need to call or connect with multiple state or county agencies to receive services for which they are eligible. The challenge is exponentiated if there are language barriers and the multiple entry points (Unemployment Insurance, Housing Voucher, Child Care Assistance) use or rely on incomplete (language options) or fragmented solutions for a population in need of support. A one-stop shop model for refugees and immigrants at state government is vital; a phone line makes it more scalable across the state.

Another centralized service should be communication and engagement with community based organizations. Often, various entities utilize the same trusted messengers and same partners to convey their programmatic information (such as child care opportunities). This fragmented approach often leaves community members confused, as their needs are holistic. The state should consider the ways in which various programs should collaborate on shared messages to the New American community.

**The survey of community-based organizations and county agencies overwhelmingly chose state government as ultimately responsible for ensuring access for New Americans to public programs.** Given that context, it is best for the state government to respond to these challenges as one organization to make significant strides to equitable access for all, rather than providing six or seven partial solutions.

## Considerations for Implementation of Recommendations

Under Colorado's state-supervised and county-administered program environment, it is important to note that the state's primary role is creating the conditions for the counties to successfully take action and respond to the program issues identified in their own jurisdictions. Survey data suggests those successful conditions might include state-sponsored collaboration, funding, and technical guidance. In practice, this could translate to the state, under the Office of New Americans and with the appropriate resources and funding, taking the initiative to convene meetings where county-administered programs can share information within and across states, both formally and informally, through state associations, training, or contracts with universities.

In fact, regular briefings on updates to federal and state laws as well as eligibility for safety net access were considered important to help organizations connect New Americans with programs. According to an Urban Institute study on county administered human services programs, proponents of county-administered programs value the flexibility to adjust to local circumstances, but several county administrators identified a need for technical assistance in navigating federal rules.<sup>16</sup> The state of Colorado has the unique ability to bring agencies and community-based organizations together to share innovations and updates, provide funding for digital skills training and associated expenses, and most importantly, provide detailed guidance to counties about how to implement changes sustainably and effectively.

For further discussion of individual program issues and recommendations, the research team submitted a catalogue for each state departments and for ONA's consideration. Details from the survey also were submitted under separate cover.

---

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/county\\_tanf\\_final\\_report\\_submitted\\_to\\_acf\\_b508.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/county_tanf_final_report_submitted_to_acf_b508.pdf)

# Other Issues to Consider in Studying Programs

## Access for New Americans

The survey went beyond what was the main access barrier and what could be done to address the issue since previous data gathering informed about a potential gap or contradictory statements on who owned the responsibility to improve access for New Americans in a state where most programs are county-administered and community organizations play a strong role in outreach, program enrollment and advocacy.

Lastly, one point that remains important in the study of access by New Americans to public programs is immigration status. This study focuses on access rather than eligibility. However, immigration status is more about eligibility. As part of the next steps in the Office of New Americans work, all stakeholders could frame the conversation about access and immigration status as follows:

- 80% of Colorado's immigrants have some type of immigration status,
- Many programs (like LEAP/LIHEAP) allow mixed-status households to apply
- State programs regularly do outreach to groups of non-immigrants, even if they are ineligible to apply
- Each immigration status is different in terms of eligibility.
  - Some legal immigrants are banned for 5 years from TANF and SNAP, some not.
  - Some of those without lawful presence are eligible for unemployment, some not.
  - Some individuals live in mixed status families where their household may be eligible even though an individual may be undocumented.
- Client-centered programs work with the client to ascertain barriers (such as challenges) and find solutions. Immigration status could be a barrier but should not be presumed to be.

For all the potential cases where those individuals without lawful presence are eligible for program benefits, the issue of immigration status should be less of an issue for improving access to programs for New Americans.

## Conclusion and Next Steps

Though Colorado is a state-supervised, county-administered system, there is no issue that requires standardization more than the patchwork, nonexistent or inconsistent alternate language resources across Colorado that currently exist. Interviews, focus groups, survey data and targeted recommendations acknowledge that substantial language barriers exist, especially for non-Spanish speaking New Americans. Attempts to mitigate additional barriers must first address the foundational need for language access.

It is unclear whether the New American in-person preference for services may be a cause or a function of the lack of New American digital literacy and digital access. However, the nationwide shift towards digital services that followed COVID-19 can only mean growing disparities if the issue remains unaddressed.

While specific steps forward are dependent on respective programs, Colorado as a state can only move forward if the state listens to the preferences and needs of its New American populations, which may include more robust, equitable networks of community-based organizations working with New Americans.

---

<sup>1</sup> The New Americans Initiative was codified into the Office of New Americans through House Bill 21-1150, signed by Governor Polis on June 25, 2021.