

Onondaga Citizens League
2012 Study Committee Notes – Meeting on March 28, 2012

Meeting held at the United Way, 518 James St., Syracuse

Attendees: Felicia Castricone, Melody Holmes, Karen Kitney, Don MacLaughlin, Pat MacLaughlin, Sarah McIlvain, Brian Moore, Theresa Pagano, Rachel Pollack, Peter Sarver, Nancy Shepard, Marsah Tait, Tashia Thomas, Amy Thorna, Paul Ariik, Marlana Daher-Rahman, Hari Adhikari

Co-chair: Heidi Holtz

OCL: Sandra Barrett, Becky Sernett

Summary

At the second Onondaga Citizens League (OCL) 2012 Study Committee meeting, members decided upon seven areas to focus their efforts: refugee resettlement services; health; housing; crime/safety; economic opportunities and jobs; literacy and education; and stories. Co-chair Heidi Holtz also proposed two additional areas: refugee voices and cultural competency. Members are asked to volunteer to assist with one or more focus groups that would help organize expert panels and/or meet independently for research/discussion and then report back to the main committee.

Introductions/Process

OCL/Study Committee—Sandra described how a portion of the OCL Web site (onondagacitizensleague.org) will be used as an information sharing resource for the 2012 study. Not only will committee notes and meeting handouts be posted online, but committee members will also be able to use the site to post articles and any resources they want to share with other members between meetings.

Meeting schedule—The OCL full study committee will meet bi-weekly. On the second Tuesday of the month, the committee will meet at 9 a.m. at PEC (Progressive Expert Consulting) at 650 James St. in Syracuse. On the fourth Wednesday of the month, the committee will meet at 12 noon at the United Way, 518 James St. The meeting schedule is as follows:

Tuesday, April 10, 9 a.m. - PEC

Wednesday, April 25, 12 noon - UW

Tuesday, May 8, 9 a.m. PEC

Wednesday, May 23, 12 noon - UW

Tuesday, June 12, 9 am - PEC

Review of Initial Meetings

Sandra discussed how she condensed and organized the OCL's brainstorming questions from the first two initial meetings into nine questions. Some of these questions can already be answered by current data and by agencies that work with refugees. These questions are presented in no particular order.

1. How can government and social service agencies better communicate, collaborate and work together to make service delivery more effective and efficient?
2. Who are the refugees and what are their demographics?

Some of this is already answered by the Dept. of State demographics, but these demographics only go so far; they don't include a breakdown of male/female, ages, etc.

3. What are the federal and state laws, agencies, regulations and processes that govern refugee resettlement in the US?

The "R&P Core Services Checklist" document that resettlement agencies use reviews these.

4. What are the needs?

The committee can decide how to break this large area down.

5. What services are being provided? What agencies are providing what services?

The OCL has a partial answer to this with the beginnings of a list compiled by Heidi, "Organizations in Syracuse Working with Refugees."

6. How can schools and agencies best provide literacy and education?

So many questions focused on education and literacy, that the OCL broke this out of the "needs" question.

7. What are the economic impact and the potential for economic development of the refugee population?

Jobs and hiring would fit under here.

8. What are the cultural considerations? How do we educate ourselves?

9. What are refugees' perspectives?

Peter Sarver wondered whether religious communities (churches, etc.) should be identified as such or referred to specifically, as congregations typically don't consider themselves "agencies", but many have long-term relationships with refugees.

Sarah McIlvain asked where landlord/tenant relationships would fit in these questions and offered a story about refugees' not receiving fair treatment from landlords. Sandra said this could fit under "needs". And Heidi said that while anecdotes may be valid, the committee would like more firm data about what is going on in the community, instead of anecdotal evidence. The Gifford Working Group hopes its data collection will offer a baseline for the committee to review.

What we know now

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 when the information is ready to be shared.

Heidi also reviewed current data (census statistics for Syracuse from Syracuse.com and the Dept. of State Demographics on refugees) and the start of a listing of agencies in Syracuse that work with refugees.

Felicia Castricone from Catholic Charities reviewed the "R&P Core Services Checklist".

