

LOCAL POWER TO CHOOSE WELCOME:

SUPPORTING NEW ARRIVALS WITH DIGNITY

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Introduction

All human beings have inherent dignity and the right to seek safety. Every day, adults, children, and families are making treacherous journeys across borders in search of a better future – in many cases as a matter of life and death. As a nation, we must always welcome people seeking refuge and inclusion into our communities, ensure they have access to the resources they need to thrive, and continue to advocate for a more humane and dignified immigration system.

Since April 2022, Texas Governor Greg Abbott and his allies have sent tens of thousands of people seeking asylum to cities such as Washington, D.C., New York City, Chicago, Denver, and Philadelphia – going to great lengths to ensure there is no coordination or partnership with receiving cities. While facilitating the travel of people seeking asylum to their preferred destinations is a welcome and important practice, the way in which Abbott and his allies' are conducting busing is not only reckless and inhumane, but it also reflects a deliberate choice to promote political games, fuel fearmongering, and funnel more money into rapidly arresting, prosecuting, and incarcerating people seeking safety.

State and local leaders must band together and choose welcome. The good news is that communities across the country have been doing this. Local leaders, advocates, and community members volunteer their time, skills, and care to welcome people in search of a better life with dignity. Everyday people are showing us a path forward that is rooted in respect and community, and offering us a roadmap to reflect nationally. It's time for leaders at all levels of government to help scale and reinforce community-led efforts across the country.

The purpose of this memo is to offer local government leaders direction on how to ensure their localities can follow the lead of communities, and take on this shared responsibility to create a welcoming infrastructure. Based on interviews with grassroots organizers, government officials, policy advocates, and local elected leaders organizing in their communities, this memo details medium-term strategies that local governments can take to welcome migrants and people seeking asylum in order to support their transition into a new community.

We know there is no one-size-fits-all solution, and that local context will ultimately inform the solutions and steps a locality takes. That’s why this memo aims to provide a roadmap for the conversations and strategies local leaders should pursue, rooted in an abundance framework and a commitment to building grassroots community power.

Note: In building a durable welcoming infrastructure, there are a diverse set of resources and advocacy strategies at your disposal. This memo does not include the immediate, rapid response strategies that a city should take. We encourage leaders to also check out the following resources:

- [‘Always Welcome’ Toolkit](#) by National Partnership for New Americans, We Are All America, and Cities and Counties for Citizenship offers both rapid response strategies and in-depth communications guidance.
- [This document by a wide coalition of immigration advocates](#) outlines a robust federal agenda.
- [Welcoming America](#) is a resource available to local governments and community-based organizations who are interested in accessing their peer network and ongoing support for localities to build welcoming infrastructure.

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Policy

Establish an Office Dedicated to Immigrants and Refugees

A standing function of local governments, regardless of their size, is to provide services, welcome, and integration for new arrivals and migrants. In recognition of this, in the last decade, [many localities have created staffed immigrant affairs offices](#) (pg. 7), such as an "Offices of New Americans" (ONA) in Nashville, the Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs (OIRA) in Denver, or Office of Welcoming Communities (OWC) in Jersey City. Smaller localities may also have dedicated immigrant-focused efforts in their local government, but [may embed it into their structure in other ways](#) (i.e. as part of broader racial equity or community engagement efforts). While your local government may have ceded some of the work of supporting new arrivals to local nonprofits, the first significant step for government support is to ensure there are dedicated government personnel to oversee welcoming programs.

Recommendations:

- **Have conversations with your executive and local advocates about where in the local government structure such an office would integrate the best.** Localities have [different approaches](#) (pg. 8) regarding where to place their immigrant affairs offices within their government. Some cities create an independent office that directly reports to the mayor, while others have housed their office within their Equity Office or under their Department of Health and Human Services.
- **Identify and appoint personnel who have existing relationships with local immigration advocates.** Finding personnel who already hold relationships with immigrant advocates will strengthen the office's coordinative and programmatic capacity.
- **Discuss with fellow elected officials now about the creation of an office.** Creating, resourcing, and developing the work of a new office takes time, so it is advantageous to establish an office and dedicated personnel in advance of a surge in new arrivals.

