

*Onondaga Citizens League
2012 Study Committee Notes—Meeting on May 23, 2012*

Meeting held at United Way, 518 James Street, Syracuse

Attendees: Amelia Begovic, Carolyn Brown, Felicia Castricone, Marion Ervin, Melissa Hidek, Stephanie Horton, Karen Kitney, Sarah McIlvain, Robin Morgan, Rachel Pollack, Paul Predmore, Jonnell Robinson, Peter Sarver, Lois Schroeder, John Scott, Dzenan Selimovic, Nancy Shepard, Marsha Tait, Amy Thorna, Lisa Warnecke, Sandy Whittaker, Nancy Zarach.

Presenters: Paul Predmore, James Branche, Dominic Robinson, Eric Rogers, Mary Kane, Paul Ariik

Co-chairs: Kristen Heath

OCL: Sandra Barrett, Becky Sernett

Summary

Members of the Economic & Job Opportunities subcommittee presented a discussion on how successful refugees are in finding job opportunities in the Syracuse area and what challenges they face, particularly during these difficult economic times. Paul Ariik offered a personal perspective as a refugee who has settled in Syracuse and pursued higher education. A question and answer period followed the presentation, and the Crime and Safety subcommittee met to discuss its presentation after the general OCL study committee meeting.

The next OCL meeting will be on June 12 at 9 a.m. at PEC, 605 James St., Syracuse. A presentation will be given by the Health subcommittee.

The schedule for future subcommittee presentations is:

June 12—Health

June 27—Housing

July 10—Crime & Safety

Economic & Job Opportunities

Paul Predmore, who is on the OCL board of directors, moderated the discussion, which began with a brief reference to an article in the *Syracuse Post-Standard* about the area's unemployment rates that continue to be high despite an increase in job opportunities. The article can be found on the OCL Web site in the resources section for the 2012 study committee. Paul then explained that the panel would focus on employer and refugee viewpoints on jobs and economic opportunities in an attempt to open the communication and align the two standpoints.

Dominic Robinson, who is the director of the Northside Urban Partnership (Northside UP), pointed to a Hamilton College survey ("The Fiscal Impact of Refugee Resettlement in the Mohawk Valley") conducted in 2000, which found that in the first 15 years, refugees are an economic drain on a community's resources. After this, however, they contribute to the net positives in the next 15 to 23 years. The question then becomes, Dominic said, "How do you accelerate that [positive] economic impact?"

In terms of the job opportunities, there are two dynamics affecting refugees' success. The first is that recent refugees are more difficult to place in jobs—either because of lack of English skills or little to no formal education experience or both—and the second dynamic is that there are fewer jobs available to low- to no-skilled workers. This lower placement rate means that there is a “higher chance for refugees to need social services”, and so the community and refugees “have to get creative.”

Northside Up offers training programs for lower-skilled refugees and tries to place higher-skilled refugees (those who have had more professional careers in their homeland) in higher-skilled jobs. One avenue refugees may take, because of more difficult economic times, is to start their own business and Northside Up also helps with small business assistance.

“There’s an incredible entrepreneurial impulse among refugees,” he said. But there is no hard data on how many refugee-started businesses are in central New York.

The failure rate for many new, small businesses is high, and even if their businesses fill a substantial niche in the community, many refugees have the added burden of being unfamiliar with U.S. regulations and contemporary U.S. business practices. Consequently, there is a lot of turnover and refugee businesses operate at low margins.

Northside Up tries to help by offering a “cohesive set of services to guarantee these businesses succeed.” And, he says, “Almost all [refugees] are incredibly eager to contribute to their new home.”

“All of these factors make them a compelling part of our community,” he says.

James Branche, a recruiting specialist with United Radio, said he seeks refugees for positions in many departments, including: shipping and receiving, quality control, customer service and accounting. He looks for a strong motivation to work and a “willingness to do whatever is needed for the company.” Problem-solving skills are also highly desired. The ultimate goal is to “build a better community” (within United Radio and within Syracuse) and employing refugees has benefitted the company. He shared a story of a refugee who works in customer service whose positive and abundant energy motivates other employees to work better. There is a rippling effect.

To overcome any challenges that may be unique to its specific field of work (such technical terms and language), United Radio offers English and other classes so that employees can understand and communicate with each other.

Mary Kane, who is a job developer at Bob’s School (Syracuse’s Refugee Assistance Program), said that one of her responsibilities is to network with local employers to

help them consider hiring refugees. In her experience, most employers are very happy with their refugee workers because they exemplify such basic skills as showing up on time and completing the tasks that are required. Some employers she mentioned are: Stickley Audi & Co. and Marquardt Switches, Inc.

