New Americans with Developmental Disabilities

NEW YORK STATE | Council on Developmental Disabilities

Goal of Issue Brief

The goal of this issue brief is to share information about new Americans and explain the barriers that make it challenging for new Americans to access the developmental disability (DD) services they need. New Americans with disabilities have a right to access services. People who are interested in increasing access to disability services for new Americans are the audience for this issue brief.

Agency Missions and Connections to New Americans with DD

This issue brief is a collaborative effort of the New York State (NYS) Council on Developmental Disabilities (CDD) and the NYS Office for New Americans (ONA). The mission of the CDD is to enhance the lives of New Yorkers with DD and their families through programs that promote self-advocacy, participation, and inclusion in all facets of community life. ONA and CDD partnered on an initiative called the ONA Ramirez June Initiative to better reach and serve new Americans with DD. This issue brief is a result of research and lessons learned from this collaboration.

The ONA Ramirez June Initiative

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The mission of ONA is to welcome and assist all new Americans in accessing and navigating a variety of free services that support their inclusion in the diverse cultural fabric of NYS. NYS ONA's services are provided by community-based organizations across the state that help people to learn English, become a U.S. citizen, access mental health support, find a job, and live their American Dream. ONA helps all new Americans regardless of their immigration status or what language they speak.

New American families shared with the CDD and ONA about the barriers they faced accessing disability services because of issues such as language, cultural stigma, or limited access to disability information. In response to these barriers, the CDD worked with ONA to develop a project called the ONA Ramirez June Initiative.

Groundbreaking Initiative to Assist New Americans with DD

The ONA Ramirez June Initiative is a groundbreaking program that is a first of its kind in the nation. The Ramirez June Initiative helps increase access to disability services for new Americans, through outreach, partnership, and training. As a result of the first five years of the CDD and ONA's collaboration, the Ramirez June Initiative has engaged over 4,200 people through workshops and trainings.

New Americans in New York State

People leave their home country and come to the United States (U.S.) for many reasons. Some people come to the U.S. to search for opportunities to achieve their own American Dream. Some people flee violence in their home country and seek safety in the U.S. This issue brief refers to people who were born outside of the U.S. and moved to the U.S. to live as new Americans.

Many new Americans, including new Americans with DD, live in NYS. In fact, NYS is home to more than **four million new Americans.[1]** That means that about one out of every four New Yorkers is a new American. Anyone who resides in NYS is considered a New Yorker. It is illegal in New York State to discriminate against someone on their national origin and immigration status.

Who are New Americans?

A "new American" is a person born outside the U.S. who moves to the U.S.

Understanding Immigration Status

New Americans go through an immigration process to access an immigration status in the U.S. An immigration status determines whether someone can enter the U.S. and how long they can remain in the U.S. There are different types of immigration statuses a new American can have. Some new Americans are lawful permanent residents which is also referred to as having a "green card."

Background

Many new American families have mixed immigration statuses. A mixed status family has one or more family members with different immigration statuses. For example, members of the same family could be undocumented, have a green card, or be a U.S. citizen.

Some new Americans are able to go through an immigration process and become a U.S. citizen. However, not all new Americans want to or can become a U.S. citizen. Gaining an immigration status can be a lengthy and complicated process.

All new Americans in need, can be connected with a free legal screening from an immigration attorney to see if they are eligible for an immigration status or public benefits. A person's immigration status may affect their authorization to work in the U.S. and their eligibility to access public benefits like Medicaid and Supplemental Security Income (SSI), which are vital benefits for individuals with DD.

Language Access Needs of New Americans

The diversity of NYS is represented in the many different languages of its residents. Over 800 different languages are spoken in New York State.**[2]** Two and a half (2.5) million people, or one in ten New Yorkers, say they have limited English proficiency (LEP). LEP means that someone has difficulty reading, writing, and/or understanding English. New Americans who speak other languages or are LEP may need assistance accessing services in their preferred language. This could include the need for translated documents, resource materials in other languages, telephonic interpretation or in-person interpretation services.

Did you know?