Approach Toward Mayors, Executives, and City Managers

Mayors, executives, and city managers often have the most power in directing a locality's response and resources to receiving new arrivals, but legislators can play significant oversight roles that, coupled with a communications platform, can influence an executive to develop a powerful response.

Recommendations:

- **Develop an inside-outside strategy with local immigration advocates to ensure that your advocacy efforts are aligned.** Aligning your approach with that of local advocates will ensure their advocacy is pushing on the right levers. Working with local advocates in

times of crisis can also help lay the foundation for a longer-term [co-governing strategy](#) with those most affected by the issues at stake.

- **Legislators should use oversight authority to request that government officials report on their current practices and policies.** Hearings, community meetings, and other oversight tactics can bring clarity to the way your government welcomes people seeking asylum and migrants both in theory and practice. Hearings can also help service providers communicate to the public at-large how their programs are doing and what additional support they may need, [as evidenced by the New York City Council Immigration Committee’s hearings](#).
- **Use site visits to service providers or rapid-response sites to bring attention to the quality of services there.** Site visits help focus public attention to how services at these locations are actually being implemented and center the stories of the people impacted by these services. [Coordinating site visits](#) with fellow local elected officials and local groups can help amplify the attention you are directing to those site visits.
- **Use your platform to elevate the work of local advocates and nonprofits.** You can elevate local advocates’ efforts by inviting them to testify at your hearings and also by [using your communication platforms](#) to inform constituents of the importance of the advocates’ work. [See page 13 of this guide for more resources on narrative strategy](#).

Legal support and training for new arrivals

Migrants arriving in a new locality are often in need of legal services: some may be in the middle of complicated federal removal proceedings, while others may need assistance claiming asylum or managing parole status. Additionally, some people may have an active immigration case that requires their presence in a city far from where they are currently situated. Some service providers have [reported receiving hundreds of hearing notices](#) for people who never entered their doors. Legal counsel is critical for navigating this legal and bureaucratic thicket. In New York City, undocumented individuals obtaining legal support were [ten times less likely to be deported than those without representation](#).

[This toolkit](#) by Center for Popular Democracy, Vera Institute, and National Immigration Law Center explains how to create a removal defense program that provides universal representation with active deportation cases.

Recommendations:

- **Work with existing reputable legal service providers to assess how much funding/support they would need on a per-case basis.** Providing holistic legal services requires not only funding lawyers; but it also requires the funding of paralegals, support staff, money to support proper legal work, and other resources. [Refer to this resource to identify local providers and community organizations that provide immigration-related legal services](#).

- **Consider all funding sources, including state funding and philanthropy.** Some localities have turned to other funding sources to raise money for legal support. In New York State, state legislators have [introduced a bill that would use state funds](#) to provide a right to counsel for immigration proceedings. Many localities have recruited philanthropic partners to help resource legal services initiatives.
- **Work with your executive and legal advocates to draft Requests for Proposals (RFPs) and identify potential recipients.** In times of crisis, it can be hard to quickly draft RFPs that will satisfy both the city and legal service providers. Even after a successful RFP process, it can take years for legal organizations to hire enough staff to meet growing needs. Engaging these groups proactively will minimize the likelihood of a protracted RFP process and increase the likelihood that people seeking asylum and migrants in your locality have legal representation.

Coordination and Funding

Coordinating between different levels of government (state, county, and city), nonprofit groups, philanthropy, volunteers, and other key community institutions

Embracing asylum-seekers, migrants, and other new arrivals with a dignified welcome requires all levels of government working hand-in-hand with community institutions. To leverage this sense of shared responsibility, local governments should coordinate their welcoming infrastructure with local community groups and with surrounding jurisdictions. Syncing existing services and processes can help facilitate a more seamless and comprehensive provision of services.

Recommendations:

- **Identify state-level agencies that have analogs in city-level or county-level governments.** Alignment between city and state enables tight coordination for service provision – streamlining services by eliminating duplicative efforts. In Chicago, for example, city-level departments and offices have regular meetings with their state-level counterparts to align their efforts.
- **Coordinate a regular call between government agencies and community groups.** Local governments can play a central coordinating role between government agencies and community organizations to communicate consistently about programs and service provision. Community organizers should be asked what kind of frequency and format of coordination would be helpful toward their efforts.
- **Work with local community organizations to make clear how volunteers can join in the existing efforts to support new arrivals.** The City of Philadelphia, for example, created a [“How you can help people seeking asylum arriving in Philadelphia” webpage](#), which includes information about organizations working on the issue and links to donate to the

city's "Welcoming Fund." [Chicago](#) and [New York](#) have created similar resources to help direct and channel volunteers to existing efforts. Refer to this [Welcoming America guide](#) (pg. 5) for more information about this.

Identifying and Leveraging Sources of Funding

Coordinating and expanding a range of programs during an unexpected surge of new arrivals can put pressure on already strained municipal budgets, so many localities have sought other sources of funding to reimburse or buttress their welcoming infrastructure.

Recommendations:

- **Establish a "Welcoming Fund."** Philadelphia's Mayor's office has created a ["Welcoming Fund"](#) to help direct private dollars to nonprofit organizations. Similarly, in Denver, the Mayor, Colorado governor, and a local foundation created a ["Newcomers Fund"](#) to bolster resources to government agencies and nonprofit groups. Refer to this [Welcoming America guide](#) (pg. 10) for more details about this.
- **Leverage and assess the possibility for state funding.** While people seeking asylum and migrants may initially arrive in more urban, dense areas of a state, many will find homes in other areas of a state. Supporting new arrivals is a statewide responsibility and localities should capitalize on any opportunities to leverage state funding to bolster its welcoming response. In Illinois, for example, the state government [has supported temporary housing for migrants in hotels](#) located in the surrounding suburbs of Chicago.
- **Leverage federal resources.** While the federal government has yet to provide an adequate response to support localities shouldering the cost of welcoming people seeking asylum and newcomers, some funding is currently available via the [Federal Emergency Management Agency's \(FEMA\) Emergency Food and Shelter Program \(EFSP\)](#). Through EFSP, the federal government reimburses local governments and nonprofits for the costs of providing food, shelter, and other services to those in need. It should be noted that these reimbursements have not been substantial to date; [New York City received less than 1%](#) of its \$1 billion request for federal support.
- **Urge federal agencies and members of Congress to improve federal spending:** Already, local officials and immigration advocates are similarly [calling on and writing letters to federal agencies and Congress to disburse more money and resources towards local services for new arrivals](#). Additionally, National Partnership for New Americans and Welcoming America [are advocating for an Office of New Americans](#) that would coordinate and resource community-driven efforts.

Connecting to and Building Government Resources

Assess and catalog existing resources, programs, and service providers

In any community, there may be a range of mutual aid efforts, nonprofit groups, state and federal programs, local government services, unions, and faith-based groups that offer a spectrum of services to new arrivals regardless of their immigration or citizenship status.

Recommendations:

- **Work with local community groups to prepare a resource with all city, state, and federal benefits available to new arrivals regardless of immigration status.** Cataloging and documenting existing resources can be helpful in developing a clear understanding of the available fuller sense of the resources and their providers and to produce materials that will help people seeking asylum and migrants navigate the services.
- **Prepare translated resource documents.** Preparing these documents ahead of time will make it easier to connect people seeking asylum to information if recent arrivals are suddenly transported to your city. When deciding on translations for resources, consider both the languages most commonly spoken in your community and the full range of languages (including indigenous languages) spoken by countries that are likely sources of new arrivals. Work with nonprofit organizations with ties to these communities to provide culturally competent and accessible translation.
- **Look to non-traditional allies that are not exclusively immigration-focused, including faith-based groups and unions.** Faith-based communities and unions can be engaged as powerful allies in the fight for the dignified treatment of people seeking asylum and newcomers.
- **Identify any existing federal, state, and local programs that provide resources for specific categories of people seeking asylum.** Certain groups of people seeking asylum might be eligible for additional services and resources. In Illinois for example, people seeking asylum, as well as non-citizen victims of trafficking, torture, or other serious crimes, may be entitled to [exclusively state-funded medical, cash, and food assistance under the Survivor Support and Trafficking Prevention Act](#). For details on federal and state services that should be available regardless of status, refer to these resources from the National Immigration Law Center: [Overview of Immigrant Eligibility for Federal Programs](#), [Guide to Immigrant Eligibility for Federal Programs](#), and [A Decade of State Immigrant Rights Victories](#).

Connecting new arrivals to local government social services programs

Government bureaucracies and nonprofit organizations can be difficult to navigate, especially for people newly arriving in the country. For newly arriving migrants, this difficulty is exacerbated by numerous factors, including, the lack of permanent housing, lack of documents, trauma, language

barriers, restrictive immigrant eligibility rules, and more. These practical barriers often prevent immigrant families from using the government services for which they are eligible.

Recommendations:

- **Limit the complexity of service provision and consolidate the number of agencies that immigrants and new arrivals must be in contact with to obtain services.** Intended beneficiaries can have difficulty accessing services if city bureaucracies require individuals to contact numerous agencies and service providers. Unnecessary complexity in this bureaucracy can leave individuals without services and city resources unused. For example, San Diego [saw the number of its emergency housing vouchers utilized increased significantly](#) after it minimized the number of agencies and individuals whom clients needed to engage with when they applied for housing vouchers.
- **Establish a physical space (i.e. a Navigation Center) where you can direct new arrivals to begin receiving services.** Establishing a physical space—which centralizes where new arrivals must go to receive information regarding services—can streamline the process of connecting them to the services to which they are entitled. New York City, for example, [worked with the American Red Cross to establish a Navigation Center](#) that connects people to the full breadth of NYC services, and [Chicago has also established a Multi-Agency Resource Center \(MARC\)](#).
- **Establish a municipal ID program.** Accessing government services and completing daily tasks are made more difficult without some form of identification. People seeking asylum often lack official identification from their home country or otherwise. Because a lack of formal immigration status often precludes undocumented immigrants from obtaining federal or state identification documents, [municipal identification programs serve to fill that critical gap](#). Some cities in Texas have even begun experimenting with an [enhanced library card](#) as a way of providing official identification.
- **Disentangle local governments from federal immigration enforcement by ensuring that local government services, including law enforcement, do not inquire about or record a person's immigration status, and by adopting other measures that protect privacy.** Federal immigration authorities [have access to state, regional, and local criminal databases](#) even when jurisdictions have sought to limit their cooperation with ICE. One way to curtail the federal government's ability to target undocumented persons is to limit your local government from collecting data on immigration or citizenship status. Working with local immigration advocates will help identify the best data collection practices that help ensure that eligible residents can receive the services they need without fear that doing so will place them at higher risk. Local governments should adopt other policies that protect privacy and limit entanglement with federal immigration enforcement activities. They can limit disclosure and authorized use of information about the individuals they serve, develop protocols for responding to requests for information, as well as access to any non-public areas.

Housing

While some people seeking asylum and migrants may arrive in your locality with housing via family or community connections, many will need the support of your local government to secure housing. There will inevitably be challenges: an influx of new arrivals can place additional strain on an already burdened housing system, and in some places, an unexpected surge in migrants can open or deepen tensions between newcomers and longer-standing communities who are unhoused or experiencing poor housing conditions. It is imperative to work proactively to produce housing solutions to mitigate those tensions and ensure that the conversation stays focused on providing housing for all.

Recommendations:

- **Advocate for state investment in housing.** Building and funding more permanent supportive housing and affordable housing in cities will require state investment and funding. Localities, in coordination with local, state, and national coalitions, should be pushing state officials for increased investment in housing.
- **Leverage federal housing programs.** While many federal housing programs are not available for undocumented individuals, a number of federal housing programs [do not have immigration status or citizenship requirements](#).
- **Increase permanent housing supply.** For example, in New York City, advocates and progressive elected officials have pushed for the [legalization of basement and cellar apartment rentals, accompanied by strong inspection and regulation programs](#). The legalization of these types of rentals that have long been considered unlawful not only increases rental supply, but ensures that new arrivals who may be likely to find themselves in these “gray-market” rentals are entitled to the full breadth of legal protections.
- **Increase shelter and transitional housing supply.** While not a long-term solution for shelter shortages, it can be helpful to identify hotels and alternative structures that can serve as temporary shelters or transitional housing. Some examples include New York City’s [agreement with the Hotel Association of New York City](#) to house people seeking asylum, Denver’s [efforts to build safe outdoor space shelters](#), and Minneapolis’s [efforts to convert a warehouse into the nation’s first indoor, tiny-home community](#). It’s imperative to ensure that these interim shelter and transitional housing solutions are dignified, planned in coordination with local advocacy organizations, and well-staffed with social service staff.
- **Work with housing advocates to assess whether existing protections for unhoused communities are applicable to migrants, and consider passing additional housing protections.** Many of the services aimed at benefiting unhoused communities can also be used by migrants, many of whom are likely experiencing some form of homelessness. In New York City for example, [an existing right to shelter law ensures the city’s shelters](#) cannot discriminate against certain populations and also entitles unhoused individuals to a bed if they need one. New York City advocates then leveraged this existing law

intended to benefit unhoused populations for people seeking asylum. Additionally, many cities have [passed source of income discrimination ordinances](#). In the event that people seeking asylum and migrants are able to obtain local, state, or federal housing vouchers, it's imperative that landlords be prohibited from discriminating against them on the basis of their use of vouchers. Localities could also adopt ordinances, as some states do, that prohibit landlords from inquiring about a prospective tenant's immigration status, requiring a Social Security number, or discriminating against tenants based on their actual or perceived status.

Schools and Education

While a large portion of recent migrants to many localities have been single men, localities should make plans to prepare for the arrival of families with young children. Ensuring that these families and children are integrated into the public school system with services that meet their needs is a critical component for families seeking stability in a new country.

Recommendations:

- **Work with education officials and teacher's unions to determine what the optimal busing and placement plan would be given the current landscape of resources and anticipated locations for shelters.** With education officials, assess which schools are best positioned to provide support for newly arriving children by determining proximity to resource centers, proximity to similar ethnic communities, the number of ESL teachers, etc. Officials will need to weigh tradeoffs such as whether to prioritize transporting students to the most proximate schools for ease of coordination or whether to distribute students across a range of schools. For an example of how one city is approaching this, see [New York City's comprehensive support plan to support families seeking asylum](#).
- **Allot additional funding for schools based on students' housing status, not their immigration status.** In New York City, the government is [providing additional money to schools](#) based on how many students are currently experiencing temporary housing – this would capture both newly arrived migrants and unhoused residents. This ensures that the city bureaucracy is not tracking immigration status of children while also ensuring they're still directing their resources to those in the most need.
- **Focus on ESL support.** Without language learning resources, students may struggle to acclimate. Some cities have adopted creative solutions to increasing English-as-a-Second-Language resources. New York City, for example, [leveraged a partnership with the government of the Dominican Republic](#) to add 25 new teachers.

Health and Mental Health Services

When people seeking asylum and migrants arrive in your community, some will be experiencing physical and mental health challenges due to traumatic conditions prior to and during their migration. Ensuring that people seeking asylum have access to healthcare resources will help facilitate their integration.

Recommendations:

- **Establish a program that provides health coverage to undocumented individuals.** Because virtually all newly arriving migrants will be uninsured, localities will need to help fill the gap. Numerous cities — including [Los Angeles](#), [San Francisco](#), and [New York City](#) — have enacted programs that make healthcare available to uninsured individuals, including those without an immigration status.
- **Include mental health coverage in any health-related programs.** In addition to addressing physical health needs, localities should anticipate the need for mental healthcare among new arrivals, particularly given their arduous journeys. The stakes of providing quality mental healthcare can be life-or-death: In New York City, [two individuals have already died of suicide](#) in the shelter system.
- **Prepare your city workforce to deliver trauma-informed care.** Because of the prevalence of trauma amongst people seeking asylum, consider requiring relevant city agencies to provide initial and ongoing training to all government personnel who regularly engage with people seeking asylum, as is currently [being contemplated by the New York City Council](#).

Workforce Support

People seeking asylum and migrants arriving in a new locality will face a number of challenges to finding steady, meaningful, and well-paying employment, especially since obtaining federal work authorization is an [unnecessarily lengthy process](#) that the federal government has failed to improve despite a labor shortage. As a result, migrant workers are likely to be relegated to the margins of the economy, where they can face precarious work arrangements. Localities can develop strategies that combat workplace exploitation and empower workers.

