

Systems Alignment for Effective Resettlement

Engaging Refugee-led Organizations and Refugee Voices in Refugee Resettlement

Strategies to Achieve Alignment, Collaboration and Synergy across Delivery and Financing Systems

Research-in-Progress Webinar

April 29, 2026

12-1 PM ET

colorado school of
public health

Agenda

- Welcome:** Systems for Action
- Presenters:** Maliha Ali, Trenita Childers
- Commentary:** Seyoum Berhe, Baktash Manocher
- Q&A:** Project Team

Presenters



Maliha Ali

*Project Director
Senior Researcher
American Institutes
for Research (AIR)*



Trenita Childers

*Facilitator
Senior Researcher
American Institutes
for Research (AIR)*



Seyoum Berhe

*Advisory Panelist
Director/State Refugee
Coordinator
Office of New
Americans*

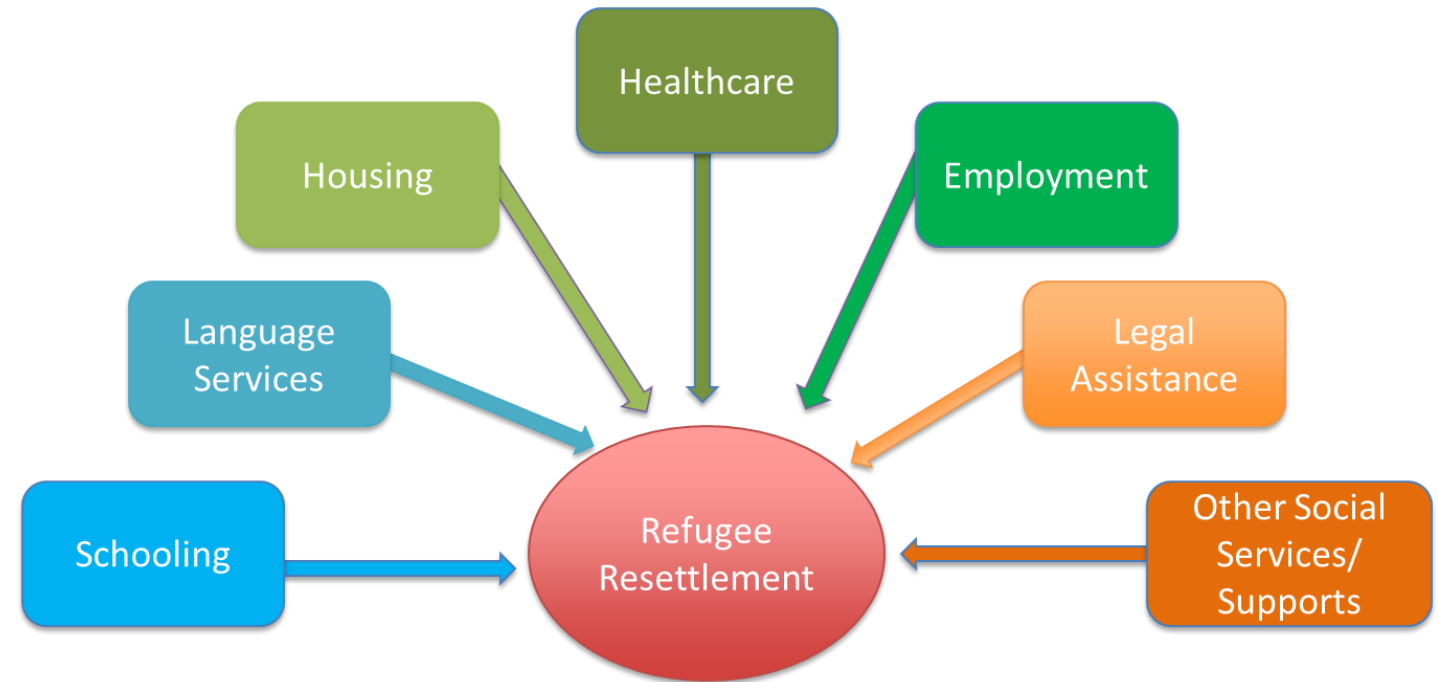


Baktash Manocher

*Advisory Panelist
Newcomer
Representative*

Background: Refugee resettlement

- Medical + Social + Public Health Systems support refugee resettlement.
- Timely and coordinated resettlement services help address the health-related social needs for newcomer health and well-being.



