



# Future Ready Oregon: Workforce Ready Report

Workforce Needs of Immigrants and  
Refugees in Oregon

2023



## **Acknowledgements**

**Thank you** to the 56 community members who participated in the focus groups and shared their experiences and wisdom.

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# Table of Contents

# S F I N E T H I N G S

01.

Introduction

02.

Portland: Participant Background

03.

Portland: Career Interests

05.

Portland: Challenges & Barriers

06.

Portland: Resources Needed

07.

Ontario: Participant Background

08.

Ontario: Challenges & Resources

09.

Next Steps & Recommendations

# NON O T C D O R T N

In 2023, as part of the Higher Education Coordinating Commission's Future Ready Oregon: Workforce Ready Grant, the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization (IRCO) completed a series of focus groups with 44 Asian, Ethiopian, Greater Middle Eastern, Latinx, Pacific Islander, and Ukrainian immigrant and refugee community members in the Portland metropolitan area, as well as 11 African, Greater Middle Eastern, and Latinx community members in Ontario, Oregon, to understand people's career background and interests, and the barriers they face, and resources needed, when trying to enter the healthcare, manufacturing, technology, and construction industries.

These industries are prioritized by the state because they are all growing, with high demand for employees, and offer many pathways to living wage careers; often in and around the neighborhoods where community members live. However, the availability of jobs and training programs alone do not mean that these opportunities are accessible to immigrant and refugee community members. To ensure that immigrants and refugees can benefit from these opportunities, programming, services, and policies must be aware of and responsive to the unique experiences facing different communities. This report details key findings shared by immigrant and refugee community members in Portland and Ontario, Oregon.

# PARTICIPANT BACKGROUND: PORTLAND

44 community members participated in 6 different focus groups (see table). The group targets were selected to cover the 6 major ethnic groups served by IRCO (African, Asian, Greater Middle Eastern, Latinx, Pacific Islander, and Slavic & Eastern European). Specific communities were selected based on data from IRCO's 2022 Community Needs Assessment showing high need. Most (70%) of the participants identified as female, while the remaining identified as male.

Focus Group	Count and Background
Asian	6 Vietnamese, 1 Burmese, 1 Chinese, 1 Malaysian
Ethiopian	5 Ethiopian, 3 Ethiopian Tigrayan, 2 Oromo
Greater Middle Eastern	3 Afghan, 2 Iraqi, 1 Syrian, 1 Sudanese, 1 Saudi Arabian
Latino/a/x	5 Mexican
Pacific Islander	5 Chuukese, 1 Chuukese American born
Ukrainian	6 Ukrainian

**Table 1: Participant Background**

## Immigration Story:

Participants' immigration story reflects the migrations trends, with all Ukrainian, Afghan, Burmese, Malaysian, and most Ethiopians arriving within the last five years as refugees. Meanwhile, most of the Arabic speakers also arrived in the U.S. as refugees but they arrived more than five years ago. The remaining all have been in the U.S for longer than five years and did not arrive as refugees.

## Educational Background:

- Most completed at least a HS Diploma or equivalent, including all Ukrainian and Pacific Islander, and all but one Ethiopian, Latina, and Asian participants.
- Most Ukrainian and Ethiopian, and about half of Asian and PI participants had a post-secondary degree or higher.
- The post-secondary degrees and training from their native country were most often in healthcare (pharmacy, nursing, nursing assistant, midwife, and caregiving), education, and business (accounting), while others also had a degree or some training in IT/Technology, manufacturing, construction, real estate, sign language, flight attendant, engineering, and law from their native country.

# CAREER INTERESTS: PORTLAND

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All participants who have been in the U.S. long enough to find work - regardless of educational background - have had to work a variety of survival jobs, particularly in caregiving, education (daycare and tutoring), custodial and hospitality, manufacturing (assembly line level - with Aramark, Columbia, etc.), and food service. Many have had to change their careers entirely.

