

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

Attendees: Amela Begovic, Beth Broadway, James Branche, Marlena Daher-Rahman, Paul Driscoll, Marion Ervin, Melody Holmes, Karen Kitney, Jackie Leroy, Susan Linerode, Don MacLaughlin, Pat MacLaughlin, Sarah McIlvain, Mike Melara, , Brian Moore, Cynthia Morrow, Rachel Pollack, Paul Predmore, Peter Sarver, John Scott, Olive Sephuma, Amy Thorna, Laura Viera-Suarez, Lisa Warnecke, Nicole Watts, Sandra Whittaker, Nancy Zarach.
Presenters: Felicia Castricone, Stephanie Horton, Helen Malina,
Co-chairs: Heidi Holtz, Kristen Heath
OCL: Sandra Barrett, Becky Sernett

Summary

At the fourth Onondaga Citizens League (OCL) 2012 Study Committee meeting, representatives from refugee resettlement agencies presented a detailed overview of how they help refugees, what mandates the Department of State sets for the resettlement process and offered current statistics and timelines. The PowerPoint presentation and timeline is available on the OCL Website for viewing (see “Resources”); these notes will offer an outline of the presentation.

The next OCL meeting will be on Tuesday, May 8, at 9 a.m. at PEC, 605 James Street, when the Literacy and Education subcommittee will present its discussion to the entire study group. Members are invited to sign up to serve on a subcommittee. The schedule for future subcommittee presentations is:

May 23—Economic Opportunities and Jobs
June 12—Health
June 27—Housing

Online Resources

Sandra announced that Syracuse University has created a listserv for the OCL 2012 Study Committee, and she will make it available to the study group members to use for discussion and information sharing. An email will be sent to members with the link to sign up. Also, she pointed out that CBS News featured a story about Burmese refugees resettled in Syracuse; a link to the story can be found on the OCL website, in its “Resources” section.

Stories Subcommittee

Heidi reported that the Stories Subcommittee had its initial meeting, and discussed hosting a film series along with other potential partnerships with community organizations, including Syracuse Stage when it presents a production about the Congolese community this fall. The Onondaga Historical Association might be able to provide guidance on collecting oral histories.

Refugee Resettlement

The presentation was given by: Helen Malina from Interfaith Works/Center for New Americans, Felicia Castricone from Catholic Charities, and Stephanie Horton from the Syracuse City School District Refugee Assistance Program (Bob's School).

Helen began with the resettlement process on the international level and then took it to the United States. The United Nations determines when a refugee is ready to be resettled. The United States takes in the most refugees, followed by Canada. Ten volunteer agencies (known as VolAgs) contract with the U.S. Department of State (DOS) to process refugees, and these agencies also work with several hundred affiliates (in our community these are Catholic Charities and Interfaith Works.)

There are two types of refugees: those considered "free" cases (no U.S. ties) and those with U.S. ties. Before the refugee arrives, the agency will verify the relationship and whether or not the family/friends can offer some sort of support network.

When the agencies get notice from the DOS that a refugee is coming, it starts to make arrangements. (This can range from 4 weeks to 24 hours notice.) By the time the refugee arrives, an apartment is rented and provisions are ready.

Felicia presented the process once the refugee arrives in Syracuse. The agencies meet the refugee(s) at the airport (often at 11 p.m. or 12 a.m.) and take him to the apartment or to a relative's/friend's if so requested. Refugees are given a home and safety orientation. They are introduced to how their appliances work, how the doors lock and are given a basic overview of the safety of their neighborhood, etc. They are also told where families who speak their language are located, and they are given a "hot ethnic meal". Oftentimes, the refugee community will cook for new arrivals.

Within 24 hours, the agency visits the home to make sure everything is OK. They also give them pocket money (\$20 per adult and \$10 per child) to spend on whatever they want. The agencies check their forms (the I-94) and make copies. These forms serve as the refugees' only form of ID, and it allows them to get a Social Security card.

The refugees are taken to the local Department of Social Services to get signed up for cash, medical and food assistance. These are federally funded programs run through the local DSS.