Project objective: Create and assess a novel systems alignment approach to improve the health and well-being of newcomers as they resettle and integrate in Virginia

Federal agency requirement

- Inform receiving communities and system leaders on anticipated arrivals
- Gauge local capacity
- Coordination and communication among key actors

Opportunities

- Improving meaningful two-way communication between conveners and system partners to align efforts
- Capacity building for collective impact
- **Look upstream to create sustainable solutions**



Role of the Advisory Panel



VA Office of New Americans, State Refugee Resettlement Coordinator



VA Department of Health, State Refugee Health Coordinator



Refugee/Newcomer Representative



Church World Service, VA Director



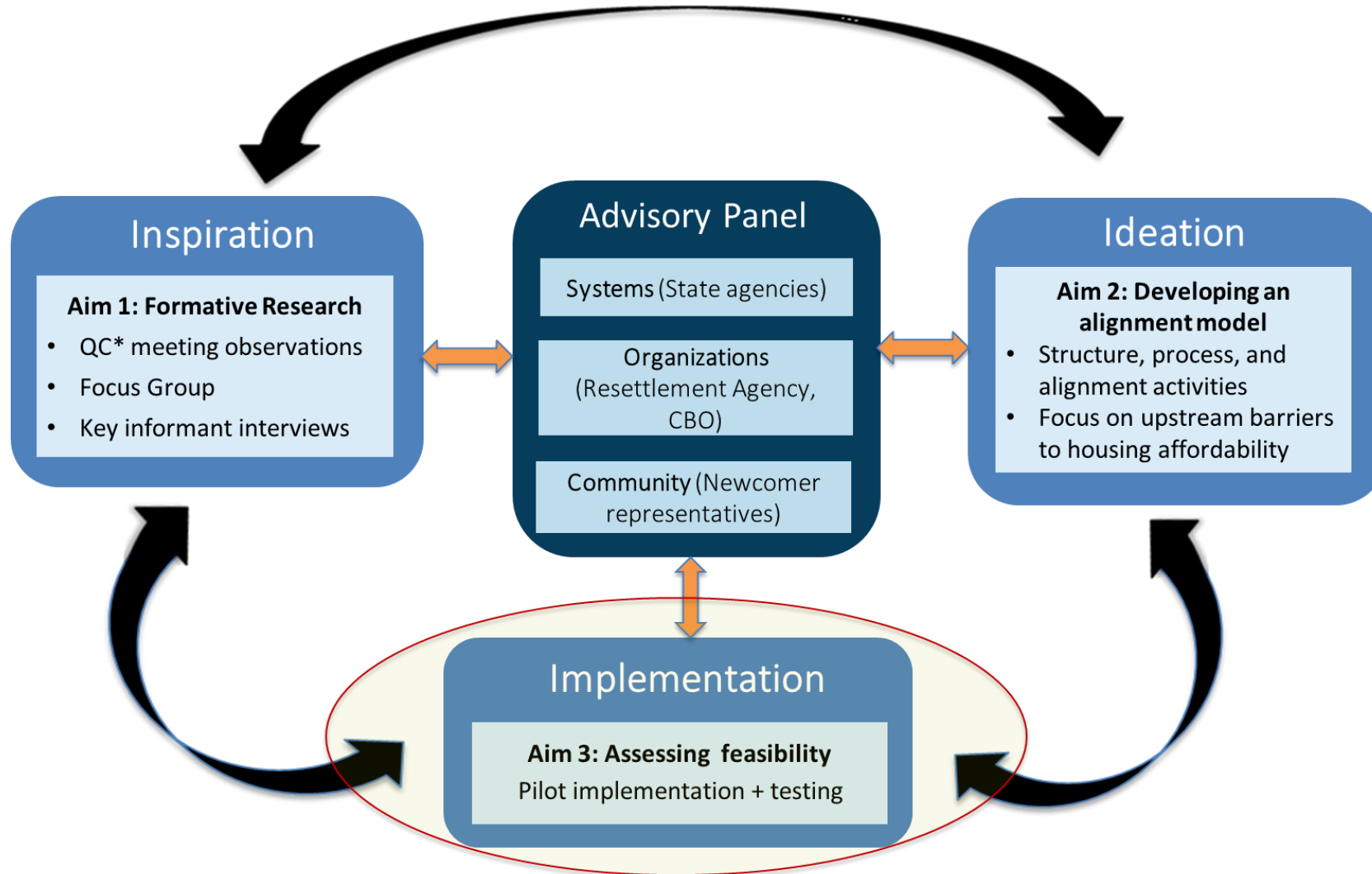
Refugee/Newcomer Representative



FreshStart Refugee Assistance Center, President/Founder

- Represent different systems (government, public health, social services) and different roles (state agency, resettlement agency, community-based organization, community member/refugee)
- Co-develop systems alignment approach
- Application of Human-Centered Design (HCD) principles

Human-Centered Design



Implementation Phase Overview

- **Prototyping:**
 - Upstream Solutions Working Group
- **Pilot-testing**
- **Feasibility assessment**
- **Product development:**
 - Implementation Guide

Upstream Solutions Working Group Pilot: Orientation Information



July 11 – July 18, 2025

Systems Alignment for Effective Resettlement Project

Contact: Charlene Nguyen (cnguyen@air.org), Project Manager

Introduction

Thank you for your willingness to serve as an expert on the Upstream Solutions Working Group, a new systems alignment model developed as part of a research study at the [American Institutes for Research](#). This orientation guide will help you prepare for what to expect and how to participate in the pilot test of the working group.

What is the Upstream Solutions Working Group Pilot?