In a lot of cases, people have bounced around from one industry to another and remain unstable or unsatisfied with their jobs, while those who have elected to remain in their industry and work/train their way up tend to be in the healthcare (e.g., CNA I to II) and manufacturing (from production to management) sectors. Ultimately, most of those with settled careers settled in jobs in the healthcare, education, manufacturing, and nonprofits field.

Less than 1 in 4 participants completed additional certificates or degrees here in the U.S., and those that did earned certificates in Certified Nursing Assistant, Community Health Worker, and Cybersecurity, and 1 completed a B.A. in accounting.

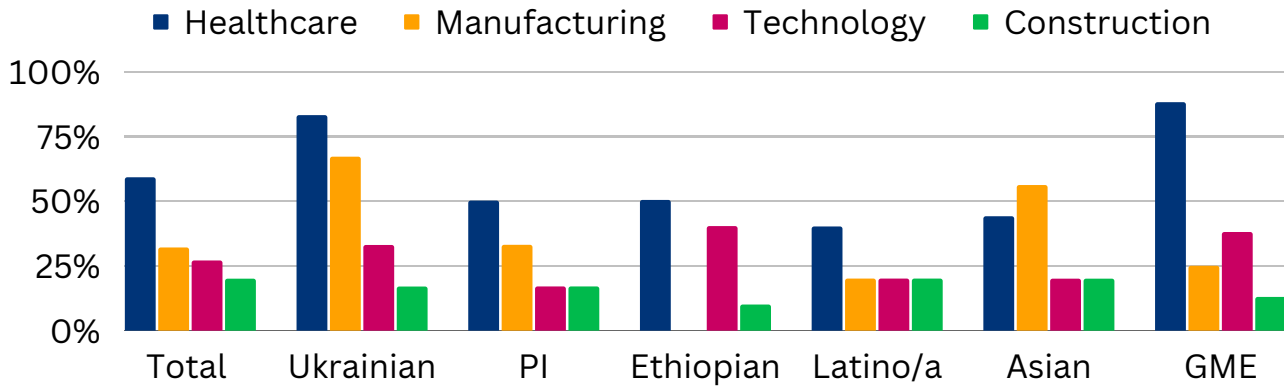
*"I applied as a housekeeper with a Master's Degree, and they didn't take me... I was overqualified."* Ukrainian participant

*"I know two doctors who are now working as interpreters."* Iraqi participant

*"I'm telling people to aim not for the lower level, but a mid or high level job."* Ethiopian participant

# CAREER INTERESTS: PORTLAND

**Chart 1: Portland Industry Interests**



When asked about which of the four industries people are interested in, most participants mentioned healthcare, followed by manufacturing, technology, then construction. Overall, people were interested in the fields that they've had prior training in, or that they've been exposed to since coming here. Those with advanced training were less likely to be open to new fields, while others were open to any field that has good pay and job security, if they had more information and exposure to it.

Common reasons people were not interested in certain industries include a lack of exposure or information (manufacturing and construction), prior bad experiences (manufacturing), high English and education requirements (tech), gender norms (construction), and cultural barriers (construction and manufacturing). See Appendix A for more details.

*"It's not like I don't want to do it, it's because I don't think I can do it naturally."* a female Ethiopian participant speaking about cultural gender norms for women working in construction or manufacturing.

Three Latina participants shared that they had previously worked in manufacturing conditions that were freezing, where they did not receive breaks, had to sit on the floor to eat, and where they were treated as an "esclavo," or slave.

# CHALLENGES & BARRIERS: PORTLAND

With each focus group, we asked participants what are the biggest barriers and challenges they face when trying to access the healthcare, manufacturing, tech, and construction industries. The table below highlights all the barriers shared across the six Portland focus groups.

The four most common barriers are: 1) a lack of information, connection, and exposure to the industries, 2) the language barrier, 3) the costs and risks involved in pursuing training, and 4) credentials and experience in native country not accepted. For more details see Appendix B.

