

*Onondaga Citizens League
2012 Study Committee Notes—Meeting on June 27, 2012
Meeting held at United Way, 518 James Street, Syracuse*

*Attendees: Felicia Castricone, Melissa Hidek, Don MacLaughlin, Helen Malina, Nader Maroun, Nancy McCarty, Sarah McIlvain, Robin Morgan, Peter Sarver, Olive Sephuma, Marsha Tait, Tashia Thomas, Nicole Watts, Nancy Zarach
Presenters: Patrick King, Harith Alnoamy, Joshua Eberle, Paul Driscoll and Susan Hamilton
Co-chairs: Kristen Heath, Heidi Holtz
OCL: Becky Sernett*

Summary

The housing committee shared the process of resettling the diverse range of refugees in the Syracuse community and discussed how decisions are made regarding housing, how refugees face challenges when trying to buy their first homes and what types of financing and resources are available to them.

The next OCL meeting will be on July 10 at 9 am at PEC, 605 James Street, Syracuse. A presentation will be given by the Crime & Safety subcommittee.

The final subcommittee presentation this month will be:

July 25—Youth & Education 12 noon (will be held at PEC, 620 James St., instead of United Way)

Housing Subcommittee

The panel was facilitated by Patrick King, housing manager for InterFaith Works (IFW) Center for New Americans. It included: Paul Driscoll, Syracuse's commissioner for neighborhood and business development; Harith Alnoamy, a refugee from Iraq who works at IFW as an employment specialist; Joshua Eberle, a law student and former housing coordinator at IFW; and Susan Hamilton, a loan officer at Syracuse Cooperative Federal Credit Union.

Patrick King, housing manager for IFW, emphasized there is "no cookie cutter" solution to finding housing for newly arrived refugees. While there is a list of requirements and a procedure IFW must follow, refugees' needs vary and are "defined on an individual, case-by-case basis." A single refugee has different needs than a family of eight, he said.

Most of his day is spent on post-arrival responsibilities, such as making home visits and negotiating landlord-tenant issues. He facilitates the relationships between landlords and tenants, and helps resolve any problems that can range from late payments to absentee landlords. Sometimes, he will even fix a minor issue with the apartment (say, a broken lightbulb) if that proves to be simpler than calling the landlord.

He also assists with emergency moves, such as a family whose home on the northside was destroyed recently by fire; this wasn't a refugee family, but a second-generation immigrant family. "There are no boundaries for who I can help with housing," he said. In another case, a family with a 6-month-old newborn was struggling with an absentee landlord. He found another home for them within six hours.

The IFW cooperates with a range of other NGO (non-governmental organizations), such as community groups and ethnic organizations. The goal is to build relationships and strengthen the community, and this underscores the work they do for Syracuse's new neighbors.

“We say the word refugees so much that they become a separate entity, but they are our neighbors.... They are here permanently now.”

Josh Eberle, a law student and former housing coordinator at IFW, said one way the community can facilitate a refugee’s resettlement is to recognize the differences between various refugee groups. “The Iraqi community comes with much different skills than do the Bhutanese,” he said. And these skills and the refugees’ backgrounds most likely will determine what types of services and education the refugees need to adjust to life in Syracuse.

A Bosnian refugee who lived in a home similar to what you find here has an easier transition with the home environment than, say, a Burmese refugee who has never seen a gas stove or used a light switch. He said not differentiating does a “disservice” to them.

As an example of the education some refugees may need, he said he once went to a home after the refugees complained of it being too cold in the winter. He discovered the heat was up to 90 degrees, and all of the windows were open. “Training has to be catered to individual groups,” he said.

Harith Alnoamy, a refugee from Iraq who works at IFW as an employment specialist, came to the United States in 2009. He pointed out that one significant way refugees differ from immigrants is that immigrants have time to plan for their move; refugees do not. Still, refugees’ goal is similar: “Our goal is to be successful in this new life.” And, he added, “everything is different here...education, health care, housing....” This makes it challenging, especially when the information is often given all at once and is difficult to digest.

Most refugees’ motivation is to buy a house, and he has been able to buy one for his family, but the process wasn’t easy. Not only did he have to navigate a new system and new culture, but his Islamic religion forbids him from paying interest on money borrowed. “It is a sin to pay interest,” he said. This challenge is faced by many in the Iraqi community. Fortunately, he was able to work out a deal with his landlord to serve as the mortgage. Alnoamy paid the downpayment, and pays down the mortgage in monthly installments (interest free). Not everyone may be as lucky as he was in finding a solution, he said.