The Upstream Solutions Working Group is a prototype systems alignment model developed by the AIR team to help newcomer resettlement leaders and practitioners work together more effectively in addressing newcomer resettlement needs, with a focus on upstream drivers of health. **This pilot working group focuses on housing as a fundamental driver that shapes opportunities and outcomes for newcomers.** As part of the Upstream Solutions Working Group Pilot, invited experts will test out a systems-dynamics-group-model-building approach to identifying and addressing upstream drivers of health.

What will you do in the Working Group?

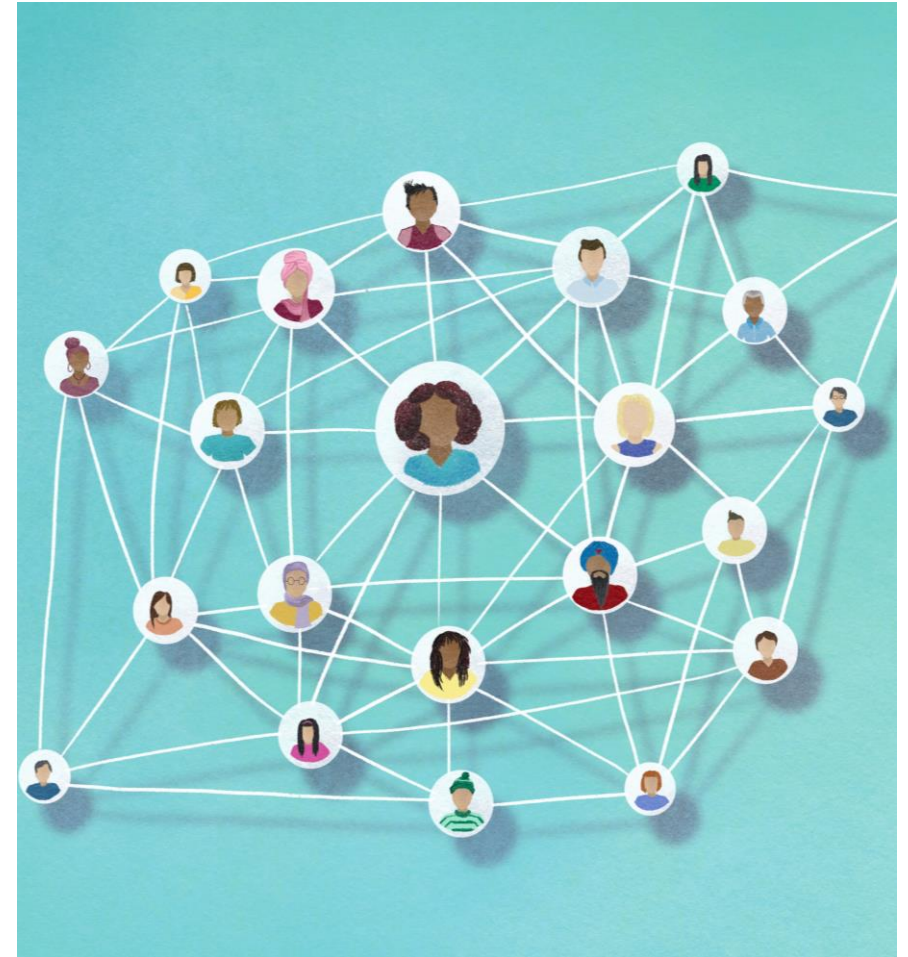
- Participate in 1 orientation meeting and 3 working group sessions (90 minutes each) to implement and test the Upstream Solutions Working Group model
- Collaborate with fellow experts to frame, explore, and map the many systemic influences on housing affordability for newcomer families in Northern Virginia
- Work through systems mapping steps and activities that will help you see connections and intervention opportunities you may not have considered before
- Build stronger working relationships with other organizations addressing housing challenges

Glossary

- **Upstream factors** are the root causes and conditions that influence people's health and wellbeing. Housing, education, employment are examples of upstream factors.
- **Systems dynamics** is about understanding complex systemic issues by viewing social problems as webs of interconnected factors, actors, and interactions, rather than as isolated individual issues.
- **Group model building (GMB)** is a participatory process that uses systems dynamics to create a shared understanding of complex systems among diverse stakeholders – including practitioners guiding strategic planning and collaborative action.