She explained one of the reasons behind refugees' high motivation to work is that: "They've hit the bottom. They're here with their feet on the ground, and they need to move." And this means finding a job to keep their family together and help them survive.

The problem most refugees face, she said, is that they don't have a safety net. There is no "extra" money or savings or family or friends to turn to. So, she said, "If refugees aren't creative with jobs, they have no money."

As manufacturing jobs have declined, Dominic said, so have the possibilities for refugees to be hired in large groups. Northside Up offers a program called Green Train, which teaches construction and weatherization skills to help create more job opportunities for the unemployed or underemployed. To show how it's been successful, Dominic said that two years ago, Zerodraft started hiring Green Train graduates and it now has an entire team composed of its graduates.

For a refugee perspective, Paul Ariik described his experience after arriving in the United States a few weeks after 9/11. His first job was at Loretto, working in the kitchen. Then, someone encouraged him to take a welding course, and because the timing of the course and the distance from his home to Loretto, he quit the kitchen work and went to work at a hotel. He stayed there six months until he finished the welding training. He worked as a welder as he pursued his studies at Onondaga Community College, but then he discovered he was too exhausted to study while he worked as a welder. So, he quit welding and focused on his college degree. Then, Terry Loftus from Bob's School, helped get him a job at a loading and unloading dock. Next, someone filled out an application for him at St. Joseph's Hospital Health Center, and he was quickly hired to help transport patients.

"When we have a connection with an American, we will be able to get a job," he said. "Getting a job today...it's not about what you know, it's about *who* you know."

Many employers, because of the economic downturn, have switched their hiring to temporary agencies, and Paul said that refugees dislike temporary work because there is no job security. Also, refugees who have invested in their education (such as himself; he has a degree in public administration) have difficulty finding work in their fields and the jobs they are looking for. They now carry the burden of student loans and may not be able to afford to pay them back.

"I don't want to go back to Africa to live, but I consider it today," he said. In Africa, his degree is worth a lot, but he has family here, and he doesn't want to leave them;

they are U.S. citizens.

Now, he's earning \$7 to \$9 an hour and he can't support his family on that wage. "If I quit and go on welfare...I would go crazy."

Mary said there are four job developers at Bob's School and hundreds of refugees looking for work. They don't place anyone in a company they haven't personally visited and met with an HR representative. Refugees are assessed by job developers and placed according to their skills and companies' needs. Currently, the developers work with 65 local companies. Terry Loftus who helped Paul Ariik was "instrumental in building the network" with local employers.

Refugees, she said, "want what we want" in terms of jobs and job security. A Bosnian refugee recently told her: "I want a job I can keep the rest of my life." And, of course, it's difficult—for anyone—to find that now. It's unfortunate, she said, that many employers now go through temp agencies. "We don't like that, but that's the situation we face."

She says developers don't ask employers to treat refugees any differently than other employees. There are no "special favors"; they just ask them to give refugees a chance.

The challenge they face is that there are only so many job developers, jobs and hundreds of refugees looking for work. "Our office is swamped. Refugees aren't as happy as they could be." The needs exceed the office's resources. There are probably areas that could work better, she said. And one point to remember is that it's not just about getting refugees jobs, but helping them keep the jobs. "We could use a cadre of social workers." She spent an hour that morning with one employer about a refugee employee, and this took away time she may have had to help another refugee find a job.

Paul added that the refugee community needs to be educated (and he and others are trying to do this) about any cultural differences that may pose problems. For example, in some refugees' cultures, it isn't acceptable to work for a younger person or have a woman as a supervisor. These cultural differences need to be resolved. The same is true for educating U.S. employers about any negative biases they hold against refugees that might prevent them from hiring.

Another challenge for refugees, Paul said, is the online application process. Most refugees don't have access to computers, and don't know how to use them; yet many companies only have online employment applications.

Eric Rogers from SCORE, which offers free business counseling and mentoring, provided a frame of reference on entrepreneurship in the U.S. economy. In 2008, he said, of the 27 million businesses in the U.S., 21 had no employees. "There are a lot of

entrepreneurs out there,” he said. And this is good, since the “entry level jobs won’t be there” in the future, because of globalization and the information-technology revolution. He called entrepreneurs the “secret economy”, because there is little hard data on them.

One of the challenges for any new business is raising capital, and getting access to capital is particularly difficult for refugees. Some organizations are micro-lending, and SCORE tries to guide refugees to potential lenders. But sometimes, even if a refugee is successful in starting a business—say a store—he or she doesn’t have the marketing or business acumen to assess why a customer would shop at his or her store rather than someplace else.