Susan Hamilton, a loan officer at Syracuse Cooperative Federal Credit Union, said she will look into how her bank might be able to partner with lenders who could offer no-interest loans to the local Muslim community. Syracuse Cooperative is a small credit union that offers low cost checking and savings accounts, as well as a matched savings accounts to first time home-buyers who qualify for the special program. This matching program involves one-on-one counseling about home ownership and when the account owner has saved up \$1,875, the bank matches it four times, giving them \$7,500. This gives the future homeowner \$9,375—or 20% down on the loan for a home. “This can be the magic number,” she said.

She has worked with many immigrant and refugee families. Recently, she helped a large Congolese family. She has also helped families from Southern Sudan and Cuba. “This program works well for lots of folks,” she said.

Paul Driscoll, Syracuse’s commissioner for neighborhood and business development, said he is trying to help the city provide more affordable housing to its citizens. “There’s a dearth of affordable, quality housing,” he said. Currently, there are 1,800 vacant structures and 9,000 vacant units. But these units aren’t move-in ready, and he feels pressure from social services

who are dealing with maxed-out shelters and individuals whose hotel vouchers are used up to make these units available. The work the units need take time and money, though, and this is a major problem.

Over the past two years, the city has lost almost 50% in federal funds, he said, and this causes problems for not only housing refugees but for other Syracusans as well.

There are tax-credit incentives for developers, and he's currently working with some to bring units "online" that would be rent controlled and offer quality housing. This is the biggest project he's been working on since he became commissioner two-and-a-half years ago, he said. He pointed to a building on the Northside by St. Joseph's Hospital in which the developer is taking advantage of the tax credit program to rehab the structure into affordable rental housing units.

The city also receives funding through federal Community Development Block Grants that then provide monies to such nonprofit organizations as IFW and Catholic Charities so they can make housing improvements, etc.

"Where we're lacking is funding for private landlords," he said. He wants to create a funding network to help landlords make improvements to their properties. So far, though, they haven't been successful at offering this, he said.

He sees hope in a new joint land bank program. The city recently received approval to form a joint land bank that would redevelop tax-delinquent properties. According to a news story posted on May 17, 2012 on Syracuse.com¹: "The Greater Syracuse Property Development Corp., as the local land bank will be named, will function as an independent, not-for-profit corporation. It will acquire liens on tax-delinquent properties from the city and county, and either collect the delinquent taxes or foreclose if the owners won't pay. Seized properties would be marketed for redevelopment."

Driscoll said cities or other government entities are "cumbersome" when it comes to real estate, which is why it works with non-profits. There's also a regulatory part of his job—monitoring the condition of single and double-family properties.

Heidi Holtz asked what happens when refugees are initially settled into housing, and if it was considered temporary. Eberle said that IFW will find an apartment, furnish it, sign a lease in the refugees' name and pay the rent with the money the organization gets from the refugee family (through federal funds) for housing. The refugee, once he or she arrived, signed an agreement for the IFW to act on his or her behalf. The refugee, then, might not see a landlord for a month or so or maybe longer.

King said he acts almost like a property manager for the tenants and landlords, and that many refugees and landlords find this helpful. If there is a problem, the refugees would contact him, he said, and he would work with the landlord. After a 3-month period, he introduces them to the landlord, but he may help facilitate the relationship for a period for up to 5 years.

Nancy McCarty asked about a vacant apartment building on James Street. Driscoll said the complex foreclosed, and was bought by a developer and is being renovated.

¹ See www.syracuse.com/news/index.ssf/2012/05/post_596.html

Peter Sarver asked about grouping ethnic groups near one another and whether or not this is helpful to or hindering their assimilation.

“We don’t really look to assimilation,” Eberle said. Many immigrants are typically resettled on the Northside, and this is just how it has worked throughout the city’s history. The Northside offers cheap, affordable housing with landlords the IFW and other resettlement agencies trust. He tried to settle three Bhutanese families on the Southside, and within two weeks they broke the lease and moved back to the Northside. “They get frustrated,” he said. There are safety issues, he said, with being an ethnic and/or religious minority, and the refugee families may feel particularly vulnerable.

When many refugees do buy homes, they tend to go into the suburbs. He said refugees see the same problems that “we do” with the city: schools, roads, vacant housing and crime.