Implementation Phase - Prototyping

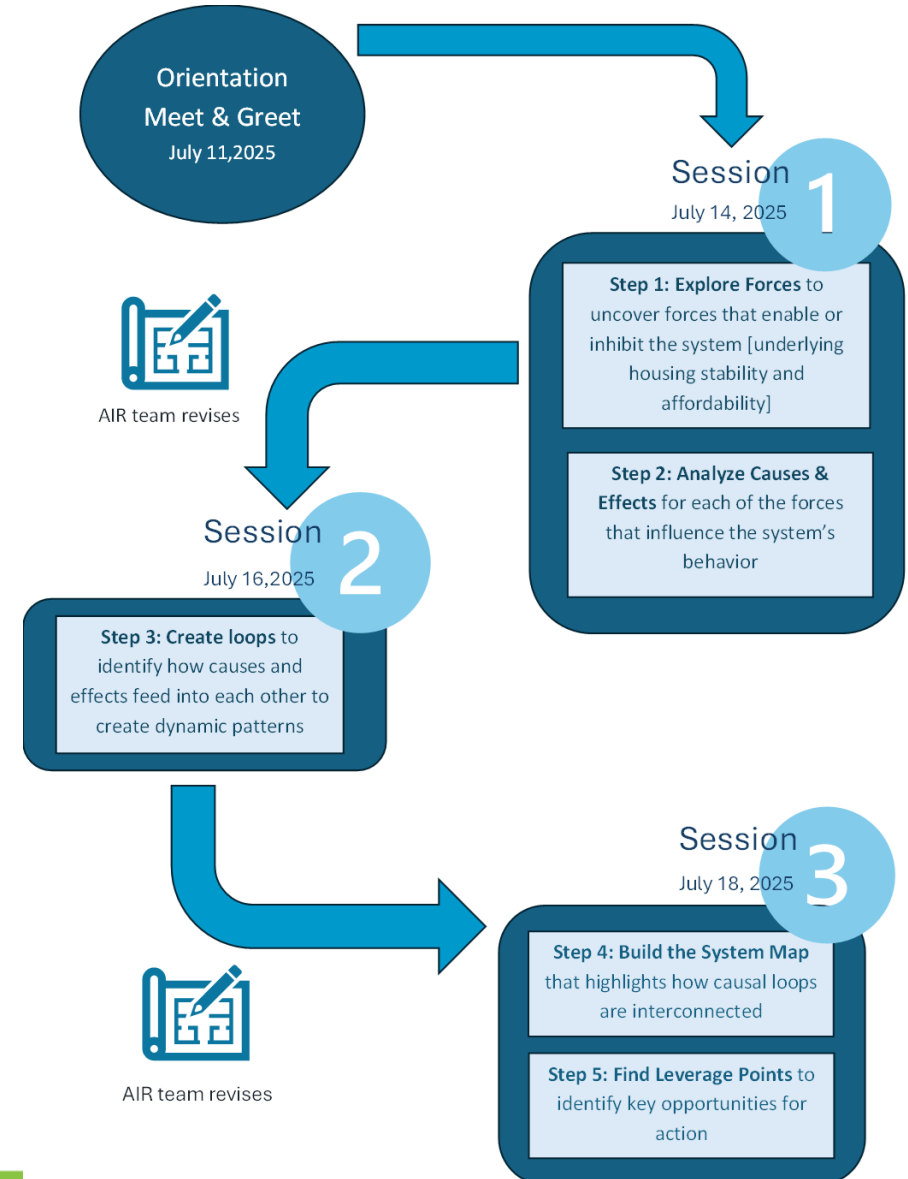
- A prototype **systems alignment model**
- Establishes a framework for collaboration
- Includes a structure, process and set of activities based on systems-dynamics:
 - **Structure:** Core-group + Invited Experts
 - **Process:** Systems dynamics/Group Model Building
 - Steps to develop a systems map
 - **Outcomes:**
 - System map
 - Building shared understanding
 - Identification of upstream barriers



Implementation Phase – Pilot Test

Test the systems alignment model with representatives from 9 organizations + 2 newcomers

- Focus: Housing System
- Participants of the Upstream Solutions Working Group worked through a five-step process to:
 - Produce a basic **systems map** that shows the housing system
 - Learn about newcomer experiences navigating housing in Virginia
 - Connect with other system representatives



Implementation Guide

- Describes a systems alignment approach for quarterly consultations known as the **Upstream Solutions Working Group**.
 - Introduces system mapping in newcomer resettlement
 - Provides steps for developing the working group
 - Outlines a schedule of activities congruent with quarterly consultation procedures.
- State refugee coordinators and resettlement agency leaders and staff can use this guide to implement the alignment approach in their local contexts.
- Included in the Appendix are materials and practical examples to help local resettlement sites get started.



Implementing the Upstream Solutions Working Group

A Guide to Align Systems and Organizations in Newcomer Resettlement

Maliha Ali, Charlene Nguyen, Danielle Agraviador, Trenita Childers
American Institutes for Research* (AIR)

Advisory Panel:

*Seyoum Berhe, Virginia Office of New Americans
Susannah Lepley, Church World Services
Jill Grumbine, Virginia Department of Health*

*Neelab Yousafzal, FreshStart Refugee Assistance Center
Baktash Manocher, Newcomer Representative
Subhanullah Shafaq, Newcomer Representative*

October 2025



SHARED UNDERSTANDING



Greater clarity

PARTICIPATORY PROCESS



An experience of inquiry
and discovery

DIRECTION FOR NEXT STEPS



Joint capacity for action



Key features - Structure

The working group includes a **core team** of staff and members from quarterly consultation meetings, supported by an **extended team** of invited experts.