Planning for study meetings

Dennis Connor from the Onondaga Historical Association will give a presentation on the history of Syracuse and refugees, called "Welcoming Community", at the April 10 meeting.

Heidi reviewed the focus areas and asked members to volunteer for a focus group: refugee resettlement services; health; housing; crime/safety; economic opportunities and jobs; literacy and education; and stories. The committee requested experts to come to the larger meetings to discuss all focus areas except stories. The April 25th meeting will feature experts from the refugee resettlement services agencies.

Paul Arik said he is pleased with what the study committee is trying to do, and said that from his experience and from talking to other refugees, he sees a large need in the area of mental health. He shared some personal experiences.

Heidi restated his comments to emphasize that the refugee community has unmet mental health needs and that the Syracuse community also needs to be aware of what the refugees have been through.

Felicia said that she doesn't see a rise in mental health needs, necessarily; they've always been there. "It's not an easy problem to attack," she says. Some refugee populations don't accept help, and then there is the problem of finding funding for mental health services. Catholic Charities recently received a grant from OnCare to help address the mental health needs of refugee children.

Heidi discussed the possibility of hosting a film series to raise community awareness, and members discussed various possibilities. Some of the films mentioned include: *God Grew Tired of Us*; *Return of the Lost Boys of Sudan*; *Rain in a Dry Land*; *The Storytelling Class*; *Hotel Rwanda*; and *The Letter*. The Onondaga County Public Library also has a listing of movies the committee could use. The ideas under this heading also could include book clubs (a reading list is being developed by OCPL), theatrical presentations and storytelling/oral history initiatives. Work on these types of events, called the "Stories" committee, would need to begin soon.

Committee members then signed up for focus groups.

Theresa Pagano distributed information for the Bringing the World Together event at the Palace Theater on Saturday, April

21: <http://www.eventbrite.com/event/2955430773/mcivte>

Organizations in Syracuse working with Refugees

This is an incomplete list of the organizations in Onondaga County and Syracuse that work directly or indirectly with the refugee population. A short description of each organization is provided, as well as a link to the agency or organization's website.

Please note, this list is not comprehensive. As other organizations become known, they will be added.

To be added: *ETHNIC COMMUNITY BASED ORGANIZATIONS AND THE CONTACT INFO.*

Americanization League – Based out of SCSD, this is the only organization that helps immigrants become naturalized citizens. Works with refugees as they move to immigrant status, acquire green cards, etc.

[Cathedral Academy at Pompeii](#) offers one evening a week adult ESL classes; mostly parents of Cathedral students, intermediate and advanced level.

[Catholic Charities](#) - Resettlement services and support. The program provides assistance with applying for jobs and registering for English language classes, locating translators, finding housing, and securing medical care. Special academic programs prepare refugee children to attend school. The Refugee Youth Outreach Program provides recreation, tutoring, homework assistance, and other supports to refugee children.

[City of Syracuse Neighborhood and Business Development](#) – concerned with both housing and workforce opportunities for refugees.

[Hiscock Legal Aid](#) – program for immigrant assistance also often receives request for assistance with refugees, especially as they move towards green card status. They also work with [Vera House](#) on domestic violence issues.

[Hopeprint](#) - Facilitating sustainable development of local resettled refugees and their communities in the areas of economy, health, leadership, education and justice. Programs: Hopeprint Home, life coaching; Advanced ESL/College Prep classes, tutoring, ESL conversation groups, children's programming and more.

[Interfaith Works Center for New Americans](#) - assists refugees in beginning new lives in America; resource and cultural center for the Southeast Asia population in community; to assist communities in being a place of welcome for refugees and immigrants; and to help refugees and immigrants in developing their own self-help skills, projects, and associations.

It is the mission of [JOBSplus!](#) to focus everything that is said and done in the welfare system on helping people find and keep employment. This begins the moment individuals first apply for public assistance and continues until all who are able have achieved economic independence.

[Literacy Volunteers of Greater Syracuse](#) – works with ESL students through tutoring and small group classes; partners with other literacy programs in city to provide training.

