Centro de los Trabajadores Colorado

Josef Korbel School of International Studies
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HERE TO STAY: CENTRO DE LOS TRABAJADORES COLORADO'S 'BIENVENIDOS A DENVER' PROGRAM

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Background

Since late 2022, Denver has become a leader and top reception site among cities hosting newly arrived immigrants, or "newcomers." As of late spring of 2024, the City of Denver had reportedly served over 42,000 newcomers over this period, mostly from Venezuela, but also from Colombia, Peru, Mexico, and elsewhere in Latin America and beyond (Bedayn, Associated Press, April 10, 2024; City of Denver Newcomer Sheltering and Support Dataset). Some sources contend that Denver received more newcomers per capita than any other major U.S. city between late 2022 and early 2024 (Jordan, New York Times, Feb, 12, 2024), especially due to the fact that it can be reached by direct bus line from El Paso, Texas. Despite a failure of the federal government to provide cities and states with sufficient levels of requested assistance, Denver has remained committed to improving its newcomer reception, departing from other cities' approaches by developing an ambitious new program, the Denver Asylum Seeker Program and corresponding Newcomers Playbook.

Announced in April of 2024, this six-month program provides new arrivals with housing, food, and rental assistance support, free assistance with asylum applications, and job training in coordination with nonprofit assistance (Mathurin, Denverite, April 10, 2024). The goal is for the six months of job training to coincide with the period in which asylum seekers are awaiting work authorization after submitting asylum applications. After receiving work authorization, asylum seekers will then be prepared to enter the workforce, which is especially important as many cities continue to contend with post-pandemic labor shortages (Ferguson and Hoover, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, June 24, 2024).

Newcomer Profile

In early February of 2024, Nestor and Mari, [1] a couple from Venezuela, walked into Denver's worker center, Centro de los Trabajadores Colorado (Centro), for an intake with Centro's *Bienvenidos a Denver* program. The program assesses the needs of new migrant arrivals to offer resource navigation. Nestor and Mari were accompanied by Griselda, another recent arrival from Venezuela with whom they shared housing. Nestor, Mari, and their three children had arrived in the United States in early October 2023. Two of their children were now enrolled in school. Before starting their journey, they had planned to go to New York where their cousin lives, but in the end "he backed out." So, the family decided to go to Colorado instead. However, the initial address the family gave to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) for their asylum case was in New York, so they were apprehensive about their pending immigration case. They tried to change their address on the USCIS website, but the change had not yet been processed by the time they arrived at Centro. Yet their first court appearance was scheduled for only two months away. They were not certain if they had changed their address correctly. Yet, they were wary to present themselves to USCIS in Colorado out of fear of being detained. Mari was afraid of leaving her three children alone, "without a mother," she said. The couple had every reason to be afraid. Griselda, the woman they lived with, said, with evident pain in her voice, that her daughter "had just been detained for this very reason."

Nestor and Mari now planned to stay in Colorado for the long term but knew it was important to have a steady job. Their only means of transportation was "by foot," making it hard to get to appointments, find work, and secure other resources. They now lived in a house but had spent time living on the street after their 37-day stay at the Radisson hotel shelter expired. Unlike many newcomers, they had the generous support of someone they called their "Godmother," who helped enroll their children in school, saying "She is Mexican and is a God's angel." At a church, they also received assistance and a business card for someone who would advise them before going to court, but they did not recall the name of the church. They had not gone to other organizations, just Vive Wellness, "which paid half of the rent for December and the deposit." They had also spoken with a social worker at a food bank who had connected them to Centro and given them a card for assistance with filing taxes.

Mari and Nestor are just two of the more than 42,000 newcomers who have arrived in Denver since late 2022.

[1]To humanize newcomers (whose experiences often become lumped together) and protect confidentiality, we assign pseudonyms for all newcomers. We also edit third-hand references and quotations in the intake notes of newcomers' experiences (e.g. they) to the first person in italics for improved readability without losing the sentiment of what newcomers shared.

In Colorado, labor shortages are particularly prevalent in sectors in which new arrivals often seek employment—childcare, hospitality, construction, and childcare (Silva, NBC News, June 18, 2024). Despite this labor demand, newcomers are largely unable to receive work authorization and thus to contribute to the labor market while improving their financial, housing, and food security. Venezuelans arriving after July 31, 2023, for example, were no longer eligible for temporary protected status (TPS), which had previously provided access to work authorization. Meanwhile, the CBP One parole program has been exceedingly difficult for precarious migrants in transit to access (see explanation here). Day labor and temporary, informal work are thus some of newcomers' only options, which are characterized by low pay and a lack of job security, and which are prone to a host of labor violations such as wage theft (Galemba 2023). To address city, state, and federal gaps, robust mutual aid networks in Colorado have also supported newcomers with a range of services from food and clothing to housing, employment, advocacy, and resource navigation (see website here).