The **core team** includes:

- State refugee coordinator (Department of Social Services–Office of New Americans)
- State refugee health coordinator (Department of Public Health)
- Resettlement agency directors
- Newcomer representatives
- Refugee-led community-based organization

The **extended team** of invited experts includes:

- County government and local agency representation (social service, public schools, public safety)
- Private and not-for-profit system representatives (social services, real estate, housing, health care)
- Subject matter experts from resettlement agencies (housing, employment, mental health, public safety)

Key Features - Process



Phase 1: Launch



Phase 2: System mapping to identify upstream barriers



Phase 3: Identify opportunities to address upstream barriers



Phase 4: Plan actionable strategy



Phase 5: Engage the system to act, learn and adapt

Launching the Upstream Solutions Working Group



Develop the Core team

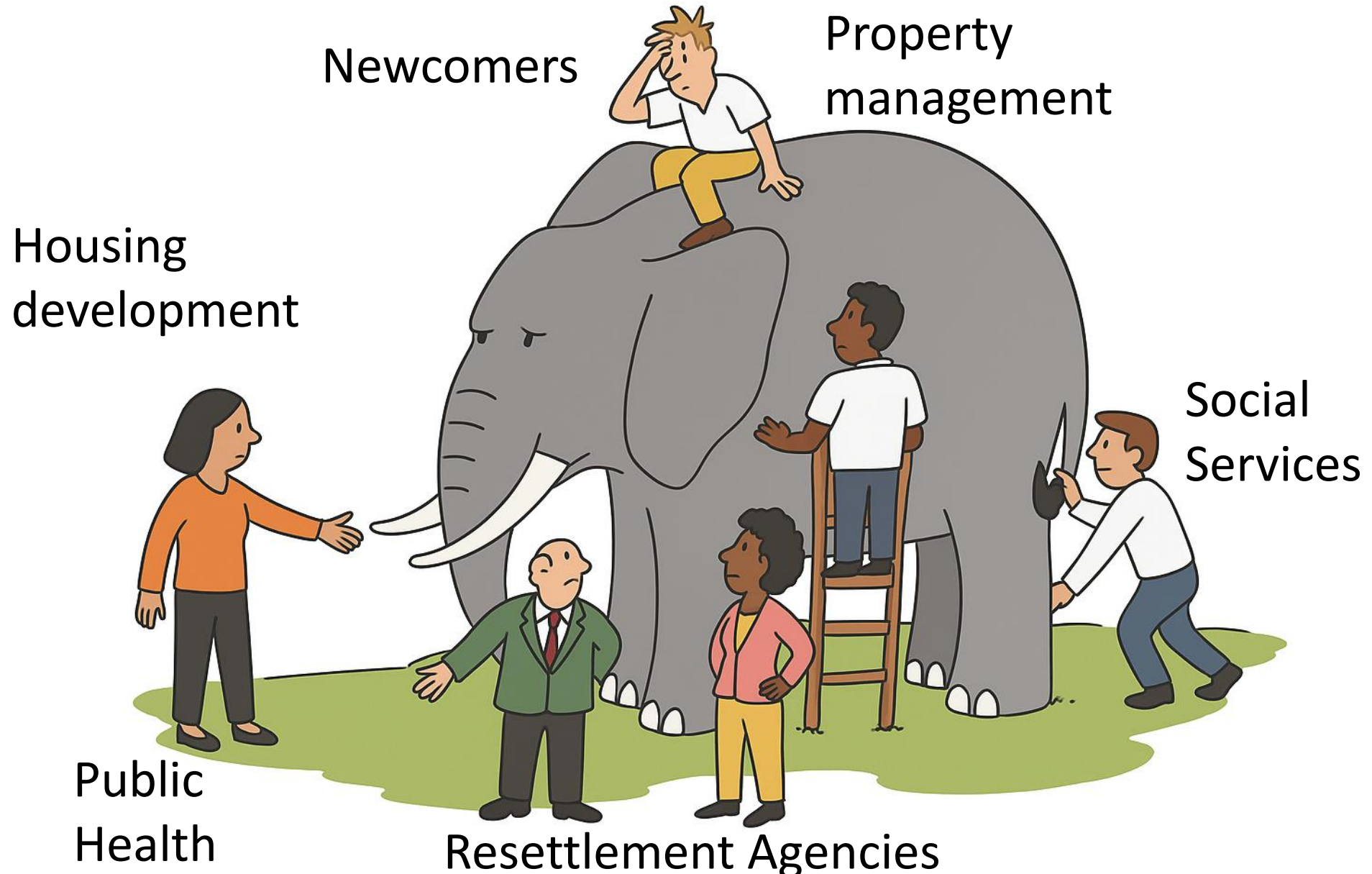
Conduct Outreach and Engage Invited Experts

Determine Schedule and Frequency

Conduct Orientation and Training

Launch and conduct working group sessions

Different Sectors/Systems Looking at the Housing System



DEMAND forces

THEME - Knowledge and communication gaps (inhibitor)