**Table 2: Portland Challenges**

<b>A lack of information, connections, and exposure</b>	<b>Language barrier (especially vocational)</b>	<b>Family/financial responsibilities and cost of training</b>	<b>Native degree or qualifications not accepted</b>
<b>Cultural barriers (e.g., gender norms, self-exclusion, navigating workplace culture)</b>	<b>Discrimination</b>	<b>Tech literacy</b>	<b>Difficulty gaining job experience/ first job</b>
<b>Immigration documentation</b>	<b>Low education levels</b>	<b>Navigating resources (e.g., financial aid, scholarships, etc.)</b>	<b>Transportation</b>
<b>Tech access</b>	<b>Age restrictions</b>	<b>Health restrictions</b>	<b>Competitive</b>

*"I can go online, but I don't know what is real and what is a scam."*  
Ukrainian participant



# RESOURCES NEEDED: PORTLAND

The table below highlights participant responses when asked what kinds of resources or support would be needed to help people get into the four industries.

The four most common resources cited are: 1) Culturally specific outreach and education in the community, 2) English as a Second Language (ESL) and vocational ESL classes, 3) Culturally or linguistically specific classes and cohorts, and 4) Shorter trainings that are paid and/or have scholarships. For more details see Appendix C.

**Table 3: Portland Resources Needed**

<b>Culturally specific outreach and education in community</b>	<b>ESL and vocational ESL classes</b>	<b>Culturally or linguistically specific classes and cohorts</b>	<b>Shorter trainings that are paid and/or have scholarships</b>
<b>General employment services (e.g., resume help, interview prep, etc.)</b>	<b>Help transferring their native credentials</b>	<b>Classes on weekday evenings</b>	<b>Language support navigating resources</b>
<b>Transportation support</b>	<b>Programs for the elderly and people with disabilities</b>	<b>On-site childcare during classes</b>	<b>Classes about rights and navigating workplace culture</b>

*"We need information, but not just words." Ethiopian participant in regard to different types of outreach.*

*"[We need to show community members that] here everyone is equal, you can do what they can do."  
Chuukese participant*

# PARTICIPANT BACKGROUND: ONTARIO

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## **Participant Background:**

12 participants participated in the focus group in Ontario, Oregon. Of these, there were 5 Syrians, 1 Iraqi, 3 Somali (1 grew up in Kenya), 1 first generation Hispanic, 1 African American and 1 White American. The group was evenly split male and female. To get more insights into Latinx community needs, we spoke to two staff members who are part of the community.

There are roughly three trends among the immigrants and refugee groups we talked to:

- Many of the refugees - including all Arabic-speaking refugees - relocated to Ontario after living in a bigger city, primarily for Section 8 housing benefits. All of the adults in this group did not have a post-secondary education. Some shared that they had experience in their native country working in construction and owning businesses. Here in the U.S., people have worked as cleaners in the hotel, in onion processing, and driving Uber.
- Those who immigrated when they were younger, or the first-generation kids, all intend to get, or are getting, a post-secondary education, either in the community college nearby or a four-year college further away. This applies to children from both immigrant Latinx communities and African and Greater Middle Eastern refugee communities.
- We learned that Latinx adults could not attend because they were busy working in agricultural fields. The adults generally have lots of agricultural experience, high mechanical aptitude, and sometimes have taken additional training, but not enough to complete a certificate. Those in agriculture are often working 6-7 days a week. A lack of immigration documentation can be an issue, leading them to be exploited and limiting opportunities to advance in the field or to change careers.

## **Industry Interests**

In Ontario, the biggest industry is agriculture and agriculture-related food processing/manufacturing, followed by hospitality, retail, education, government work, and construction. Unfortunately, the entry level wages for most jobs across these industries (excluding education and government work) are low, and many jobs are part-time or seasonal. A few participants spoke of going to Idaho for jobs. At the same time, refugee community members struggled to get into positions like retail and manufacturing for a variety of reasons (see below).

# CHALLENGES & RESOURCES: ONTARIO

The tables below highlight what kinds of employment-related challenges immigrant and refugees face in Ontario, and also what kinds of resources or supports are needed. For more details, see Appendix B.