City officials recognize that the Denver Asylum Seeker Program is only a first step in preparing Denver to receive and integrate newcomers. The program has a limited service capacity, for example, with a current ceiling of approximately 1,000 persons, compared to the January 2024 peak of 5,200 newcomers served by city shelters. Advocates have argued for more preparedness measures and are particularly concerned by the abandonment of short-term sheltering, arguing it "will be too expensive…to reverse course" on the closure of shelters in the event of another arrival surge (Mathurin, Denverite, April 10, 2024). Still, the program offers a model for more strategic approaches to meeting immediate newcomer needs and incorporating them into the social and economic fabric of the city in contrast to cities applying more restrictive or even overtly hostile approaches.

Centro de los Trabajadores Colorado (Centro), Denver's worker center, has occupied an important space in Denver's immigrant worker landscape since the early 2000s, when it originally opened to serve and organize immigrant day laborers and domestic workers. Centro has continued to expand over the years and became a central actor in responding to newcomer needs during the recent surge in new arrivals. As part of the Denver Asylum Seeker Program, Centro received its first major city grant in May 2024 to execute WorkReady Denver, which includes providing job training, licensing, labor and safety rights, and other training to newcomers awaiting work authorization through their pending asylum applications (Denver Newcomer and Migrant Support; Silva, NBC News, June 18, 2024).

Even prior to city support, Centro had served nearly 100 new arrivals through its *Bienvenidos a Denver* (Welcome to Denver) program. The program, launched in May of 2022, conducted intakes with new arrivals to orient them and assess their needs and resources, including navigation with school enrollment, employment, food and housing, and legal support. It also served as a referral system for Centro's other workshops and programs in Wellness, Wage Theft, Employment, Entrepreneurship, and Organizing and Leadership.

Prior to 2023, most of Centro's members were from Mexico, with more arrivals from Central America in the past decade (Galemba 2023). Yet, mirroring changing migration trends at the national and local levels owing to the ongoing crisis in Venezuela,[2] Centro also started seeing the majority of new arrivals coming from that country, often with different needs and support networks than prior waves of migrants.

[2] See TRAC data on nationalities of pending cases in the national immigration court asylum backlog, with the uptick in Venezuelan cases beginning in 2022, and rising significantly in 2023 and 2024. TRAC shows a leap in pending cases from Venezuela in Colorado, from 891 in 2022 to over 3,432 in 2023 and 3,976 in 2024.

A team at the University of Denver conducted a formative evaluation of Centro's first 100 intakes with newcomers to assess needs, challenges, and accomplishments, as well as to inform newcomer reception and response programming for Centro and the multiple organizations and agencies serving migrants in Denver and other cities. We also include recommendations for next steps and follow-up with newcomers to assess their integration over time.

Key Findings

- Bienvenidos largely served Venezuelan newcomers (89.2% of intakes), who reported migrating to the U.S. for a combination of political and economic reasons related to the ongoing crisis of governance under the Maduro regime.

- Most families (61%) had either weak social ties or no ties at all in Colorado when they arrived in Denver, with nearly a quarter (22%) having initially intended to go elsewhere.

- More than half (54%) of families were residing in city shelter at the time of intake, frequently describing uncertainty and anxiety about their next steps.

- Churches were the main referral source for Centro's Bienvenidos program, with St. Dominic and Holy Ghost representing over three-quarter (75.5%) of all referrals.

- Nearly all respondents (97.8%) planned to stay in Colorado over the long term by the time of their intake.

- Nearly a third (30%) of school-aged children had reportedly not been successfully enrolled in school by the time of the intake.

- Nearly all respondents (96%) were unemployed at the time of intake, and every household had at least one member actively looking for work. The most common challenges to finding work were the lack of work authorization (91.1%), the inability to transfer credentials and/or education (19.8%), and the lack of English language skills (18.8%).

- In addition to support with work authorization and employment, most respondents also wanted support with filing asylum claims (88%) and securing stable housing (58.4%). Many also needed other forms of legal aid (32.4%), assistance with school registration (12.9%), and health services (3%).