Tenants/newcomers are not empowered to understand or influence the system ✓

Landlords worry that lack of common language skills can be dangerous if tenants do not understand landlord communications

Tenants/newcomers may not be aware of maintenance requirements and practices for units ✓

Tenants/Newcomers may not understand the lease they are signing or the fact that it is a binding contract with penalties for violations ✓

Newcomers do not understand subsidized housing or how to identify opportunities when voucher lists open or 30%AMI units become available

NIMBY - those who are most affluent / influence push back the hardest on new housing supply or newcomer

FINANCIAL forces

THEME - Income and economic stability (enabler)

Tenants/newcomers need to be economically stable to maintain housing, and vice-versa - stable housing promotes economic stability (Right balance between income and expenses)

Financial assistance for buying or rental support, emergency rental supports

Monthly income qualification ratios of 2.5 or 3 times rent is not easy to accomplish.

The cost of housing continues to increase and outpace the increase in income

Economic empowerment opportunities (especially for women at home) build self respect and self reliance as well as confidence

Rent is increased exponentially after the resettlement agencies are no longer supporting. 😞

operational costs can make it challenging to keep housing costs affordable, especially for "naturally occurring affordable housing" (NOAH)

SUPPLY forces

THEME - Complicated leasing requirements (inhibitor)

Lack of transparency

Policies and requirements are communicated using inaccessible language

New comers may be more inclined to live in a multigenerational housing (limited due to zoning)

Property managers worry about violating Fair Housing Laws when they allow newcomers to bypass credit and background checks when approving leases

Documentation requirements for newcomers are a paradox

Lack of different types of housing with restrictive zoning, in Arlington (EHO example), in FFX we see majority of single family housing

Need for larger units for larger families makes things extra challenging.

Misalignment of new supply of housing unit size and the household sizes (multi-generational housing).

Housing leasing restrictions

Not enough affordable housing units in NoVa in general, which makes it difficult for new comers to put their roots down

REGULATORY forces

THEME - Affordable housing is not always safe (inhibitor)

Safety procedures and maintenance requirements of rental unit not always enforced (ex. infestations, proximity to landfills)

Existing low income communities may oppose/resent newcomers based on biases and create unsafe environments (especially for children)

land use policies/zoning policies make it challenging to increase the amount of housing, esp. affordable housing quickly very difficult

Dillon Rule state limits local jurisdictions ability to provide housing solutions ✓✓

Newcomers do not have required documentation to be qualified for housing opportunities. There is no regulatory support for fast tracking Newcomer's document processing. For instance: When you enter USA, it almost takes 3 weeks to work to get SSN. Therefore, you cannot get a bank account, job (for pay slips), credit score or anything.

Localities are often limited by federal and state constraints (i.e. documentation status, household size, income levels) that govern funding sources

This is purple for a reason :) See my comment on "themes" Sorry!

navigating different housing systems can be overwhelming with the amount of information and different program requirements for each locality

Localities have typical government constraints - budgets, staff size, bureaucratic hassles - all of those are "regulatory forces" as they are based on the regulatory body (i.e. government)