The [Northside Urban Partnership](#) is an urban revitalization collaborative (Catholic Charities, St. Joseph's Hospital, CenterState CEO and Franciscan Collaborative Ministries) dedicated to engaging diverse groups of people and organizations in turning the Northside of Syracuse right-side up. Programs: Neighborhood Workforce Development, Urban Gardens and Green Space, Public Art, Housing and Commercial Development, Cultural Gatherings, Community Organizing.

[The North Side Learning Center](#) has offered ESL classes focusing on beginning and intermediate for three years. Classes for adult and youth.

[Onondaga County Health Department](#) - provides programs and services to assist refugees with health issues such as guides to healthy living, finding health care, and disease prevention help.

[Onondaga County Department of Social Services](#) – When refugees come to town they are brought to DSS to start temporary assistance: Medicaid, food stamps etc.

[Pro-Literacy](#) - developing a national curriculum for literacy service providers addressing the issue of cultural responsiveness and integration to American culture. Focuses on adult education. They have been testing this curriculum locally.

[Refugee Assistance Program, Syracuse City School District](#) - RAP provides refugees with access to different facilities or directly provides many services that will enable them to become self-sufficient. Programs: ESOL classes to adults, job development services, help with getting connected to the Health Care System, cultural orientation, community education and advocacy. Support refugees up to five years from arrival.

[St. Joseph's Hospital Health Center](#) is the seventh largest employer in the Central New York region, and located within the Prospect Hill neighborhood on Syracuse's Northside, a community that has long been the home to immigrants and refugees.

[Syracuse City Police](#) – Two officers are former refugees and work with the refugee community, including once a month meeting to discuss police relationships and how not to be a victim; they help arrange interpreters and conduct in-service training in cultural competency for police officers. The [Butternut Street Community Police](#) facility offers after-school programs, holiday events, summer camp.

[Syracuse City School District](#) – ESL for SCSD students as well as Adult Ed classes.

[Syracuse Housing Authority](#) – refugees sometimes move to SHA locations out of their initial housing placements; approximately 30% of Central Village residents are refugees with a large majority from Somalia.

US Refugee Program

From the Cultural Orientation Resource Center

Who is considered a refugee?

In casual conversation, people use the word *refugee* to refer to someone who has fled his or her home, whether to escape war, natural disaster, economic hardship, or political persecution. But in the world of refugee assistance, the term has a precise legal definition. Whether a person is granted refugee status depends on why he or she fled the home country.

According to the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, held by world governments in Geneva in 1951, a refugee is someone who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country." This definition includes people who have experienced persecution because of political beliefs or religious activities or because they are members of a particular ethnic group. The definition does not include people who are fleeing economic hardship or are victims of earthquakes, famines, floods, and other kinds of natural disasters. These people may be deserving of humanitarian assistance or they may be admitted to the United States as immigrants, but they are not considered refugees.

The 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees established the legal standards for refugee protection, and the United States has signed the agreement. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), established in 1951, is the branch of the United Nations charged with the international protection of refugees. The U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) of 1952 authorizes the admission and resettlement of refugees to the United States.

Who decides who is a refugee?

Refugees flee conditions in their home countries and find temporary asylum in refugee camps or communities in neighboring countries. There, the UNHCR interviews them to decide whether they should be granted refugee status and thus qualify for UNHCR protection.

The UNHCR also seeks to find what it calls a *durable solution* for any refugee situation. There are three durable solutions: voluntary repatriation to the home country, integration into the country of asylum, and resettlement in a third country, such as the United States. For most refugees, the best solution is to return home as soon as it is safe for them to do so. If that is not possible, the second-best solution may be to integrate them into the country of asylum, where social and cultural conditions are generally similar to those of the home country. Only when these two solutions are not possible does the UNHCR consider the solution of resettlement to a third country, such as the United States.

Refugees who are referred by the UNHCR for resettlement in the United States or who appear to the U.S. government to be eligible for resettlement under U.S. law are

interviewed by an officer of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (CIS). This officer decides whether a person qualifies as a refugee under U.S. law and is therefore eligible for U.S. resettlement.