- In terms of Centro's specific offerings, respondents were largely interested in programs related to employment (98%) and entrepreneurship (13%). They also wanted to attend several trainings, with the most popular being immigration rights (90.2%), rights in the U.S. (86.3%), labor rights (63.7%), and English (39.2%).

- There is a significant gap between those interested in pursuing an asylum claim (87.9%) and access to legal services (16.2%). Only 5% of people interested in asylum had spoken to someone about their case.

Methods

In coordination with Centro staff—especially Bienvenidos program coordinator, Deysi Bueno de Luna—the research team developed a standardized intake questionnaire with modules on Demographics and the Migration Journeys, Housing and other Social Supports, Work Skills and Qualifications, Experiences in the Denver Labor Market, Resources and Obstacles, Accomplishments, Successes, and Challenges, Legal Assistance, and Connections to Centro, Training Interests, and Follow-Up Processes. The intake questionnaire was translated into Spanish and administered by Bueno de Luna. The intake questionnaire covered all household members present in the United States, but typically one household representative answered the majority of questions. Through a data use agreement and under approval by the University of Denver IRB, (protocol 2112192), Centro shared de-identified intakes with the research team to analyze. Centro assigned code numbers to responses to maintain their staff's ability to follow up with newcomers while ensuring data shared with DU was confidential and private.

Intakes were conducted between October 15, 2023 and February 13, 2024, corresponding to the increase in new arrivals to Denver. [3] New arrivals peaked on January 11, 2024, during which the city reportedly served 5,212 total newcomers. At time of the last intake, there were 3,347 newcomers receiving city services (City of Denver Newcomer Sheltering and Support Dataset). In January and February, students in Professor Rebecca Galemba's graduate Qualitative Research Methods course at the University of Denver's Korbel School of International Studies accompanied Bueno de Luna to conduct some of the newcomer intakes, under the supervision of research team leadership. To maintain newcomer privacy, the sessions were not recorded. Instead, Bueno de Luna and the research team kept handwritten notes during the intake session. The team then used the handwritten notes to produce qualitative field notes and a quantitative database with fields corresponding to the intake questionnaire. The research team also held interviews with service providers and other stakeholders to learn about the newcomer landscape.

Rebecca Galemba (Professor at the Josef Korbel School of International Studies), Alejandro Chávez (Korbel Graduate Student Assistant), and Cyril Bennouna (Research Fellow at the DU Center for Immigration Policy and Research, CIPR) analyzed the 100 newcomer intake sessions, together with the field notes. Bennouna cleaned the data, conducted the quantitative analysis, and produced the figures below. Chávez led the design layout for the final report and translation of our short version. To prioritize the flow of conversation and rapport and remain responsive to respondents' needs and concerns, not all questions on the questionnaire were always asked or answered. These missing fields were excluded from the analysis. In addition, sometimes the presence of multiple households or family members during an intake complicated coding. In most cases, we only considered responses from the lead household respondent, the majority of whom (69.6%) consisted of women. In a couple instances, however, we had enough information from a secondary household respondent to create a separate entry for their household. It should be noted that these intakes represent a convenience sample of newly arrived immigrants searching for support from a community-based organization with a capacity to serve Spanish-speaking newcomers in particular.

Despite the inevitable limitations of such an intake process, the dataset enables us to document some important trends highlighting the needs, concerns, desires, and obstacles facing newcomers in Denver.

[3] Although Centro's Bienvenidos program began in May 2022, formal intakes started in the fall of 2023.

Composition of New Arrivals

Altogether, our dataset includes 102 households, covering 295 total household members, with the average intake consisting of about three people (Table 1). Reflecting the changing composition of new arrivals into major U.S. cities, as well as Colorado specifically [4] since 2023, **89.2% of newly arrived families participating in intakes with the Bienvenidos program were from Venezuela**, with additional small percentages from Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru. All respondents primarily spoke Spanish, and about a fifth had some university education, with the remaining having stopped their schooling at the secondary level (i.e., middle school or high school). **Because the vast majority arrived after July 31, 2023, only 7.3% were either eligible for or held TPS**.