POWER forces

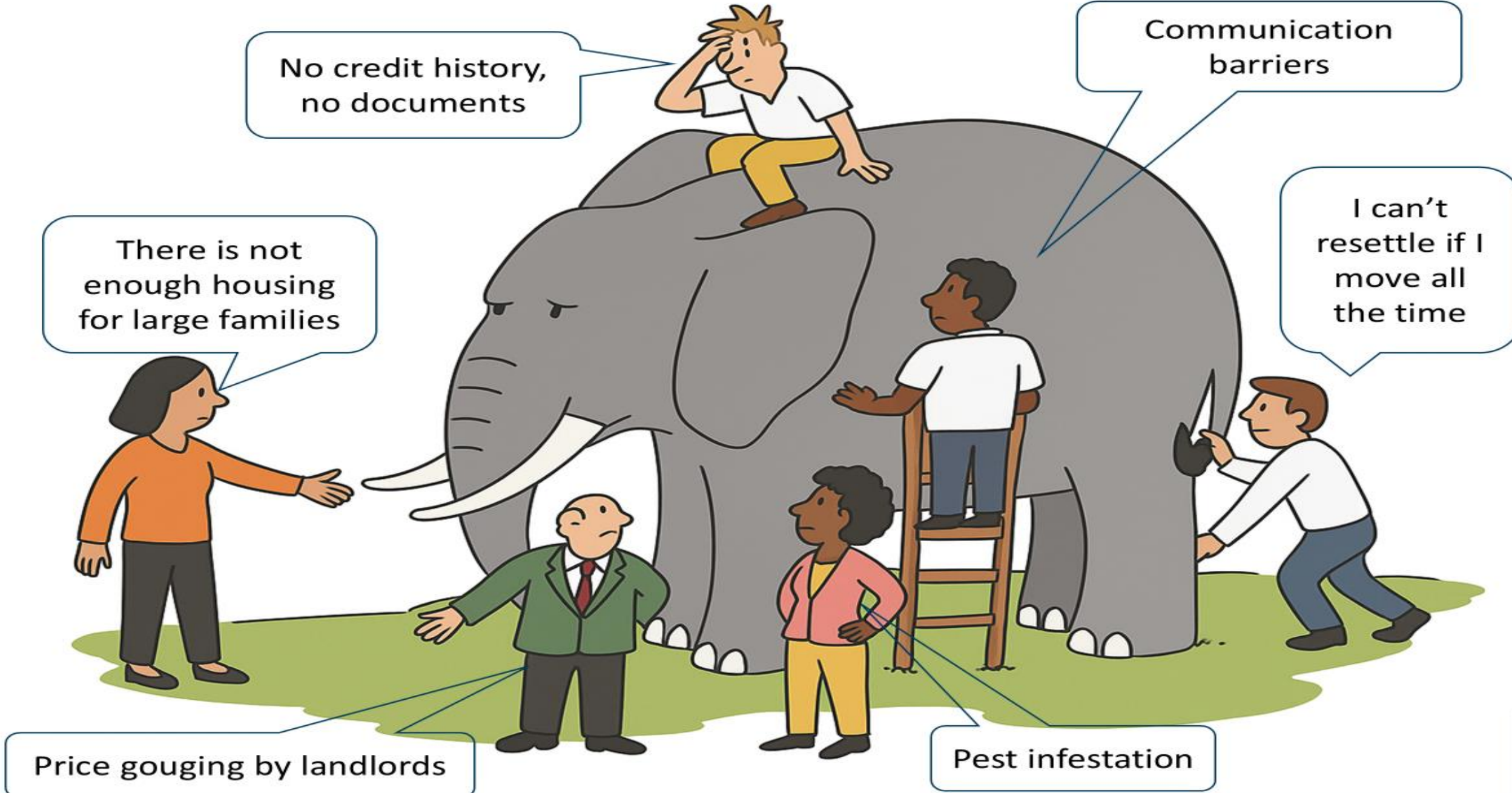
Lack of autonomy

I think the current political environment puts newcomers at risk for their employment and housing--the indiscriminate and random changes to status

I feel like this theme isn't sufficient for "regulatory" it implies there are safety/code enforcement concerns...but that is not the only "regulatory force" I will include other "regulatory force" themes in dark pink below

Refugees are placed into housing by resettlement agencies - at the mercy of property owners,

A fuller and clearer picture of the system = shared understanding





Theme: Property owners hesitant to lease to Newcomer families

Upstream (Causes - Why does it happen?)

Inherent biases/racism

language barriers

Family size

Documentation requirements

Perceived cultural practices

Lack of understanding about what to expect from newcomers

Work history

Lack of pay stubs/pay slips

Income

Lack of credit history

Lack of references

Downstream (Effects - What does it effect?)

