

Onondaga Citizens League
 2012 Study Committee Notes—Meeting on October 25, 2012
 Meeting held at PEC, 620 James St., Syracuse

Attendees: Amela Begovic, Felicia Castricone, Dan Cowen, Karen Kitney, Don MacLaughlin, Pat MacLaughlin, Helen Malina, Nancy McCarty, Brian Moor, Jonnell Robinson, Eric Roges, Lois Schroeder, Nancy Shepard, Sarah Walton, Lisa Warnecke
 Co-chairs: Kristen Heath & Heidi Holtz
 OCL: Sandra Barrett & Becky Sernett

OCL Study Enters Report-Writing Stage

The study committee meetings are taking a brief break and will resume at a future date. Becky Sernett, the study writer, is working on an early draft of the study report. Committee members are encouraged to contact Sandra Barrett, Heidi Holtz or Kristen Heath if they have study recommendations that could be published in the report. “Best in Class” examples for how other communities help refugees and suggestions for areas that should be researched further can also be given to Barrett, Holtz or Heath. If you have a story offering a personal viewpoint of what it is like to either be a refugee or assist refugees, please contact Sernett. All suggestions and stories can be kept anonymous, if so requested. Email contact information is listed below:

Sandra Barrett—ssbarret@uc.syr.edu
 Heidi Holtz—heidi@giffordfoundation.org
 Kristen Heath—Kristen.Heath@sjhsyr.org
 Becky Sernett—rsernett@gmail.com

Meeting Summary

Study committee members shared their visions for Syracuse and the refugees who resettle here. Some recommendations were made to help make these dreams reality, and suggestions were offered for what programs, organizations and resettlement cities to research for possible applications for Syracuse.

Bold Visions

The study committee was asked, What’s your bold vision for Syracuse for the next five years? Heath read some responses from the survey that everyone on the OCL listserv was invited to participate in, and others within the committee offered their suggestions at the meeting. Holtz recorded the visions and below is a listing of the notes:

- from survey – more trainings, mentoring and cultural exchange opportunities for refugees
- from survey – house all Ethnic Community Based Organizations (ECBOs) in one location
- from survey – help refugee youth gain economic independence and vocational training

- from survey – create a Northside International Village
- More professional training for refugees
- Everyone has a basic cultural understanding of refugees’ homelands and cultures
- Everyone celebrates the rich diversity, the “symphony” of the United Nations of Syracuse
- Refugees become citizens and become civically engaged in our region
- That these bold visions become true because historically we’ve been an immigrant community
- Public safety – that everyone will feel safe
- Legal driving is important – driving lessons
- Local governance proactively supports refugee engagement
- That a clearinghouse of resources (online and elsewhere) is available to anyone who needs it, particularly for literacy
- A partnership between youth (who need jobs) and seniors (who need help)
- A one-stop shop/building for refugee assistance, ECBOs, medical, public safety, etc.
- Refugees will feel welcome living anywhere in the community, not just within their own enclaves
- Sports and other athletic activities could be used to build cross-cultural relations
- Refugees participate in government through a mayor’s advisory council
- Syracuse becomes a model, particularly for students, for how to build diverse businesses and shared prosperity through student–refugee collaborations
- A cabinet or task force continues to meet to carry on these conversations
- A cable channel that’s dedicated to refugee/immigrant films, oral histories, etc.
- That refugees can attain the same goals and ideals as native-born Americans

Getting There

Next, the committee offered suggestions for how to make these visions real. Some recommendations included information on what innovative programs and collaborations are already happening in Syracuse. Holtz said that these are examples of individuals and groups taking ownership of a vision for improvement, and such ownership is necessary for any visions to be realized.

- In process—The Onondaga Historical Association (OHA), Everson Museum of Art, Onondaga County Public Library and JOBSPlus! have applied for additional funding to expand an existing program in which refugees learn the history of the community not only by touring the museums, etc., but also by visiting local banks, restaurants and businesses. This introduces refugees to the language of living in Syracuse and makes them more comfortable navigating the city.
- In process—Five refugees, varying in age, gender, country and length of residency, will be interviewed as part of an oral history project at the OHA. The stories will be available to the OCL study.
- In process, but needs further development— Build relationships between refugee and U.S. youth at a young age. Good U.S. students could help refugee kids as

peer mentors in schools, and vice versa. Catholic Charities Northside CYO does use teen mentors in after school program, but not in a school program. Use future teacher organizations? The Catholic Charities Northside CYO summer program uses a lot of high school volunteers.

- In process—There are existing programs that build native-born and new U.S. student interaction: Southern Poverty Law Center (kids change what tables they sit at to meet other students); Seeds of Peace, Lutheran Volunteer Corps.
- Empower refugee students in general—in their schools and in their families.
- In process—Videos that introduce new refugee families and students to schools are available in the SCSD at Catholic Charities, but it's unclear how many organizations and individuals know about them. They are tailored to very new refugees.
- Sometimes policies—of the Syracuse City School District and local government, for example—get in the way of helping refugees. Policy reform may be difficult to address, but it shouldn't be ignored.
- More orientation videos are available from around the county – many are free; we should acquire some. Also, maybe we should have local films made specific to Syracuse.
- What if more refugees settled in the suburbs instead of the city? This has been tried, but many refugees prefer to stay near family and friends; it can depend on the refugee's culture.
- Professional analysis of services here and elsewhere.
- More volunteer tutors at the SCSD.

Other Developments

Also at the meeting, Jonnell Robinson, an assistant professor of geography at Syracuse University (SU), said she met with the new director of English as a Second Language department in the SCSD. She learned that of the 2,200 students who don't speak English, half of them are refugees. She will type up her notes and make them available to the committee.

Sarah Walton, an SU student and Robinson's intern, reported on her research for best practices. She said some of the information she is discovering focuses on specific ethnic populations that could have broader applications. She also investigated what type of resettlement orientations programs are available to refugees and those who work with them. So far, she said, there isn't a program that's comprehensive enough to orient not only refugees but also volunteers and organizations that work with them.

Barrett introduced Daniel Cowen to the committee. Cowen is a senior at SU who manages the Know Your Neighbor (KYN) project. KYN promotes cultural and educational exchanges between refugees and Syracusans, and encourages entrepreneurship. Cowen hopes to encourage SU students to stay in the city post-graduation. Recently, KYN hosted a panel discussion at Hendricks Chapel on campus to inform students about Syracuse as a refugee resettlement city. Felicia Castricone of Catholic Charities, for example, was part of the panel.