Table 1. Sociodemographic composition of intake respondents

Total Individuals	295
Total Intakes	102
Avg. intake size	2.9
Venezuela	89.2%
Colombia	6.9%
Ecuador	2.0%
Peru	2.0%
Some Secondary Education	79.1%
Some University Education	20.9%

The reasons participants gave for migrating to the U.S. often merged political and economic motives, generally characterized by desperation and lack of opportunity, demonstrating how **the unfolding crisis of governance in Venezuela impinges on all aspects of life**. Some of the responses below demonstrate the ways that—even when immediate reasons for migration may be economic, such as lack of educational or employment opportunities—these obstacles are shaped by the political crisis, pervasive insecurity, and corruption. For example, Emiliano, a man from Venezuela who had walked in late to join Nestor and Mari's intake session, explained:

> *"I didn't even have a house* [in Venezuela]. *I came here to progress...*[with the] *goals of owning a house, educating my children, and finding a job. The salary in my home country isn't enough for anything. The land and people of Venezuela have a lot to offer, but the government has mismanaged all of this opportunity and left us with no means of progressing."*

Often, reasons for migration became interpreted as the desire for, as one respondent put it, a "better quality of life" and future for themselves and their families. Other responses demonstrated similar trends:

[4] According to TRAC, Venezuelan cases constituted 29.6% of Colorado's backlog of pending immigration cases in 2023 and 29% in 2024, up from just 12.7% in 2022 and less then 4% in 2021.

> *"We were part of the military in Venezuela and quit because we did not like the way* [the military leaders] *wanted us to act. Because we left, we were threatened by the government, so we decided to come for our safety and for our kids. There is a lot of corruption in the government…"*
>
> — Liliana, from Venezuela, living with her partner and two children in an apartment, 244 days in the U.S.

> *"The situation in Venezuela is hard. We did not have stable employment. We also wanted to come to give our children better opportunities."*
>
> — Brenda, from Venezuela, living in an apartment with her partner, 31 days in the U.S.

> *"There is a lot of insecurity in Venezuela in education, labor and quality of life. We were worried about our children."*
>
> — Dominica, from Venezuela, living with her partner and two children at a friend's home, 31 days in the U.S.

> *"The situation in Venezuela now is complicated. There is no work, the little you have is taken away from the government."*
>
> — Alejandra, from Venezuela, living with her partner in an apartment, about 2 months in the U.S.

> *"We wanted a better future for our family… the government has interfered with the education of our children."*
>
> — Maria Elena, from Venezuela living with her partner and child in an apartment, 78 days in the U.S.

> *"The corruption from… the government has been harsh on our family. The economic situation barely* [allowed] *us* [to] *survive day to day."*
>
> — Fernanda, from Venezuela, living on the streets at a campsite near the Quality Inn with her partner and daughter, seven days in the U.S.

> *"There were many problems within the labor force. Many political problems. I was threatened multiple times and am emotionally drained."*
>
> — Ana Victoria, from Venezuela with a doctorate in education living with a friend, 73 days in the U.S.

Social Incorporation

Table 2 summarizes challenges in social integration. The majority consisted of recent arrivals, with an average length of time in the United States of 53.8 days [5] at time of intake and some arriving as recently as five days earlier. **More than half (54%) of families were still residing in shelters at the time of the intake**, and these families often expressed uncertainty about their next steps.

[5] Note that this is an imprecise estimate, as several respondents did not report a specific date of arrival. When respondents said they arrived, "about a week ago," we entered that as seven days; when they said, "a month ago," we entered that as 31 days, and so on.

Table 2. Socioeconomic incorporation

Avg. Days in US	53.81
Plan to Stay in CO	97.8%
Has support network	39.4%
Residence - Shelter	54.0%
Residence - Renting	37.0%
Residence - Hosted	7.0%
Residence - Other	2.0%

Many renters were anxious about paying future months' rent as they remained housing insecure, even if they had initial assistance from churches, friends, or organizations like Vive Wellness. **About 70% of school-aged children [6] were reportedly enrolled in school**, and many parents struggled to navigate the school system. In contrast to most Latin American migrants to the U.S., who have long selected destinations owing to social, kinship, and/or employment networks (e.g., Massey and García España 1987; Donato et al. 2010), **60.6% of new arrivals reported no or weak social networks** in the United States, many even well after they had resettled to Denver. Some came to Colorado because they expected friends to receive them who they could no longer find or did not end up assisting them (Menjívar 2000). Others intended to go elsewhere, but did not find work opportunities, experienced discrimination, or had their transportation plans derailed. Some were bused directly from Texas, with little choice, or as another reported, they were given a choice, but since *"they had to pay for their ticket"* from the border, they chose Denver because it "was the cheapest." For example, Valentina was from Venezuela and had been in the U.S. for 15 days. She came in alone for her intake and was living in the Quality Inn shelter. Valentina described how her plans changed and why she settled in Colorado:

> *"My original plan was to go to Chicago where my cousin was waiting for me to arrive and settle in at her home. Once I turned myself in* [to Customs and Border Protection] *and tried to contact my cousin, he could no longer take me in* [because] *other relatives had arrived at his home, and there was no more space. I intended to reach Chicago, but I was not sure where I would stay. I was already heading to Chicago on a bus that stopped in Colorado. Once I arrived, another Venezuelan woman told me to stay in Colorado…there are better opportunities for someone helping me here than in Chicago. That is when I decided to settle down here in Colorado…I didn't know where to go."*

Those who said they had connections or social networks in Denver mostly spoke of people they had met recently, including other families while in shelter, local churches, and some mutual aid volunteers. Nearly a quarter (22%) of respondents initially intended to go elsewhere. However, even for those whose original intended destination may have not been Colorado, **nearly all (97.8%) expressed the desire and plan to stay long term,** underscoring the critical importance of addressing socioeconomic incorporation.

[6] The true percentage of school enrollment was difficult to assess since respondents did not always specify their children's age or, if they were 18 or older, whether they still intended to be in school. This percentage was thus calculated excluding from the denominator (1) children who were 18 years or older, which is the upper bound for the Grade 12 expected age in Colorado, (2) children under three years, which is the lower bound for the preschool expected age, and (3) children whose age was not given (Colorado Department of Education).

While some newcomers had found social supports upon arrival in Denver, most described **substantial challenges meeting their immediate needs**. Fernanda also quoted above, confided, *"So far, everything has been difficult. I never imagined that the U.S. would be like this. We envisioned better opportunities."* Her family had been living in the Quality Inn shelter, but their stay had ended, and they lacked the money to rent a place. A volunteer assisting them gave them a tent, which they put up near the Quality Inn since, as Fernanda shared, we *"did not know where to go next. We never could have imagined living in these conditions, especially in the cold winter."*

Work

Fewer than 4% of intake respondents reported being employed. Some were able to find temporary jobs, but **100% responded that they were actively seeking employment.** The primary obstacles identified to employment were **lack of work authorization or a work permit** (Figure 1). Respondents also noted **the inability to transfer their skills and credentials, as well as their lack of English skills.**

Figure 1. Top employment challenges (Proportion of intakes)

a) Lack of work authorization

> *"It has been hard as* [employers] *ask for work permits, which my husband and I do not have at the moment. I have been to many places...seeking opportunities for work... but they ask for a work permit, and I do not get the job."*
>
> — Marisol, from Venezuela, living with her partner and child in an apartment, 23 days in the U.S.

> *"We have been asking around for work but have had no luck in getting hired. Many of the employers have asked for a work permit in order to apply, and in other places there are no job placements available."*
>
> — Valentina, living with her partner and two children sharing a house with friends, 89 days in the U.S.

b) Difficulties transferring prior skills, credentials, or education to the U.S. job market

> *"Although I went to the university and pursued my career,* [my degree and training] *are not valid here. I cannot work in what I want* [because a work permit] *is required. Even though I have lots of experience I am unable to use it in a workplace."*
>
> — Ernesto, member of the police in Venezuela, living in Holy Ghost Church, 45 days in the U.S.

> *"My education in social work is not valid here. Also, I do not have a work permit to find a stable job."*
>
> — Manuel Ángel, from Venezuela living in an apartment, 31 days in the U.S.

c) Lack of childcare support presented additional hurdles to finding employment

> *"I haven't been able to search for a job because I have my children, but I* [have been] *talking to other* [newcomers] *in the hotel to get support to take care of my children so I can find a job."*
>
> — Rosa, from Venezuela (no partner), living with her three children in the Quality Inn, 16 days in the U.S.

d) Language barriers further compounded employment challenges

Lack of English made it difficult to negotiate with employers, whereas for others language barriers generated a wider unease with navigating various resources and social life in the United States. These challenges led some to worry about getting lost and being able to request assistance or even directions (especially when coupled with limited phone and internet access):

> *"The employers I have reached out* [to] *on the streets have told me that I cannot work for them without a work permit... And others... I am unable to understand them because they speak English* [and not Spanish]*."*
>
> — Karla, from Ecuador, living with her partner and two children in the Holy Ghost Church, 31 days in the U.S.