Property owners could find consequences related to fair housing

Farther, longer commutes

Physical and mental health of newcomer families

Newcomer families are unhoused

Perpetuate community segregation

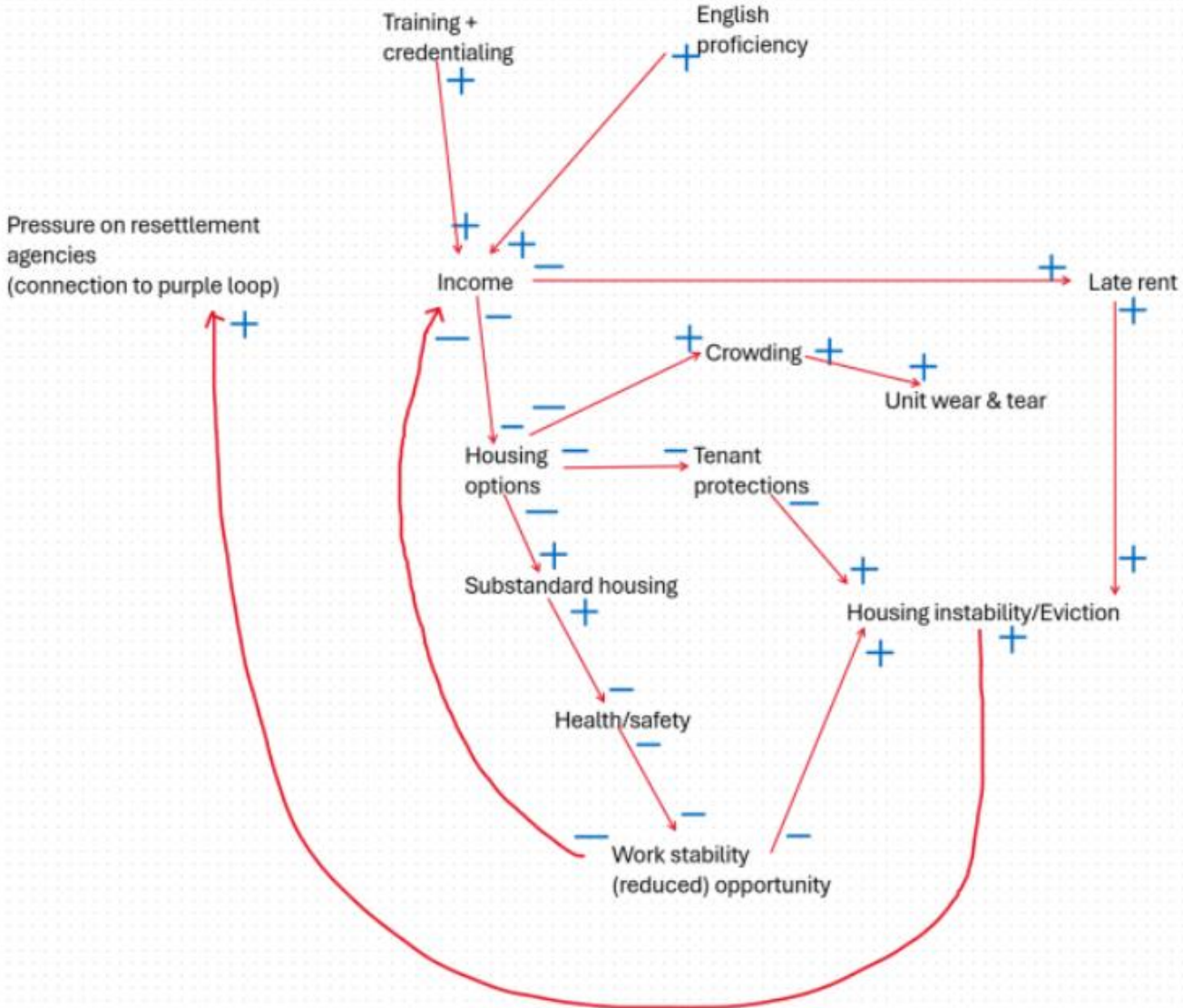
Access to healthcare

Mistrust from both tenant and newcomer/relationship not on even footing

Access to schooling

Access to foods (food deserts)

HOUSING AND POVERTY TRAP LOOP



Brainstorm solutions to leverage existing assets (policies or programs) or create new ones.

“Better information sharing and collaboration between RAs could help influence the engagement with property management companies which could help drive positive change in terms of housing conditions and price.”

“A stronger and deeper newcomer orientation is needed, with a focus on investing in training so refugees can earn a living wage and be included in the ultimate decision-making processes.”

“As a community-based organization, we can serve as advocates for the tenants when needed while allowing the Resettlement Agencies to maintain effective working relationships with the Property Management companies. We can also make sure overdue bills are paid so property management don't sour towards refugees.”

DOs

- Maintain clear expectations.
- Foster participation.
- Share interim products back with participants.
- Evaluate participant experiences.
- Adjust the pace and timeline as needed.

DON'Ts

- Overload participants.
- Organize breakouts without balancing voices.
- Skip orientation.
- Neglect feedback and follow up
- Make this “another meeting”

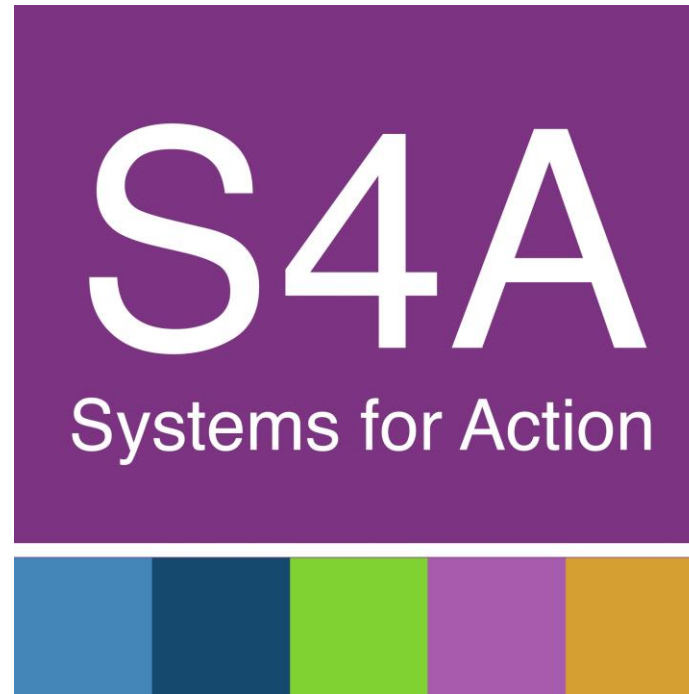
Using the evidence to achieve systems alignment

- A novel alignment approach with implementation guidance
- Buy-in and commitment to apply the co-developed alignment approach
- Strengthening the voice and authority of refugee representatives
- **Shifting process and sharing power to identify and address structural barriers to refugee resettlement**



Photo from fauxels from Pexels. <https://www.pexels.com/photo/colleagues-shaking-each-other-s-hands-3184291/>

Questions?



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