



# HOW TO RUN FOR OFFICE

## An Introductory Toolkit

Written & Published by Voice for Refuge Action Fund

# *Hello and* **WELCOME**

## **Welcome, we're glad you're here!**

This toolkit is intended to be a quick start guide to running for office. After discussions with refugee leaders around the country, we began to build a list of resources that many wished they had when making the decision to run for office. Throughout this toolkit, we tell their stories and give you links to the resources that they ultimately found or created during their campaigns or election.

Running for office is a multifaceted project that requires resources, information, and a personal drive to represent your community. Being elected to office is a similar, but yet entirely different undertaking. As we spoke with other former refugees who ran for office and won, who ran for office and lost, and who ran for office again and again until they won, we took from their stories some key points about what they learned and we've distilled that information here for you.

We hope this toolkit can be a starting point as you begin to explore the possibility of running for office in your local community. Whether you want to understand what running for office looks like or you've already entered a race, this guide provides resources to help you at any point in the process.

This guide is also tailored to and made for former refugees and speaks specifically to important information you need to know



## 02

### **WHY YOU SHOULD RUN**



## 03

### **WHAT OFFICES YOU CAN RUN FOR**



## 04

### **FILING TO RUN FOR OFFICE**



## 05

### **FUNDRAISING & PARTNERING WITH ORGANIZATIONS THAT CARE**



## 07

### **REACHING YOUR COMMUNITY AND TELLING YOUR STORY**

about how and when you can run for office and specific opportunities offered to you by other former refugees who wish to see you succeed.

One last thing, this guide was last updated November 2021. It is possible some of this information has now expired or is no longer available. Please reach out to us at Voice for Refuge via email [info@voiceforrefuge.org](mailto:info@voiceforrefuge.org) if there is a specific link or resource that you were hoping to access but no longer can. We may be able to find an updated link or an old resource link.

Thank you and best of luck,

**The Team at Voice for Refuge Action Fund**

# Why YOU SHOULD RUN FOR OFFICE

We need more people from underrepresented communities, especially immigrants and refugees, running for office to ensure that we are not only heard during a campaign, but present in the halls of power.

In Oregon Representative Kayse Jama, a former refugee from Somalia championed legislation to launch an Office of Immigrant and Refugee Advancement in 2021.

In Massachusetts, Representative Tram Nguyen, a refugee from Vietnam, became the first Vietnamese-American woman to hold elected office in the state and has joined other representatives to pass legislation to expand protections of women facing domestic abuse and assault. And at a national level, Congresswoman Ilhan Omar has been a fighter on issues that impact not only refugees, but immigrants, women and people of color.

There are over 500,000 elected positions in the United States. Every office from President, Senator, and Congressperson to local Family Court Judges, School Board, and town Mayor are elected roles. When we run for office, we choose to ensure that our experiences are heard and represented in the decisions being made. It is a big undertaking, but an important way to inspire change and challenge the status quo of exclusion.

Is my family willing to support me? How do I talk to voters about issues that matter? Where do I find volunteers? How do I know who to talk to? What do I do if I win? While there are many questions surrounding the decision, the first question to ask and answer is "Do I want to represent my community?"

**"If you see legislators or elected officials who don't share your values, you have the power to vote them out, or you have the power to run against them, like I did when I ran for office my first time."**

**- Representative Tram Nguyen**

*You Can Do it!*

*Start at the beginning*

## WHAT OFFICES CAN YOU RUN FOR?

Depending on your interests, skills, and passions, you can run for any local, city, county, or state office. School boards, city councils, assessors, judges, sheriffs, and a myriad of other offices are all elected positions.

As a refugee you can run for local & state office as soon as you receive U.S. citizenship, which you are eligible for after 5 years of living in the United States with Refugee Status. Some states have additional residency requirements that you might have to meet, for example, you may be required to be a resident of that state for 2 years before you can run for office. Also, in order to run for congress you must have been a U.S. citizen for at least 7 years. Be sure to check your state and local legal requirements to run for office before filing.