> *"I am unable to speak the language, which makes it difficult to ask about the resources that are available for my specific needs. I am struggling to navigate the community. I* [can] *only use my phone when I have an internet connection."*
>
> — Diana, from Venezuela, living with her partner and three children in the Quality Inn, 21 days in the U.S.

e) Wage theft and labor exploitation

Although wage theft and other forms of labor exploitation can be pervasive when new arrivals lack legal authorization and are desperate for work, newcomers' experiences with wage theft were rare, largely owing to the fact that most had not yet been working. Yet some cases stood out, like the following:

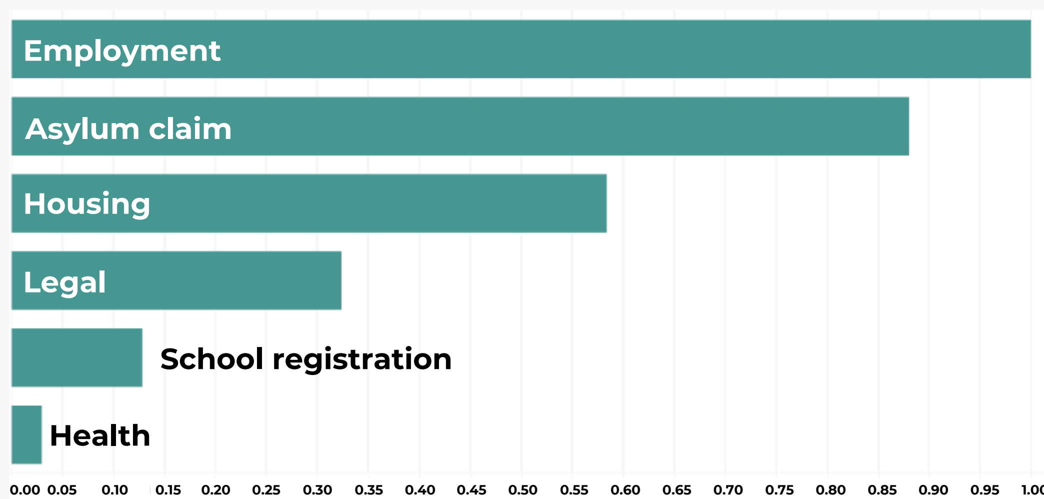
> *It has been hard as* [employers] *ask for work permits, which my husband and I do not have at the moment. I have been to many places... seeking opportunities for work... but they ask for a work permit, and I do not get the job."*
>
> — Marisol, from Venezuela, living with her partner and child in an apartment, 23 days in the U.S.

Isabela did not know where to go to seek remedy, noting that "Colorado is big and they do not have transportation." With their shelter stay expiring, the family lacked the funds to apply for an apartment.

Legal, Housing & Other Service Needs

Figure 2 summarizes the most frequently occurring needs that newcomers identified, demonstrating the primacy of employment. Employment was often interconnected with requests for legal assistance and with asylum claims, since **the main obstacle to finding reliable work was the lack of work authorization.** Once an asylum application has been pending for 150 days, asylum seekers can request work authorization. Even a few families that had entered via the limited appointments for the CBP One parole program at the U.S.-Mexico border—and thus would have a quicker route to work authorization—knew little about the process and therefore requested assistance. **Most (87.9%) respondents were interested in making an asylum claim, but, of these, only 5% had spoken to someone about their asylum case.** Few seemed to know where to start, or as one respondent said, they "were unsure where to begin." Many said they were interested in applying for asylum but explained that they did not have sufficient funds to apply. For example, intakes often noted: "She would like to apply for asylum but does not have the financial means to do so."

Figure 2. Top family needs (Proportion of intakes)



Sometimes, these responses made it unclear whether the "lack of financial resources" meant to hire an attorney, pay fees and purchase associated documents, or if some respondents had even misinterpreted the "work permit" or "asylum" as something you could purchase. Yet work and asylum applications can become a Catch-22. Asylum seekers need sufficient finances to pay for paperwork, attorneys, and filing fees to even begin the process of getting a work permit as part of an arduous asylum process that can take 3-5 years. But, without work, these same newcomers struggle to garner the requisite funds to spend on the asylum process, in addition to covering their own living expenses and basic necessities in the meantime. Yolanda, a newcomer from Venezuela living with her partner and two children in an apartment and in the U.S. for 35 days explained, "It has been difficult to find a job. You are required to have a work permit, which is expensive and takes a long time to process. We do not have the money for it [asylum process] as we cannot work."

