

Date of Hearing: May 7, 2025

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Buffy Wicks, Chair

AB 548 (Solache) – As Amended March 24, 2025

Policy Committee: Human Services

Vote: 5 - 2

Urgency: No

State Mandated Local Program: No

Reimbursable: No

SUMMARY:

This bill revises eligibility criteria for the Enhanced Services for Asylees and Vulnerable Noncitizens (ESAVN) program, specifies acceptable proof of California residency, and extends eligibility for grants or contracts awarded to nonprofit organizations with one year, rather than three years, of experience providing relevant services.

Specifically, this bill:

- 1) Revises eligibility requirements for the ESAVN program as follows:
 - a) Strikes provisions establishing eligibility for resettlement services to individuals who are granted asylum by the United States (U.S.) Attorney General or the U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security (DHS) pursuant to federal law or who are eligible for assistance and services under existing state law, as specified.
 - b) Instead, establishes eligibility for individuals to have entered the U.S. and are screened by DHS during January 1, 2024, to January 1, 2026, inclusive.
 - c) Provides, for purposes of the bill's provisions, a person may show they are currently residing in California with a California driver's license or California identification card, a utility bill or through rental history.
- 2) Strikes the definition, "vulnerable noncitizen" as any individual who would be eligible for ESAVN services and replaces it with "eligible person" to mean an individual who meets the criteria described in item 1b, above.
- 3) Provides conforming definitional changes for the provision of case management services.
- 4) Provides that grants or contracts may be awarded pursuant to ESAVN to nonprofit organizations that have at least one year of experience, rather than three years, providing case management services and culturally and linguistically appropriate services.
- 5) Requires the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) to collect data from grantees related to specified outcome metrics, and to post the findings on its internet website.

FISCAL EFFECT:

The ESAVN program was established through the 2021 Budget Act, which allocated \$8 million over three years, until June 30, 2024. The program is currently unfunded and the Governor's proposed budget does not provide funding to continue the program. The author has submitted a General Fund (GF) budget request for \$15.2 million in one-time funding over three years to CDSS to continue to fund the ESAVN program.

This bill creates potential GF cost pressures, likely in the tens of millions of dollars annually, to fund the program sufficiently to provide caseworker services to asylees who lack legal status and are not eligible for state or federal services, as well as more broadly to others who fit the new definition of eligibility in the bill. As written, this could include U.S. citizens, foreign students, people making adjustments to their immigration status, and others who wouldn't be served by ESAVN under existing law.

This bill also likely creates workload costs for CDSS to update its processes for reviewing bids from nonprofit organizations under the new one-year experience requirement, as well as to implement and monitor the data collection and posting requirements.

COMMENTS:

- 1) **Purpose.** This bill is sponsored by the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights. According to the author:

Both refugees and asylees are eligible for a wide range of benefits, including Medi-Cal, and CalFresh, but unfortunately, without adequate support and a culturally responsive program, most new asylees are not aware of their eligibility and forgo enrolling in benefits. Sustaining the ESAVN Program ensures equitable access to vital safety net services for asylees and vulnerable immigrants as they restart their lives in California.

- 2) **Background. *Vulnerable noncitizens.*** In the U.S., vulnerable noncitizens are legally characterized as refugees, asylees (also known as asylum seekers), and other noncitizens, such as parolees, conditional entrants, temporary protected status individuals, and legally permanent residents (LPRs), among others.

Refugees are individuals who have fled their home countries due to fear of persecution based on factors such as race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. They undergo a vetting process while still in their country of origin or in a refugee camp. Asylees are individuals who have already arrived in the U.S. and are seeking protection from persecution in their home countries. They apply for asylum upon arrival or within one year of arrival, on the basis of fear of persecution based on the same criteria as refugees. Asylees' legal status is determined through an adjudication process, often involving interviews, hearings, and legal representation. Other noncitizens who may also need protection and support, as defined in state law, include victims of human trafficking, domestic violence, or other serious crimes who are preparing to file or have filed petitions for a T-visa or have filed petitions for or received U-visa non-immigrant status with the appropriate federal agency.

CDSS administers the ESAVN program to provide culturally appropriate and responsive case management services for persons who are residing in California and who are granted asylum

by the U.S. Attorney General or the Secretary of Homeland Security or who are eligible to receive refugee cash assistance and services as victims of crime. The ESAVN program is subject to an appropriation in the annual Budget Act and no additional funding has been provided since 2024. Existing law requires the ESAVN program be implemented only to the extent funds are appropriated.

This bill expands eligibility for resettlement services under the ESAVN program from “vulnerable noncitizens” to any “eligible person” who has entered the U.S. and has been screened by DHS between January 1, 2024 and January 1, 2026. The bill also clarifies acceptable documentation for residency in California.

Advocates assert the changes in this bill will allow recent arrivals, regardless of federal actions that may limit services, to receive services under the ESAVN program, provided funding is allocated in the state budget for this purpose.

Case Management Services. Existing law requires the ESAVN program to provide specified services for up to 90 days within the first year following a person’s grant of asylum or eligibility for services as a victim of a crime. Grants or contracts awarded pursuant to the program may be executed only with nonprofit organizations that meet specified requirements, including that an organization must have at least three years of experience providing both case management services and culturally and linguistically appropriate services.

Advocates assert the demand for these services surpasses the capacity of qualified nonprofits. To expand access to services, this bill requires a nonprofit organization to instead have at least one year of experience providing the above-described services. In 2024, when the program ended, there were 13 ESAVN grantee service providers.

Data Reporting. Existing law requires CDSS, in collaboration with service providers, to determine outcome metrics to define program success. This bill requires CDSS to collect data related to those outcome metrics from grantees and post the findings on the department’s internet website.

- 3) **Related Legislation.** AB 1318 (Bonta), of this legislative session, expands the definition “qualified nonprofit organization” for the purposes of the administration of the ESAVN program, among other programs, to allow contracts or grants be awarded to nonprofits with either state tax-exempt status or federal 501(c)(3) status.
- 4) **Prior Legislation.** AB 2218 (Santiago), of the 2023-24 Legislative Session, was similar to this bill, but did not include the eligibility criteria changes. AB 2218 was held on this committee’s suspense file.

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