

Meeting held at the Gifford Foundation, 126 N. Salina St., Syracuse

Attendees: Nancy Calhoun, Felicia Castricone, Marion Ervin, Ginny Felleman, Helen Malina, Sarah McIlvain, Jennifer Roberts Crittenden, Peter Sarver, Lois Schroeder, John Scott, Nancy Shepard, Al Stirpe, Marsha Tait, Amy Thorna, Lisa Warnecke, Nicole Watts, Paul Welch, Nancy Zarach.

Co-chairs: Heidi Holtz & Kristen Mucitelli-Heath

OCL: Sandra Barrett, Becky Sernett

“Department of *Grundsatzfragen*” (Fundamental Questions)

Summary

The first Onondaga Citizens League (OCL) 2012 Study Committee meeting served as an introduction to committee members to the purpose of OCL and the study committee, who was then tasked with brainstorming for the 2012 study topic: “The World at Our Doorstep” (working title), which focuses on the refugee population in Onondaga County.

Introduction

OCL/Study Committee—Sandra described the purpose of the OCL was to “build the civic capacity of the community” and “foster an informed citizenship”. The role of the study committee begins with clearly defining the issue and the specific policy questions to be addressed. The study committee then decides: how fact-finding for the study will be conducted, and what research methods will be used based on the questions it hopes to address. Research might include, for instance: reading reports; presentations by study committee members, expert witnesses, or outside expertise; and formal or informal surveys. Notes from meetings become part of the record, and in addition, studies typically involve the public (e.g. panel discussions, surveys, talks). In the study report, the committee usually: summarizes findings, develops conclusions, makes recommendations and sometimes creates an action plan. The committee might also decide how to disseminate study results and further engage the community on this issue. “We don’t want it to be a report that sits on the shelf,” Sandra said. The entire process is completed within a year, culminating in the publishing of the study report.

Suggested Framework—Kristen said an initial framework for examining the topic could focus on these areas: crime/safety, housing, jobs, health and literacy. And the committee would do a needs and gaps analysis, best practices inside and outside Syracuse, success stories, myths vs. facts and recommended actions for each area.

Gifford Working Group—Heidi gave a brief summary on what the Gifford Foundation Working Group is doing on this issue. The Working Group is a number of stakeholders who work with refugees who are beginning an assessment of

current activities and services. The Group's goal is a dashboard of information on process and services. This information may be used as a resource for the study committee.

First Task: Defining the Study

"Working Brain"—Committee members were asked to visit four brainstorming stations to pose questions and ideas to four areas of inquiry listed below. The OCL will have a full record of the questions/ideas that were discussed but below is a representative sample of the discussion on each question.

1. What assumptions do we need to test or challenge in thinking about refugees in our community?
 - a. Refugees from a specific region, culture or country are not homogeneous and should not be treated as homogeneous. And if this is so, how do we care for them to acknowledge these differences? Also, specific reference was made to the diversity in learning styles and perhaps also a need to more individually tailor resettlement strategies.
 - b. How can we avoid stereotyping in general?
 - c. Challenge: Refugees learn enough English to live in the United States.
 - d. Test: Everyone needs a college education.
 - e. Test: Certain refugees are more entrepreneurial than others.
 - f. How do refugees honor the American work ethic?
 - g. Test: Faith-based agencies are best to handle resettlement.

2. What do we need to learn to understand dilemmas/opportunities in being in a refugee community?
 - a. What are the micro-finance opportunities?
 - b. Could a pool of "good renters" be designated to facilitate refugee-landlord relationships?
 - c. How can we take advantage of the cultural differences that refugees bring to our community? For example: restaurants/food
 - d. How can we individualize larger refugee groups?
 - e. What are refugees' experiences since they arrived in the United States?
 - f. What is the ethnic and religious make-up of our refugee population?
 - g. What strengths do refugees bring?
 - h. Is consolidation of service providers possible?
 - i. How can we better integrate refugee students into the school system?
 - j. How can we help empower the refugee population? For example: strengthening their voices in the community and reinforcing their rights
 - k. How can we be proactive about any problems or challenges?
 - l. Is it possible to create a larger "sponsorship" of refugees to ensure a better/smoothier resettlement?

3. What draws you to this inquiry?
 - a. What are the religious and cultural differences that may lead to challenges in serving refugees? Specific references were made to such issues as: treatment of women and a concern about domestic violence/abuse as well as family dynamics that include a large number of children and the housing of such families.
 - b. How does a specific service agency fit within the larger scope of refugee resettlement in Syracuse?
 - c. How can we create sustainability?
 - d. How can we serve refugees better now and for the long term along with making the job easier for us?
 - e. What are refugees experiencing in Syracuse and what were they told about the resettlement process and the United States (laws, rights, culture, etc.) before they came here?
 - f. How does the resettlement process work?
 - g. How can we better engage and connect to the refugee community?
 - h. How can resettlement agencies work together and improve communication?
 - i. How can local agencies get the information they need about the resettlement decisions made on state and federal levels?

4. What questions, if answered, would make a difference in the refugee dynamic in our community?
 - a. What is the home entry status of refugees who are blind and/or deaf and might require disability services?
 - b. How can local law enforcement agencies better understand cultural differences to determine when specific abuses (such as domestic violence or date rape) are taking place?
 - c. Is integration positive or negative?
 - d. What are the cultural/religious differences that make it challenging (or easier) for refugees to resettle in our community?
 - e. What is the "refugee" experience in Syracuse?
 - f. How much "assimilation" do refugees want?
 - g. What impact does the local criminal culture have on the refugee population?
 - h. How can we ensure long-term impact?
 - i. What resources are available to get answers to these questions?
 - j. How can we maximize the results of these conversations?
 - k. What can be accomplished now and what can't be?
 - l. How do we engage the Syracuse community?
 - m. What are the successful resettlement practices and strategies?

The results of the four brainstorming stations were summarized and discussed in

the larger group. There was a request for a better context of the history of refugees in Onondaga County (possible engagement of the Onondaga Historical Association).

Timetable and next steps

Kristen announced that the study committee hopes to have standing, bi-weekly meetings. Heidi said that there will be a second “first” meeting for committee members who were unable to attend this meeting due to the school break. There was a request for a listserv or way for committee members to communicate between meetings. There was also a request for a visual schematic of what the study committee is trying to do.

Co-chairs invited committee members to make recommendations for whom else to include in these discussions. Note: The committee hopes to gain refugee input as members of the committee, and is working to accomplish this.

A final reminder was made to be sensitive to the confidentiality of any information that might endanger refugees’ safety and welfare.