Each refugee must also receive \$925 per person, and this is to pay for rent, food, etc. They are also expected to pay back the travel loan for coming here. It can be difficult for an individual or small family to survive on this allotment in which case the agency dips into its flex fund (where extra money is pooled from the \$1,125 it receives for each refugee). An additional \$725 per refugee the agency receives from the DOS goes to pay its administrative costs. Felicia stated, "It's really not enough to meet its costs." So, agencies apply for and receive a variety of grants, from such organizations as the United Way, etc.

Within 14 days, the refugee must have been applied for a Social Security card. All eligible males must also sign up for the Selective Service System.

Agencies are required to provide up to 90 days of services, but this is such a short period of time for adjustment, that agencies offer some services past this period.

Stephanie presented the employment and educational services end, but also stressed that the success Syracuse has with resettlement is due to the agencies' inter-collaboration.

Bob's School is located on Syracuse's North Side, in the former Holy Trinity Church building. There are adult education programs that teach English. Adults take an oral-based proficiency exam and are placed in classes based on their scores and levels of their previous education. All children eligible for K-12 education are enrolled in the school district.

Medical services are offered by a network of providers. After the initial physical, if a refugee is relatively healthy, he or she wouldn't return to the physician until 9 months or a year later, just as it would be for anyone else. Translators can be used at medical appointments, and the agencies are receiving a richer medical history from the United Nations to help them care for refugees during resettlement. Some refugees will be receiving mental health counseling.

All agencies have employment services. "If it helps someone get a job, we're doing it," Stephanie said.

There are also "secondary migrants" coming to Syracuse. These refugees were initially settled somewhere else, but then decided to come to Syracuse. Usually, the refugee has a tie here. These individuals don't require as many services as newly arriving refugees, and their funding does not travel with them. Syracuse receives about 250 secondary migrants, but there may be more the agency doesn't know about.

After one year, refugees can apply for a green card, and then after 5 years, he or she can apply for citizenship.

A question was asked about volunteer involvement. All agencies use volunteers, and Helen said the work they do couldn't be done without volunteer involvement. There are also sponsors of refugees, but these must be established organizations such as faith based institutions or non-profits.

Another question was asked about housing, and Felicia said that housing decisions are based on affordability, whether landlords accept public assistance and where a specific refugee community may already be located. Most refugees are resettled in the city, many on the North Side. Helen said that the agencies have a strong partnership with the city school district, and this is another deciding factor for resettling in the City of Syracuse. She said the

SCSD is the “best equipped to work with refugees.” Seventy-seven native languages are spoken by children within the SCSD.

A discussion followed about transportation and whether or not refugees are able to get to their jobs, appointments, etc. The agencies teach refugees how to use public transportation, but there are also car pool collaborations between the agencies to help with specific needs. Many refugees are also given bicycles. Centro recently reached out for input when changing its routes and a point was made that perhaps Centro bus drivers could be provided with additional information on how to be of the best assistance to refugees.

A question was asked about unaccompanied minors, and Felicia said that there are some specific programs for those refugees. The process would be similar, but the minor may be put in foster care if he or she has no family already here.

A question was asked about unemployment, whether it was higher for refugees than the general population, and Felicia said they aren’t currently tracking it, but they do help refugees sign up for unemployment benefits. Then, a discussion followed about local employers to celebrate for hiring refugees. Several companies were named: Stickle, Marquardt Switches, United Radio and Kilian Bearings, among others.

Helen said that the DOS visits agencies every five years for monitoring its services, and that last summer during such a visit, “They were so impressed by the deep and real and rich collaboration in this community.”

An anecdote about a neighbor believing that the refugees next door were not being visited by or assisted by any Americans led the agency reps to point out that for the most part their case managers are former refugees. Thus they are not always “Western” in appearance and the neighbor might believe they are also refugees.

During the course of the Q & A the following questions or points were raised for consideration in future presentations:

Is there a way to facilitate introductions between refugees and neighbors?

What employers can be celebrated for hiring refugees and how employable are refugees? Also, what are the unemployment statistics?

Next Meeting:

The next meeting will be held at PEC at 605 James St., on Tuesday, May 8, at 9 a.m.