Hamilton said that in her experience, refugees have bought properties in the city. “I wouldn’t give up on the refugees [by thinking they] might flee the city as soon as they can afford to buy housing.”

King said that grouping like people works, even if the people “up top” don’t like it.

Sarah McIlvain said she has heard complaints that refugee families are getting access to much-desired large family public housing units after a matter of months when some city residents have been on the waiting list for a long time.

Holtz responded that she knows that in Central Village, in particular, there are specific requirements for residents and the refugee families may fit the criteria more easily.

Eberle elaborated by saying that in some cases, “It’s easier to be a new American than an old American.” For example, some public housing units bar felons from renting, and this may be even if it’s the father of a family whose drug conviction is 20 years old.

Driscoll said there are many variables that go into the public housing decisions. A family from Somalia with 12 children will have priority over a family with 5 children. And, he acknowledged that the names on the waiting list for the units and vouchers number in the thousands. Public housing is “divvied up by size and need.” He’s not aware, though, of “anyone jumping that line.”

Helen Malina said that if the housing is designated for a disabled resident, a disabled individual who applies for housing at just the right time may be able to move to the head of the line. But her understanding is that the “waitlist is sacrosanct.”

Part of the problem, Driscoll said, is that the majority of the public housing—particularly large units—is on the Southside, and the city needs more diversity in its public housing offerings. The new development on James Street he referred to earlier will have about 17 affordable units, and some may be as big as four bedroom.

Olive Sephuma asked if there is anything that can be done to better welcome refugees into a neighborhood to mitigate problems before they happen.

King said that when he would help refugees move in, he would try to encourage the neighbors to get to know the refugees. But his time is “limited.” IFW is creating a “strong group of volunteers” who will do some of this work, however.

Malina emphasized that while the concern to alert neighbors to help make them more aware and welcoming of the refugees must include a respect for the privacy of the refugees who are part of a particularly vulnerable population, and so the relationship-building should be done on a more intimate basis.

Don MacLaughlin asked if there are landlords who have refused to rent to refugees. King said it is most often the other way around—the IFW has refused to work with a few landlords. Since he came on board, he has evaluated the landlord list and brought on new landlords who work better with them and removed the ones who don't. For how hard some landlords work to help the IFW and new tenants, he pointed to an example of a landlord who got notice that he needed to get a unit ready within 24-hours for a new family. Unfortunately, the family was delayed, and so the landlord did the work and now has an empty unit. But, King said, "He knows that he'll get the apartment filled eventually."

MacLaughlin then said that a friend of his owns property and rents it to a Sudanese family and is very pleased with the tenants. They call him "grandpa", and the friend has enjoyed local events with the tenants. For example, he took them to the Balloonfest.

King invited folks to contact him if they know of good landlords he could work with. "I'm always looking to develop good relationships with good property owners." He added that some of the landlords he works with are former refugees from Vietnam, Bosnia, Russia and Laos (for example). "They love renting to refugees," he said.

Malina said there is a Syracuse Refugee Landlord Association that meets to discuss problems, concerns, etc. "I love our landlords," she said, "and I have to say, quietly, on the Northside."

McIlvain asked if the properties owned by out-of-state landlords could be mapped. She said there were many rumors that half of the Northside is owned by New York City landlords.

Driscoll said yes, it could be mapped. They use the legal address as the landlord's address.

Eberle said that some of the individuals they refer to as "landlords" are actually property managers. They aren't owners. There used to be a problem with "slum landlords" who acted as property managers for owners in New York City, and these managers would steal the money for over-charged repairs and/or rent money and then disappear. The owners had no idea what was going on.

To point to how complicated it can be, King said in one instance he's working with an owner who lives in Connecticut, a property management company located in New York City, and a property manager who lives locally. "We try to eventually get to the owner," he said in reference to mediating problems.

Nader Maroun, a city Common Council member, thanked the committee and involved citizens for their work on this issue. He has seen how the children of refugees have been "real leaders in our schools." He is of Lebanese descent and said he appreciates the presence of the refugees and what they bring to the city. "We are becoming a better city because of the work here," he said of the study committee.

Nicole Watts of Hopeprint, a not-for-profit that works to build relationships with the refugee community, said she recently welcomed a refugee into the Hopeprint home for dinner and the

refugee said he has been in the United States for 3 years, and this was the first time he was welcomed into a Western home. He was thankful for the opportunity.

The next OCL meeting will be July 10 at 9 a.m. at PEC, 620 James St., when the Crime and Safety subcommittee will give its presentation.