- **1 in 10** New Yorkers self-report having limited English proficiency (LEP)
- **Spanish and Chinese** are the top 2 languages new Americans speak in NYS
- **800+** different languages are spoken in NYS

Language Access Law

In 2022, NYS Governor Kathy Hochul signed a Language Access law requiring executive state agencies that provide direct services to the public to translate their “vital documents” into the top 12 languages most commonly spoken by New Yorkers with LEP.**[3]** According to the Office of Civil Rights, vital documents are generally documents that affect access to, retention in, or termination from state services, programs, or benefits. Vital documents can include applications, consent forms, complaint forms, intake forms, and letters notifying someone of their approval or denial of services, among other important documents.

NYS also requires state agencies covered by the Language Access Law to provide interpreters for people with LEP when they are trying to access the services or benefits the state agency provides. NYS employees are not allowed to refuse services to someone because they speak a language other than English. The NYS Language Access Law helps anyone who needs support communicating in a language other than English, including new Americans, to connect with state agency services or benefits.

Conclusion

ONA and the CDD worked together to create the groundbreaking ONA Ramirez June Initiative. The Initiative has helped new Americans access disability information and has built partnerships across the service system. However, more support and collaboration are needed for new Americans to access the disability services they urgently need. NYS celebrates diversity as one of its greatest strengths. When people work together and support each other, it helps all New Yorkers to thrive.

Click here to watch a video on the impacts of the CDD and ONA's Ramirez June Initiative.

Sources Cited

[1] Office for New Americans, (n.d.) ONA Publications and Data. https://dos.ny.gov/ona-publications-and-data

[2] Office of General Services (n.d.) New York State Language Access Law. Available at: https://ogs.ny.gov/new-york-state-language-access-law

[3] Office of Human Rights, (n.d.) U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, FAQ "707- What is a vital document?"

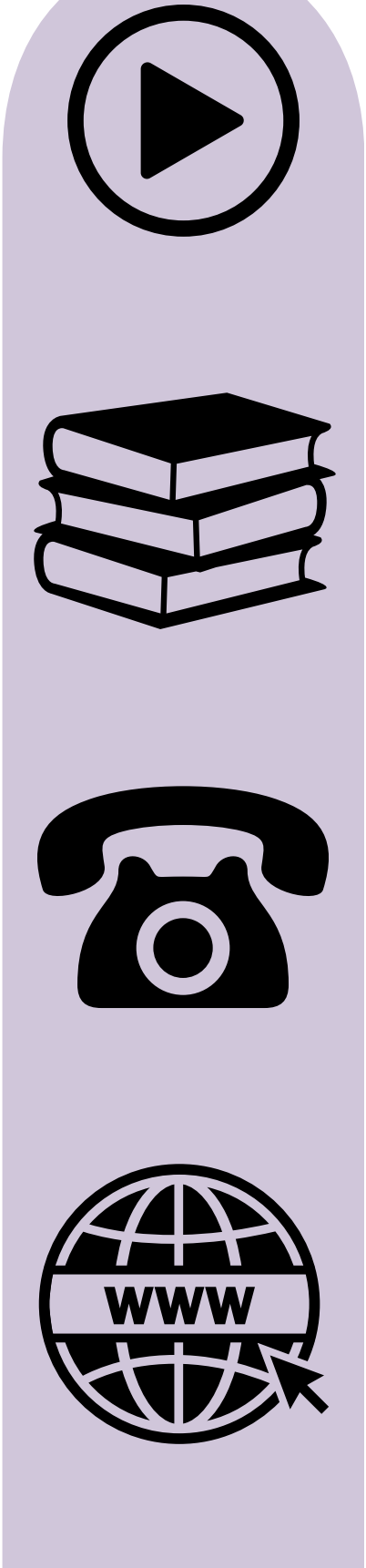
Resources

- **New Americans Hotline: 1-800-566-7636**
  Connect with ONA programs near you, assistance is available in 200+ languages. All calls are free and confidential.

- **ONA Ramirez June Initiative:** Connecting new Americans with developmental disabilities to vital resources, information, and services. Visit the website.

- **Resource Guide:** Services for New Americans with Developmental (DD) in New York State: View the Resource Guide.

- **OPWDD Front Door Videos:** Step-by-step informational videos on how to become eligible for OPWDD supports and services. Available in English, Spanish, and Chinese. View the videos.

- **NYS Office of Language Access (OLA):** the office overseeing New York State's language access services. Visit OLA website.

- **LEP.GOV:** federal website with guidance and resources for the implementation of language access. Website includes data and mapping tools, training videos, and example Language Access Plans, among other resources. Visit the Website.