**"One of my core principles is that people who are impacted by issues must take a leadership role in solving those issues. Therefore, we need to continue campaigning and working to elect more immigrants and refugees."**

**- Representative Kayse Jama**

*Where do you want to have an impact?*

# *How to* **FILE TO RUN**



1

## **Be a U.S. citizen and register to vote**

As mentioned, you are eligible for U.S. Citizenship after 5 years of living in the U.S. with refugee status. Once a citizen, you can register to vote and fully participate in U.S. elections. Make sure you and your eligible friends and family are registered to vote here:

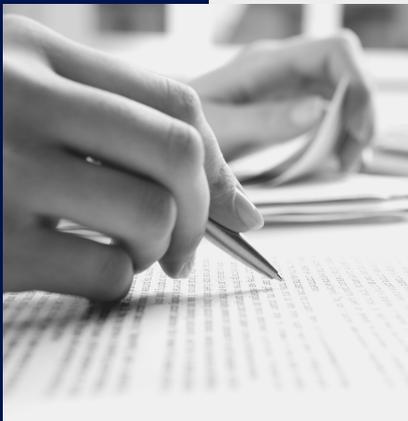
**REGISTER TO VOTE**



2

## **Meet state and local requirements**

Congresspeople must first be citizens for at least 7 years. Candidates for President and Vice President must have been born in the United States as citizens. While local offices have fewer requirements, sometimes they do have a requirement to live in the district for 6 months, 2 years, or more. Be sure to ask questions and confirm that you are eligible before filing to run. Talking to current elected officials is a great place to start.



3

## **File to run with the Secretary of State**

The next step is legally submitting your name and paperwork to run for office in your state. This tells your secretary of state to put your name on the ballot and is your commitment to run for office observing state laws. Find your State's SOS site to file to run here:

**FILE IN MY STATE**

*Build a team!*

# FUNDRAISE & PARTNER WITH ORGANIZATIONS THAT CARE

Campaign fliers, coffee and tea for volunteers, voter software, and other resources that will help you win can be expensive. While you can use your own money for your campaign, fundraising will lighten the load and give excited voters a way to contribute to your success.

While directly asking a person or organization for money may seem intimidating, fundraising can take on many different forms – including through tweets, texts, emails, in-person meetings, and large community events.

The earliest stages of fundraising often involve pooling money from your own pockets or asking for donations from your closest family and friends in order to get your campaign off the ground. However, knowing your donors and potential donors outside of your immediate community is critical.

Good donor research will help you determine where to focus your outreach. Using publicly available FEC fundraising data showing who in

has donated to campaigns in your district can be a great way to start. But reaching out blind won't build the types of relationships you need to find excited supporters. Be sure to spend time looking at a donor's giving history to know how much to ask for. If you share mutual friends with a donor, ask those friends to introduce you when at an event together or by setting up a coffee. Of course you won't always know something about the person you're calling. In these cases, introduce yourself well, ask questions of the person, and ask them if you can follow up with an email, which you can use to make a follow up ask.

Ultimately, the key to a strong fundraising strategy begins with setting and sticking to a campaign goal and creating a strict budget. Find a great example here:

[EXAMPLE FUNDRAISING PLAN](#)

**Need a more in depth training? Try this [workshop from NDTC](#)**

# *Know your partners* **TYPES OF POLITICAL ORGANIZATIONS**

## **State Parties**

State parties play a fundamental role in campaigns and politics. They are directly involved in the day-to-day activities of local and state politics- training volunteers, collecting donations, and registering voters. During election season, state parties often recruit candidates to run, manage campaigns, plan communication strategies, and mobilize voters. Operating within the local context every election cycle allows state parties to build deep relationships with different communities and individuals with the ability to support your campaign.

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## **Political Action Committees**

Political Action Committees are special organizations formed for the purpose of raising and spending money to elect and defeat candidates. Most PACs represent business, labor or ideological interests. PACs are able to give large sums of money to candidates they support.