**Table 4: Ontario Challenges**

<b>Language barrier</b>	<b>Cultural barriers (e.g., working with pork, taking care of men, and dress code.)</b>	<b>Fear of losing benefits</b>	<b>Lack of documentation</b>
<b>A lack of information, connections, and exposure</b>	<b>Costs of finishing training and training schedules conflict with work and family</b>	<b>Lack of established community network to assist with job search</b>	<b>Childcare</b>
<b>Inconsistencies in work and housing history</b>	<b>Tech access and literacy - especially for older people</b>	<b>Low pay across different industries</b>	<b>Shortage of employment and training opportunities nearby</b>

**Table 5: Ontario Resources Needed**

<b>ESL and vocational ESL classes</b>	<b>Jobs with shorter shifts and more flexible hours</b>	<b>Information about different employment and training opportunities</b>	<b>Finding employers suitable to different populations</b>
<b>Financial Assistance</b>	<b>Childcare</b>	<b>Centralized job board and job information</b>	<b>Online education / virtual hybrid services</b>

# NEXT STEPS

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Below is IRCO's plan to address some of the workforce needs we heard:

01

## **Develop Curriculum for Outreach**

Currently, for newly arrived immigrants and refugees, we support placements into entry level jobs because that is often their most pressing need. For more established immigrants and refugees, we provide information about different employment and training pathways, but clearly there is still a service gap for this large population, who may be employed or under-employed but dissatisfied with their job and looking for a career change. Being more settled, this population is suited and ready to take advantage of the many different training opportunities locally. The curriculum will introduce this population to different employment and training pathways in the healthcare, manufacturing, technology, and construction industries, bring them on tours of training facilities, and provide workshops on career mapping, employee rights, navigating workplace culture, accessing support services, and more.

02

## **Collaborate to Conduct Culturally-Specific Outreach**

We are aiming to grow our capacity to conduct culturally specific outreach by hiring one or two additional staff members to coordinate the outreach effort, in collaboration with our four cultural centers (Africa House, Greater Middle Eastern Center, Pacific Islander Asian Family Center, and the Slavic & Eastern European Center), who can help connect us to community members and provide feedback on the outreach, as well as industry partners.

03

## **Continue Engaging with Industry Stakeholders and Policymakers to Identify Pathways for Those with Advanced Degrees, especially in the Healthcare Sector.**

We will continue to engage policymakers and lawmakers on this pressing issue of advanced degree transfer and re-credentialing. We'll also engage with industry stakeholders to identify alternative career pathways suitable for those with advanced degrees, and continue to provide the career coaching and wrap-around supports to clients.

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STAKEHOLDERS

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Base on the focus group conversations, as well as discussions with our staff and several training providers, below are some recommendations for industry stakeholders who are interested in helping immigrants and refugees into their industry.

01

## **Deepen Collaboration with Different Immigrant and Refugee Communities and Community-Based Organizations.**

The need for more information and outreach was the biggest challenges facing different communities, but what was evident in our conversations with community members is that the typical way organizations do outreach (e.g., sharing flyers) is not effective, because people are typically risk-averse and hesitant to engage with information that is not coming from trusted sources within the community, who understand their unique needs and can speak to the suitability of different employment and training opportunities. To bridge this gap, organizations need to make meaningful partnerships with community members and/or community-based organizations to develop tailored strategies for outreach.

02

## **Consider Improvements to Training Design to Be More Responsive to Community Needs**

Some of the recommendations that community members expressed include: ease the process for admissions into ESL/ESOL programs and make program more career-oriented (e.g., by connecting students with career counselors), increase number of Vocational ESL programs, offer classes on weekday evenings and/or with more flexible schedules, shorter length trainings, on-site childcare, and trainings in convenient locations.

03

## **Connect With Community to Learn About Cultural Nuances**

Make workplaces more welcoming and culturally sensitive by reaching out to community-base organizations to learn about the cultural nuances of different communities and how to remove cultural barriers.



Thank you for reading.