Others expressed the need to attend to more pressing needs first, not uncommon for newcomers who have fled violence, experienced insecurity en route, and may still be contending with various forms of trauma. However, with few exceptions, asylum seekers only have one year to file an asylum application. For example, Carmen, from Venezuela and living with her partner and two children at the Quality Inn (26 days in the U.S.), shared:

> *"My mind at the moment is focused on finding a stable job so we can look for a place to stay...We are afraid of being kicked out of the hotel and staying in the street."*

Bueno de Luna noted on Carmen's intake, "The last thing she is worried about is looking into asylum and lawyers."

Lack of knowledge yet strong interest in asylum reflect the **need for legal outreach and support**. This is especially important because the government does not provide immigrants with access to counsel if they cannot afford an attorney, and there is limited access to low cost or pro bono providers in Colorado. Despite efforts by local non-profits like the Rocky Mountain Immigrant Advocacy Network (RMIAN), the Colorado Asylum Center, law school clinics, some city and state funding for immigrant legal defense funds, and the City of Denver's new Denver Asylum Seeker Program, a new study found that Colorado "ranks last in a national analysis of representation rates, with just 14% of people facing immigration proceedings having access to legal defense" (Colorado Fiscal Institute 2024). Meanwhile, having legal representation dramatically improves the success rate of winning one's immigration case and/or being granted asylum. Of newcomer respondents in our sample, just 16.2% had received any legal services.

We encourage Centro to investigate the obstacles to receiving immigration and other legal services in greater depth and to partner with trusted legal services organizations to address these gaps and challenges.

Centro Resources and Follow-Up

In the interest of assisting Centro follow up with newcomers over time, and to monitor and evaluate their program and service outcomes, we asked a series of questions about how newcomers learned about Centro and what programs or trainings they were interested in, and we assessed willingness for follow-up. **Every single respondent (100%) expressed an interest in becoming a member of Centro and agreed to follow-up.** However, based on inconsistent responses to how Centro should follow-up, it was often difficult to know what mode of tracking would be ideal. Given some inconsistent asking of intake questions, as well as inconsistent responses, we recommend Centro identify priority questions for a more streamlined follow-up.

Table 3 demonstrates the important role of churches in forming a referral network to Centro and offering support to newcomers. Between St. Dominic and Holy Ghost, **churches comprised over three-quarters (75.5%) of referral sources.** When asked about social networks and support systems, newcomers also frequently mentioned churches, for providing temporary housing, a source of social support through the pastor/priest, church members, and other newcomers, or food banks and other services offered by churches. Social media has also been an important referral mode, as Centro noted that many newcomers contact them via Facebook, WhatsApp, and other social media. We suggest more follow-up on how to best leverage these digital networks, enhance access to reliable digital tools, and minimize rumor or communication errors common in social media channels.

Table 3. Source of referrals to Centro (percentage of intakes)

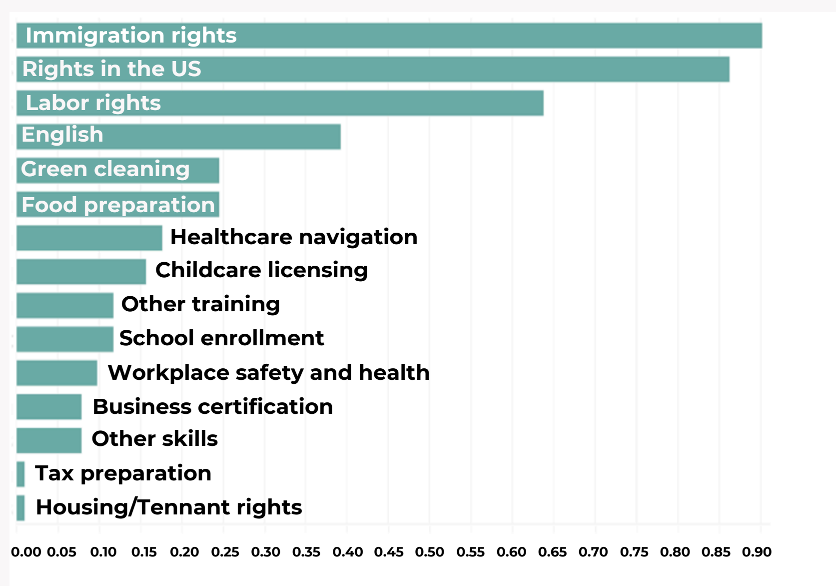
Source	Percentage
St. Dominic	55.1%
Holy Ghost	20.4%
Social media	12.2%
Other community group	7.1%
Other	5.1%