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## **Non-Profits**

Many, but not all, nonprofit organizations are limited in their ability to directly influence political activities and political candidates. 501(c)3 non-profits are unable to endorse or contribute to candidates. 501(c)4 non-profits are able to endorse and contribute to candidates, but are limited in the amount of time it can spend supporting political activity. These organizations are also able to contribute through "Independent Expenditures" (IEs), but these must be done without coordination with the candidate. Non-Profits can be great partners in a campaign and offer great opportunities to meet voters and volunteers who care about the issues you care about.

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## **Unions**

Unions play an important role in US politics, engaging with the democratic process through lobbying, campaign funding, and the mobilization of other resources to push for the interests of the working class. The internal and external role of unions within the social landscape of the U.S. informs the way in which it engages in local and national politics — as a democratic means of representing the collective voice of a wide cross section of American communities in addition to the facilitation of alliances with unorganized workers around relevant socio-economic and political issues.

# *Using Social Media* **REACHING YOUR COMMUNITY & TELLING YOUR STORY**

Find the platforms that work for you.

## **Facebook**

Facebook can be a great platform to connect with voters and volunteers when running a campaign. It is best to set up a specific campaign page and invite friends and family to like the page. Facebook is a useful platform to share videos, fundraising asks, and photos from the campaign trail.

While it tends to have less engagement than other platforms, it does have the benefit of offering political advertising and an easy-to-use advertising platform

## **Twitter**

Twitter is a popular platform for political candidates to use in the course of their run for office. Twitter is unique in that it doesn't allow you to edit your Tweets once published. Through Twitter you can share short ideas and updates, retweet things said by others, and reach your audience multiple times a day. Unlike Facebook & Instagram, Twitter does not allow political ads.

## **Tik Tok**

Tik Tok is a video based platform with about 80 million monthly users, with 60% between the ages of 16-24. In the run-up to the 2020 election cycle, the Ossoff campaign and the "Tok the Vote" movement used Tik Tok to turn out the youth vote in Georgia. Tik Tok, like Twitter, is a fast-paced app with a focus on trends and clever video content.

## **Instagram**

Instagram is great for image-driven campaigns and for reaching a younger electorate demographic group. 25 to 34-year-olds represent the largest audience on Instagram, followed closely by the 18 to 24 age group of individuals. Users are more likely to access the social network multiple times a day, so engagement on Instagram is likely to be higher than other platforms. Engage with voters in your stories, through IGTV videos, and regular photo posts.

## **LinkedIn**

LinkedIn, a business social network, draws primarily older, higher-educated citizens who are more likely to show up to the voting booth. LinkedIn is a good platform to share articles, op-eds, and achievements with your network, but it can be challenging to build an audience. If you use LinkedIn regularly already, you can certainly leverage it for your campaign.

## **WhatsApp**

In the last number of years, WhatsApp has become increasingly used by political campaigns as a direct link between politicians and their electorate. WhatsApp is used widely as a messaging and social media platform, with the ability to create large groups, share stories, and forward photos to new individuals and groups.

**Want more information about planning a communications strategy? See our [Communications Toolkit](#)**

*Just be you!*

*Share your story*

# STORIES MATTER

Leverage websites, email campaigns, fliers, and letters to reach your community, but ultimately, be you. Share your story, because your story matters and urges people to recognize that what you're saying matters.

Additionally, tell other people's stories (with permission). When you meet people with direct experiences facing the hardships you want to address, ask questions and learn their story, because their story matters too.



**"As a former refugee, I'm proud to serve in the New Hampshire State House and share refugee voices and experiences with others."**

**- Representative Safiya Wazir**

[OUR COMMUNICATIONS TOOLKIT](#)

[READ STORIES OF SUCCESS](#)

[LEARN HOW TO TELL YOUR STORY](#)

*Connect stories to the issues you care about.*

**Have your run for office before? Take our 15-minute survey about what worked and what you learned!**

Voice for Refuge Action Fund Voice for Refuge Action Fund is a first-of-its kind organization created to advance pro-refugee policies at the national, state, and local level, to hold elected leaders accountable and to support the election of pro-refugee candidates at all levels of government.

We're here to help you feel equipped and ready to run! Reach out for any addition resources or questions about getting started. And find us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#) to stay up to date on our events and trainings.

[CONTACT US](#)

*You can run for office. we know it!*