Dominic echoed this challenge. Refugees who owned businesses in their homelands, tend to be more successful at starting businesses here, but then the “context” or “landscape” of doing business in the U.S. is so different that the businesses fail. They may not be aware of the capital costs, insurance needs, how to generate and maintain revenue, or how to comply with local and state codes. He pointed to a Somali shop that sells Somali goods and has a market base here, but the owners don’t understand zoning and codes, and Dominic and members of his organization are frequently on the phone trying to help the owners. In another example, refugees were successful at opening an African International restaurant very quickly, but then Dominic discovered the manager didn’t have a profit & loss statement, wasn’t keeping receipts and didn’t understand what the “tip” line was on the credit card receipt.

Northside Up offers clients help with developing a business plan, obtaining financing, and other services, but they also need to define: “How do you infuse a series of educational services to allow them to succeed?” The community needs to determine how to “tap into the energy” that refugees bring.

Question & Answers

Lisa Warnecke, an entrepreneur with her own consulting business, as a volunteer initiated informal efforts with several others to help refugees make and sell handmade sewed and knitted crafts. Beginning with the Art Mart across from City Hall during the holidays and continuing with other events, some have also placed and sold crafts in local stores. She learned that two refugees had yoga certificates from the United Nations, so helped to set up informal classes in White library.

Her role has been to make phone calls, offer transportation, give advice, and be a resource to make the connections happen. Some of the needed skills are fairly basic, such as how to make a calendar, write last names or organize an address book. The fundamental notion, she said, is to empower refugees to help themselves and to help other refugees. For instance, some refugees were English teachers in the refugee camps, and she asked why we couldn’t get those individuals who resettle here to help teach English here.

Sandra Barrett asked if the refugee community has a noticeable positive impact on local businesses. For example, the Pond Street Wegmans carries a large ethnic food section at the front of the store.

Eric said that there has to be a critical mass of an ethnic group or particular refugee group with specific needs for companies to cater or specialize to them.

Dominic said that many refugee businesses try to help refugees feel more at home. For example, there is a Vietnamese pool hall/café, a card-playing sandwich shop.

Nancy Shephard said that Springside Farm in Fabius has been providing lamb to many Muslim refugees and has come to understand the Muslim calendar pretty well. The owner was stumped, however, when refugees were placing lamb orders at the end of June. She finally asked one customer, "What is this holiday?" The customer gave her a baffled look and said, "Fourth of July." She said this speaks to how quickly and fervently some refugees adopt the U.S. as their new home.

Sarah said some clients she works with have found year-round work at farms who have had to develop side businesses to be successful during non-growing seasons. Dominic said Beak & Skiff hires a lot of refugees.

He also said that they were working with the former president of Morrisville State College to develop agricultural programs or a partnership, but that fell through when he resigned from the position.

Helen Malina from Interfaith Works said, "Farmers are some of their most loyal employers." There has been a challenge with transportation, she said, because the farms are outside of the public transportation route. IFW has transported some of the refugee workers, and the farmers have helped as well.

Employment and economic opportunities may come from trying to have a better understanding of the local industries in general. For example, it was important for IFW to understand how CNY farmers survive year round, and then get refugees involved in those other businesses.

Paul said that if there was a way to inform the ethnic communities, particularly refugees, of products and services they might need, that would help them take advantage of local resources. He said some refugees were travelling to Rochester to buy lamb. It would also be important to inform them of SCORE, Northside UP, etc.

Amy Thorna from the Onondaga County Public Library asked what happens when a refugee can only earn minimum wage.

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Mary said that refugees “do what they have to do to make do.” Their priorities are their family, education, jobs.... “They don’t really spend money.”

James said that at United Radio, refugees can move up through the ranks of jobs, depending on their skills and specific goals.

Dominic said he met with the head of the local Department of Social Services and learned that most individuals on its rolls do have employment, but it’s not enough to meet their needs. So, he said, “the system is subsidizing people who are working.”

The gap between the working poor and the middle class is widening. He called this a factor of the “contemporary American economy.” And so Northside Up is trying to train people for more middle class jobs in the construction, medical and education fields. For example, he said, St. Joseph’s is offering health-training courses.

Eric said that in general, it’s the second generation that’s able to get a better financial foothold.

Stephanie Horton from Bob’s School said that the local high school valedictorians have been younger generations from refugee communities.

Rachel Pollack, who volunteers to help refugees, asked if there is any data on the impact second generation refugees have on the economy.

Dominic said there was no hard data, but they do know that as refugees improve their education and lifestyle, they move into the suburbs. This is another reason to figure out how to make Syracuse a quality place to live to keep the middle class residents.