Which refugees are eligible for U.S. resettlement?

A person who meets the definition of *refugee* may be eligible for U.S. resettlement if he or she—

- has a particularly compelling history of persecution;
- is a member of an ethnic or religious group that is considered by the United States to be of "special humanitarian concern" (for some groups, only those with relatives in the United States are eligible); or
- is the spouse, unmarried child, or parent of a refugee who has been resettled or is a U.S. permanent resident or an asylee in the United States.

Generally, refugees must be outside their homelands to be eligible for U.S. resettlement, though the United States processes applications from refugees in their home countries in a few places. (Currently, the United States has such programs in Cuba, the former Soviet Union, and Vietnam.)

Refugees with criminal records or certain serious health problems may be ineligible to enter the United States. However, refugees who are ineligible for the U.S. resettlement program may still be eligible for UNHCR protection or resettlement in other countries.

Which family members may accompany a refugee to the United States?

Generally, only a spouse and unmarried children under the age of 21 may accompany the principal applicant. Other relatives may qualify for U.S. resettlement if they meet U.S. refugee criteria themselves.

How can a person find out if he or she is eligible for U.S. resettlement?

A person who believes that he or she might be eligible for U.S. resettlement should contact the UNHCR or the closest U.S. embassy or consulate. If that person has close relatives in the United States, they should contact the nearest refugee resettlement agency for advice and help in preparing the forms that they will have to fill out.

How are refugees processed for U.S. resettlement?

Intergovernmental or nongovernmental agencies, either international or U.S. based, carry out most of the preparation casework for CIS interviews, working with U.S. embassy officials. These agencies, known as *resettlement support centers*, or RSCs, interview applicants, help prepare paperwork for CIS, and arrange medical examinations and background security checks for those refugees approved by CIS.

Following CIS approval, the RSC gathers additional information about the applicant and accompanying family members. This information includes the names and addresses of any relatives in the United States, the refugee's work history and job skills, and any special

educational or medical needs. This information is needed to determine the best resettlement arrangement for the refugee.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) generally arranges transportation to the United States. Refugees are expected to repay the cost of their transportation once they are established in the United States. Refugees or their relatives may, of course, pay their own transportation costs in advance.

Before departing for the United States, refugees receive cultural orientation (CO). Overseas CO provides refugees with information about important aspects of U.S. life, teaches them problem-solving skills, and helps them establish realistic expectations about resettlement. It usually lasts about 15 hours.

Where do refugees live in the United States and who helps them resettle?

The United States is a land of great diversity, and refugees can be found in communities all across the country. Refugees may be resettled in small towns, big cities, or suburban communities. A refugee with close relatives already in the United States will probably be resettled where the relatives live. Otherwise, a resettlement agency will decide the best placement site based on the availability of jobs, housing, and social services.

The resettlement agency, often called the *sponsor*, is the most important source of information and assistance during the refugees' first months in the United States. The agency does many things: It ensures that refugees are welcomed at the airport; arranges for their housing, furniture, and basic household supplies; conducts orientation; and prepares a resettlement plan. As part of the plan, the agency refers refugees to social services and employment.

What is expected of refugees when they arrive in the United States?

Because Americans value hard work and initiative, they will expect refugees to get jobs as quickly as possible. Many refugee families, like many American families, find that both the husband and wife must work. Lack of English language skills won't prevent refugees from getting jobs, but it may limit the kind of job they can get when they first arrive.

Many new arrivals study part-time to improve their English language and job skills while they work. Resettlement agencies can help identify appropriate language and vocational programs. It is common for refugees to change jobs once their language and job skills improve.

What kind of experience can refugees expect to have in the United States?

Generalizing about the kind of experience refugees can expect to have in the United States is difficult, since the country is diverse and different refugees have different experiences. However, of the more than 2 million refugees who have been resettled in the United States since 1975, most have adjusted to U.S. life and have become valued members of American society.