## CONTACT

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# APPENDIX

# APPENDIX A: INDUSTRY INTERESTS

Industry	Reasons For	Reasons Against
Healthcare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Had exposure to the industry and/or know someone who works in it.</li> <li>•Easier to get into.</li> <li>•More career pathways and upward mobility.</li> <li>•Previous experience from home country.</li> <li>•More welcoming and diverse culture, easier to navigate (esp. for women).</li> <li>•Wanting to help people/meaningful work.</li> <li>•More job security.</li> <li>Possibility of entrepreneurship.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Not personally interested.</li> </ul>
Manufacturing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Easy to get into, especially with low English proficiency.</li> <li>•Impression of high pay and regular schedule.</li> <li>•Know family and friends who work in it.</li> <li>•Wanting to gain the skills.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Lack of connections and exposure to the industry.</li> <li>•Not personally interested.</li> <li>•Have worked in the field and are no longer interested.</li> <li>•Have worked in the field and have had a bad experience (specifically, with bad working conditions and racist culture).</li> <li>Perceived as difficult work.</li> </ul>
Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Recommended by others in their network.</li> <li>•High Pay.</li> <li>•Wanting to be connected with the world and be part of the future.</li> <li>•Working from home.</li> <li>Previous experience.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Tech skills gap.</li> <li>•Language barrier.</li> <li>Low education levels.</li> </ul>
Construction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Liked active work, moving around, making stuff, as well as the perceived 'freedom' on the job.</li> <li>•Previous experience</li> <li>•High pay</li> <li>•Low requirements to enter.</li> <li>Wanting to learn new skills.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Cultural barrier/perception against women working in the field.</li> <li>•Lack of connection and exposure to the industry.</li> <li>•Navigating workplace culture.</li> <li>•Difficult work.</li> <li>•Health/age restrictions.</li> </ul>



# APPENDIX B: CHALLENGES & BARRIERS

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<b>Barrier</b>	<b>Description</b>
A lack of information, connections, and exposure.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• People are reliant on trusted sources like family, friends, and community word-of-mouth to get information regarding the pros and cons of different career and training opportunities. Any outreach should build on existing connections.</li><li>• Especially given the time and money constraints, it's important that people have all the information in order to make informed decisions.</li><li>• It is also helpful to have people from the community who have or are working in these different industries share their experiences, and also to learn and get more exposure to the industries through tours, speakers etc.</li></ul>
Language barrier	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Basic and vocational English.</li><li>• Language support when preparing for interviews and exams.</li><li>• Negative experience with ESL classes in U.S. colleges, where the length of instruction was too long and not suitable for people's needs.</li></ul>
Family/financial responsibilities and cost of training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• People cannot stop working because of their obligations. Trainings are a financial risk.</li></ul>
Native degree or qualifications not transferrable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Having to change careers despite one's past experience and education.</li></ul>
Cultural barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Gender norms against women working in construction and manufacturing.</li><li>• Cultural and religious restrictions to work (e.g., environments with pork, beef, alcohol, working with men, dress)</li><li>• Not knowing the culture, difficulty relating when socializing and networking, limits upward mobility.</li><li>• Internalized mentality and perceived exclusion from good opportunities.</li></ul>

# APPENDIX B: CHALLENGES & BARRIERS

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<b>Barrier</b>	<b>Description</b>
Discrimination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Biases against certain communities and what jobs they may or not have, especially in management.</li><li>• Bias during the hiring process.</li><li>• Bias against advancement opportunities.</li></ul>
Immigration documentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Lacking documentation to work.</li><li>• Being exploited even with skills and certifications</li></ul>
Tech access and literacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Lack of access to computers and phones, and also not knowing how to use computers.</li></ul>
Difficulty gaining job experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Especially for those with limited or no job experience outside the home.</li></ul>
Low education levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Did not complete high school.</li><li>• Challenges with math.</li></ul>
Competition when applying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Hard to maintain grades when working and with family obligations.</li></ul>
Transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reliant on public transit.</li></ul>
Not knowing about scholarships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To help pay for schools.</li></ul>
Age/health restrictions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Do not know if worth it to restart careers.</li></ul>