Recommendations:

- **Establish an Office of Labor Enforcement.** Increasingly, cities are [creating offices dedicated to enforcing existing labor laws](#) (see pg. 6). These offices are critical to ensuring that workers, regardless of their immigration status, have their local, state, and federal rights protected. When operating most strategically, these offices target their efforts on industries most rife with labor rights violations, such as those employing workers with precarious immigration statuses. Further underscoring the importance of local labor law enforcement, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) recently [announced a new program on deferred action and employment authorization](#) for workers who are witnesses in labor enforcement cases, including cases brought by local labor enforcement agencies.
- **Conduct Know Your Rights Trainings.** Workers obtaining non-traditional employment are often exploited by their employers because employers know they are unlikely to be aware of or exercise their rights. Localities can help counter this by partnering with unions

and community organizations to offer “know your rights” training that informs workers of their rights in the workplace, regardless of their citizenship or work permit status.

- **Revisit local licensing schemes.** While most licensing requirements operate at the state level, localities can explore if licensing schemes, such as business licenses or permits, [can be inclusive of all residents](#), regardless of their citizenship or immigration status.
- **Connecting with apprenticeship, pre-apprenticeship, and job placement programs.** To create programs that ease new arrivals into full-time, well-paying jobs and provide sufficient training, [start with your local labor partners](#) and also consult [large employers and local nonprofits](#).
- **Support local organizations and immigration advocates in resisting ICE raids.** Though the practice of mass raids has been [temporarily paused under the Biden administration](#), it’s important to strategize with local immigration advocates about how to support workers targeted by ICE at their workplaces. [Review this NILC toolkit](#) for a more in-depth dive into strategies for responding to raids.

About

The **Local Progress Impact Lab** brings together local leaders, partners, and issue experts to build the knowledge, skills, and leadership needed to advance racial and economic justice at the local level.

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Additional Resources

Lastly, we want to elevate these other resources by our partners and allies in this fight.

- **[Welcoming America](#)**: A resource available to local governments and community-based organizations who are interested in accessing their peer network and ongoing support for localities to build a welcoming infrastructure. For a modest fee on a sliding scale and with numerous scholarship opportunities, they offer a wide variety of resources and services, including a [Welcoming Standard and a Certified Welcoming](#) program that provides an in-depth review of policies and practices. In addition, their guide, [Advancing a Welcoming Infrastructure for Humanitarian Relief](#), offers best practices for moments of rapid demographic shift.
- **[A Welcoming Infrastructure For Humanitarian Relief: How To Invest In Long-Term Migrant Inclusion & Equity At The Local Level By Welcoming America](#)**: This how-to guide outlines five tangible ways that local leaders can help create an equitable and welcoming environment in your locality that is sustainable in the long-term and builds resilience to support residents — now and in the future.
- **[Always Welcome Toolkit by NPNA](#)**: A toolkit of humanitarian response models, legal service orientation, advocacy strategies, and narrative/messaging resources to support the efforts led by organizations and localities to welcome new arrivals.
- **[Border Shelter Toolkit by UNCHR](#)**: Best Practices in Sheltering Asylum-Seeking Families at the U.S. Southern Border is a resource inspired by and for shelters operating along the U.S. southern border that receive asylum-seeking families and adults and provide them with vital short-term shelter.
- **[Advancing Universal Representation by Vera Institute for Justice, Center for Popular Democracy, and National Immigration Law Center](#)**: A toolkit for advocates, organizers, legal service providers, and policymakers.
- **[Travel Packet: Immigration Legal Information– San Diego Rapid Response Network’s Migrant Shelter by Jewish Family Service of San Diego](#)**: This packet contains resources

created by non-governmental and governmental organizations. Jewish Family Service of San Diego created some of these materials and assembled this packet to provide information to non-citizens released by U.S. immigration at the U.S.-Mexico border.

- **[Recommendations for Federal Policy](#)**: This document by a wide coalition of immigration advocates includes recommendations on what the federal government should do and outlines a robust federal agenda.
- **[Welcoming People Seeking Safety: A San Diego Blueprint for Humanitarian Reception by Jewish Family Service of San Diego and the Women's Refugee Commission](#)**: This report highlights the work of the San Diego Rapid Response Network (SDRRN) Shelter Services to assist more than 120,000 people seeking asylum since 2018. The reception model in San Diego stands out as an example of an effective public-private partnership that centers humanity and welcoming through the integration of respite, legal empowerment, and public health services. This explainer includes ways that governments and communities across the US can build upon and adapt from the experiences of the SDRRN/JFSSD.

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