Refugees who are able to adapt to the new environment are more likely to have a successful resettlement experience. Those who are both realistic and optimistic appear to adapt the best. Cooperation with the resettlement agency can be key to a successful transition.

Resettlement is not a decision to be made lightly. It may mean that a refugee cannot return to the home country for years. It may mean permanent separation from friends and relatives. But it may also mean the beginning of a new life with new opportunities.

Terminology

Terms referring to refugees and refugee resettlement are often incorrectly used. This is an official list of terms as defined by the [U.S. Department of Homeland Security](#). **For the complete list of terms, visit the [U.S. Department of Homeland Security Glossary](#)**

Alien - Any person not a citizen or national of the United States.

Asylee - An alien in the United States or at a port of entry who is found to be unable or unwilling to return to his or her country of nationality, or to seek the protection of that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution. Persecution or the fear thereof must be based on the alien's race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. For persons with no nationality, the country of nationality is considered to be the country in which the alien last habitually resided. Asylees are eligible to adjust to lawful permanent resident status after one year of continuous presence in the United States. These immigrants are limited to 10,000 adjustments per fiscal year.

Country of Birth: The country in which a person is born.

Country of Citizenship: The country in which a person is born (and has not renounced or lost citizenship) or naturalized and to which that person owes allegiance and by which he or she is entitled to be protected. **Former Allegiance:** The previous country of citizenship of a naturalized U.S. citizen or of a person who derived U.S. citizenship.

Country of (Last) Residence: The country in which an alien habitually resided prior to entering the United States.

Geographic Area of Chargeability - Any one of five regions-Africa, East Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, Near East and South Asia, and the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe-into which the world is divided for the initial admission of refugees to the United States. Annual consultations between the Executive Branch and the Congress determine the ceiling on the number of refugees who can be admitted to the United States from each area. Beginning in fiscal year 1987, an unallocated reserve was incorporated into the admission ceilings.

Immigrant (also known as **Permanent Resident Alien**): An alien admitted to the United States as a lawful permanent resident. Permanent residents are also commonly referred to as immigrants; however, the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) broadly defines an immigrant as any alien in the United States, except one legally admitted under specific nonimmigrant categories (INA section 101(a)(15)). An illegal alien who entered the United States without inspection, for example, would be strictly defined as an immigrant under the INA but is not a permanent resident alien. Lawful permanent residents are legally accorded the privilege of residing permanently in the United States. They may be issued immigrant visas by the Department of State overseas or adjusted to permanent resident status by the Department of Homeland Security in the United States.

Migrant - A person who leaves his/her country of origin to seek residence in another country.

Nationality: The country of a person's citizenship or country in which the person is deemed a national.

Country of Naturalization - The conferring, by any means, of citizenship upon a person after birth.

Refugee - A formal term of the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) referring to any person who is outside his or her country of nationality who is unable or unwilling to return to that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution. Persecution or the fear thereof must be based on the alien's race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion, and verified by the UNHCR. People with no nationality must generally be outside their country of last habitual residence to qualify as a refugee. Refugees are subject to ceilings by geographic area set annually by the President in consultation with Congress and are eligible to adjust to lawful permanent resident status after one year of continuous presence in the United States.

Refugee Approvals - The number of refugees approved for admission to the United States during a fiscal year. The US State Department works with the UNHCR to determine the number of refugees that will be accepted annually to the United States, generally around 70,000 per year to the US. Internationally, the number can be much higher, as refugees are also approved by other countries. The US Department of Homeland Security officers in overseas offices assure that refugees are not security risks to the US.

Refugee Arrivals - The number of refugees the Department of Homeland Security initially admits to the United States through ports of entry during a fiscal year.

Refugee Authorized Admissions - The maximum number of refugees allowed to enter the United States in a given fiscal year. As set forth in the Refugee Act of 1980 (Public Law 96-212) the President determines the annual figure after consultations with Congress.

Resettlement - Permanent relocation of refugees in a place outside their country of origin to allow them to establish residence and become productive members of society there. Refugee resettlement is accomplished with the direct assistance of private voluntary agencies working with the Department of Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement.