

# At the Margins

## Answering the Call of Newly Arrived Communities

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There were more than 108 million forcibly displaced people worldwide at the end of last year.<sup>1</sup> Among the numerous serious challenges they have faced is the interruption to ongoing education that such displacement entails.

Now more than ever, public librarians have a crucial role in ensuring that learning happens everywhere. We must be prepared to provide quality, holistic learning experiences for *every* learner within increasingly diverse settings. Amid teacher shortages, the disruptive effects of the pandemic and the climate crisis on formal education, refugees, asylum seekers, and other historically and systemically marginalized communities—all face limited access to quality education. With the wide range of services and the welcoming community spaces offered, libraries are well positioned to meet the social, emotional, and educational needs of these communities.

Of course, addressing the challenges faced by displaced people requires a comprehensive approach, including offering access to education, healthcare, mental health support, legal aid, and community integration opportunities. Libraries cannot necessarily be everything for all people, but can offer a supportive environment. Refugee children entering our spaces may be experiencing depression and anxiety or suffering from the effects of serious and sustained trauma or desensitization to trauma. They may also be experiencing grief over the loss of family, friends, home, or lifestyle. Identity issues may arise, as may a wide spectrum of behavioral issues.

Approximately one hundred thousand asylum seekers have come to New York City since April 2022, and fourteen Humanitarian Emergency Response and Relief Centers (HERRCs) and two



A multilingual, art-driven packet in development by NYPL.

hundred emergency shelters have opened since October 2022.<sup>2</sup> At The New York Public Library, the Community Outreach and Engagement (COE) team has spearheaded our collaboration with city agencies to help support the newly arrived asylum seekers, including putting together bilingual welcome kits that explain what the library can do to help. These kits begin the task of building local knowledge and cultural fluency as well as providing a guide to our resources.

Once our teams were able to visit HERRC sites in Manhattan, we were better able to understand the space and services available at them. We developed an outreach plan that included participation from bilingual branch staff and from central departments including the Community Outreach and Engagement and Children's Programs and Services teams and mapped out programs we could provide during visits. Our first visits with families on site took place on May 10, at which point we were able to offer information and resource sessions for adults about our career services and courses in English as a second language, as well as activities for children.

We also established a small Book Nook with books and materials in relevant languages for families and children. As a public library, the message that everyone is welcome is core to our outreach. We



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have been able to provide a warm introduction to the concept of public libraries and have encouraged newly arrived people to go to any of our NYPL branches simply to be in a welcoming space and to find community and more resources.

Since May 2023, we have continued to collaborate with city agencies and community-based organizations to provide services and programs in HERRC sites and other locations within our area of service, and through our School Outreach Team, in schools. Flexibility has been important; things may change from one visit to the next, from the space available at the site to the number of people present at any given time and the materials available. We work with what is available to us, adapting to serving those currently in attendance.

Based on our observations, we have found that less formally structured programs fare better. Rather than host traditional storytime sessions as we do in our branches, open-ended opportunities for expression have been popular. In addition to having books available for casual browsing, the team has provided rolls of butcher paper and art materials for kids to draw or doodle.

Suany Canales, one of our outreach associates, said, “Families loved the craft options available; one parent mentioned it being a great opportunity to reduce screen time for her little one.” The team is now working to develop an art-based multilingual packet focused on uplifting children’s identities and the ways in which we can support their self-exploration. We’re considering further shifts in programming as students return to the classroom. Serving patrons at the HERRC centers directly is one facet of service, but equipping NYPL’s branch staff to continue to serve the distinct needs of refugees and asylum seekers is at the forefront of our goals.

There are many library-focused resources dedicated to serving this growing population available in a variety of formats, and more resources are made available every day. Here are a few that we reference:

### ***Becoming a Welcoming Space for Immigrants and Refugees.***

This guide emerged from a 2019 IMLS National Forum grant that brought together ALSC and the Association of Children’s Museums. There are many resources to explore here and great prompts to help consider how your spaces, services, and programs can be leveraged to support people who have recently immigrated or sought refuge in the United States.

## References

1. The UN Refugee Agency, “Refugee Data Finder,” 2023, <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>.
2. Office of the Mayor, “Mayor Adams Announces New York City Has Cared for More than 100,000 Asylum Seekers Since Last

***Toolkit: Library Services to Underserved Children and Their Caregivers.*** ALSC’s own toolkit features a wide range of resources focused on populations that may be underserved in your community, including New Americans and Spanish Speaking Populations. The toolkit features recommended titles, apps, webinars, materials, and other resources that library staff might find useful in serving these populations.

**Services to Refugees, Immigrants, and Displaced Persons (SRIDP) Sub-Committee.** SRIDP is a sub-committee of the Office for Diversity, Literacy, and Outreach Services Advisory Committee. SRIDP has also produced *Celebrating Welcoming Week: A Guide for Libraries* as well as a toolkit dedicated to engaging multilingual communities and English language learners. Although these resources are not specific to children, they are valuable resources that highlight deeply relevant and important statistics and opportunities.

***Supporting and Educating Migrant Refugee Children.*** The National Education Association offers links to different resources that define the responsibilities of states, agencies, and other offices that support children and families who may have recently arrived in the United States. Additional resources linked here provide broad awareness of resettled populations and helpful webinars.

***The UN Refugee Agency Integration Handbook: Refugee Children and Youth.*** This comprehensive handbook focuses on working with children as partners in program design and delivery. It includes information on social connection, health, housing, and much more—as well as linking to a variety of international examples of this work in action.

***What is asylum? Qu’est-ce que l’asile? ¿Qué es el asilo?*** Available in English, Spanish, and French, this resource guide from the New York Immigration Coalition is for informational use only and is not legal advice. While the organizations listed are New York City based, the other information included can be useful for the community and as an awareness tool for staff.

Public libraries have long been supportive environments for communities of all kinds. It’s in these moments, when our towns and cities are seeing a large influx of new visitors and members—when our services are more necessary than ever—that the heart of our work truly shines. Libraries are places of possibility and positivity, and offer unique opportunities for our newest patrons to build important and enriching relationships. &

Spring,” August 16, 2023, <https://www.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/600-23/mayor-adams-new-york-city-has-cared-more-100-000-asylum-seekers-since-last-spring>.