Table 4. Newcomer interest in Centro programs (percentage of intakes)

Program	Percentage
Employment	98.0%
Entrepreneurship	13.0%
Wage theft	5.0%
Wellness	5.0%
Leadership	1.0%

Newcomers were very interested in programs and trainings offered by Centro, with strong **enthusiasm for its employment program** (Table 4). For trainings, newcomers were most excited to **learn about immigrant rights, rights in the U.S., labor rights, and English** (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Newcomer interest in Centro trainings (proportion of intakes)



Conclusion

Understanding the interests and needs of newcomers—as well as the social, economic, and legal challenges they face converting their education, skills, and energy into the local community and labor market—can help Centro, city programs, and other stakeholders come together to develop comprehensive and sustainable newcomer reception and integration strategies. Rather than competing for limited funding or duplicating efforts, there is space to creatively leverage different strengths among the diverse non-profit, government, private-sector, mutual aid and grassroots groups, and among newcomers themselves. Housing and food, work, social and spiritual integration, legal needs and asylum, education, language support, healthcare, and mental health and psychosocial support access may appear to be discrete needs as one may be immediately more pressing than others. Yet these needs are all interconnected and often compounding, critical to ensuring newcomers can build dignity, community and power amongst themselves and with the broader community—these are Centro's core tenets.

Colorado media has begun to abandon the term "migrant" for alternatives like "new immigrant" or "newcomer," to reject the political quagmire surrounding the term "migrant," portray new arrivals with more humanity, and recognize the fact that many are here to stay (Manuel, Denverite Feb. 6, 2024). Although Denver has been at the forefront of cities proactively pushing back against xenophobic nationalist rhetoric that blames migrants for social, economic, and political ills, it is just as important to avoid depicting migrants as needy objects of "charity." Centro's Executive Director, Mayra Juárez-Denis, explicitly centers the agency and dignity of newcomers, questioning well-intentioned approaches to "empowerment":

> *"Empower…the word* [is often used to mean] you're giving power to someone, but they already have their own power…They already… crossed jungles…And they already have a lot of power within them. So [the goal is to]… *grab that and make it bigger."* [7]

[7] Interview conducted by DU students Leslie Macias and Gabriela Molina Yépez, February 20, 2024.

Recommendations for the Bienvenidos a Denver Program

The intakes can be improved with a more systematic process in which:

(1) Separate intakes are conducted for each household representative based on date of arrival to the U.S. This would ensure that more complete information is collected about each major migration event within a household when members of the household have arrived at different times.

(2) Every question is asked of every respondent where relevant to reduce missing values. Questions that are asked inconsistently or often skipped by the intake staff should be rephrased or removed.

(3) Questions are grouped together thematically to facilitate a conversational flow and to reduce repetition.

(4) Intake is streamlined by removing repetitive questions, questions that did not elicit sufficient responses, and questions that respondents did not seem to understand. Particular attention is paid to enumerating the number of immediate family members currently in the U.S. (who may represent current program needs), the number currently not in the U.S. (who may represent family reunification efforts), and the date of arrival to the U.S.

(5) A tablet is used to log information directly into the program database during the intake; otherwise, the intake paper is logged into an electronic database immediately after the intake session has ended to preserve data quality.

(6) The process for referring respondents is integrated with questions about the asylum process. Questions on asylum and immigration are edited to gather more consistent information on access to legal services, asylum, and encounters with the immigration system.

(7) At the end of the intake, the intake staff member thoroughly reviews the written answers to ensure all questions were asked and the answers were accurately captured. Staff periodically review the full database to identify any inconsistencies or high levels of missingness or error. A scale or comment section is developed for staff to indicate how well they think the respondent understood and answered the intake.

Monitoring, evaluation, and learning efforts may benefit from

(1) Collecting as much contact information during intakes as possible to facilitate follow-up, including WhatsApp numbers, social media account information, and contact information for multiple household members.

(2) Actively following up with respondents within the first month of the intake to reaffirm contact, track participation in Centro programs and trainings, and track the success of referrals made to other service providers.

(3) Continuing follow-up activities during predictable periods and announcing follow-up activities as part of routine programming in order to reduce attrition.

(4) Identifying a baseline follow-up success rate and using this to create a new target follow-up rate to encourage continuous improvement.

(5) Connecting information about member participation in Centro programs and trainings with the intake database so that there is a record of each member's ongoing needs, activities, program satisfaction rates, and contact information.

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