

*2012 Study Committee Notes—Meeting on July 10, 2012
Meeting held at PEC, 620 James Street, Syracuse*

Attendees: Muna Alane, Melissa Hidek, Karen Kitney, Nancy McCarty, Sarah McIlvain, Brian Moore, Robin Morgan, Tara Pistorese, Paul Predmore, Eric Rogers, Peter Sarver, Lois Schroeder, Olive Sephuma, Nancy Shepard, Marsha Tait, Tashia Thomas, Amy Thorna, Nancy Zarach

Presenters: Det. Dzenan Selimovic, Syracuse City Police Department (presentation linked to http://onondagacitizensleague.org/ocl_studies/2012/presentations.htm); Helen Malina, Interfaith Works; John Anderson, Syracuse City School District ESL; James “Pat” Tracy, Hiscock Legal Aid Immigration Project Attorney

Co-chairs: Heidi Holtz

OCL: Sandra Barrett, Becky Sernett

Summary

The Crime, Safety and Law subcommittee, facilitated by Sarah McIlvain, presented data from Syracuse City Police Det. Dzenan Selimovic regarding the types of crimes in which refugees were the victims and alleged perpetrators. James “Pat” Tracy, a lawyer with Hiscock Legal Aid Society, discussed his work with immigrant related legal matters, and John Anderson, a teacher with the Syracuse City School District, offered a viewpoint on issues within the district. Helen Malina, from Interfaith Works, contributed the perspective of a representative from a resettlement agency.

The next meeting will be July 25 at 12 noon at PEC, 620 James St. The Youth & Education subcommittee will give its presentation.

Crime, Safety and Law

Sarah McIlvain started the discussion by emphasizing that there are many rumors about refugees regarding crime, and today’s presentation aims to provide data to combat these rumors.

Syracuse City Police Det. Dzenan Selimovic, a former refugee from Bosnia, says he takes any issues regarding refugees as “personal.” He arrived as a refugee in the United States in 1998, worked as a Catholic Charities case manager, and when he became a police officer, he was asked to “bridge the gap” between refugees and police. “We have to see them as everyone else,” he said, capable of committing crimes and of being the victims of crimes.

“A lot of refugees did commit a crime overseas and commit crimes here,” he said.

Unfortunately, there is no database that tracks specifically refugee-related crimes. (There’s no box or variable to check that says the victim or perpetrator was a refugee.) But, he was able to go through the database and try to locate information in which individuals were listed as non-citizens. He said the data he presents will not be “100 percent accurate” but it’s as close as he could get. He presents the data with his experience as an officer, and with the geographic location of the crimes committed, and

from this we can get a good picture of the refugee issue regarding crime and safety.

Data from 2006 through July 2012 for which the victims of the crime were listed as non-citizens, there were 92 reported incidents. This number is “actually higher,” he said, because many crimes go unreported. Larceny/burglaries led the list with 22 reported incidents, followed by sex offenses, with 12 reported incidents. Sex offenses are “huge” in the refugee community, he said. “It’s normal in a lot of countries” to commit sexual acts that we consider crimes here. He pointed to an example of abduction of young women. “It’s called stealing your daughter for marriage,” he said. “This may be bizarre in your eyes, but normal in their communities.”

Next came domestic violence incidents, with 11 reported during this period. In one case in 2004, a Bosnian man killed his wife and then himself. There is “a lot” of domestic violence, he said. Much of it goes unreported.

As to why crimes may go unreported (besides a cultural difference in what is a “crime”), the detective explained: “A lot of stuff refugees won’t report. They’re afraid of police, of being victimized by police because it happened back home.”

Sometimes refugees don’t understand the laws. It’s a different country, and there are different laws. What’s normal in Congo isn’t “normal” here.

There were 8 incidents regarding children, and some of this may be a cultural difference of allowing kids to be away from home (“let them run”) and on their own all day. And there were: 7 missing person reports; 5 assaults; 5 robberies; 2 forgeries (mainly abusing welfare system); 2 suicides (in one case it was an Iraqi boy who was a homosexual and faced pressure from his family that it “wasn’t right”); 1 stabbing; and 1 DWI (this last number is “totally underestimated,” he said. Sixteen incidents fell in the “other” category, which includes suspicious people and suspicious incidents.

The detective will get contacted if a crime involves a refugee. He is the “go-to” person.

The detective wanted to dispel a rumor that there are refugee gangs in Syracuse. He said there was a gang of Burmese refugees who thought it was “cool” to live the gangster life, but it no longer exists. Syracuse Burmese would join the Utica Burmese and drive around the Northside of Syracuse and beat up African Americans. And then, boys from the Highland Boys gang would take revenge on anyone who looked Asian. The detective said many refugees who try to adopt the gangster lifestyle (with clothing, music and posing with guns, etc.) think it’s “funny” or a “game,” and don’t understand how serious it is. The department talked to the parents of the refugees in the “gangs” and also tried to help them understand that it is a deadly and illegal “game.” The department helped with a large federal prosecution of Syracuse gangs about six months ago.

Next, the detective showed a map of Syracuse where the incidents took place, and most

of them occurred on the Northside. This reinforces his assumptions about refugees being involved (as perpetrators or victims) of the crimes.

He said in some cases, it is the refugees fighting amongst themselves. He retold an incident during which a 45-year-old female beat up a 17-year-old male (both refugees) by hitting him in the face with a shoe. They arrested her because, he said, it probably would have escalated to a homicide.

In cases where refugees are perpetrators, many incidents involve domestic violence. There are also cases in which boys and girls skip school or steal from stores. There are violations of open container laws and of music being too loud. Some refugees are cited for driving without a license.

In more serious cases, there are refugees who are arrested for soliciting a prostitute. And then there are refugees who become prostitutes. “I know four or five Bosnians out there right now [working as prostitutes],” he said.

Not many are arrested for drug possession, but he knows that some refugees do use illegal drugs.

The “911” call volume (from refugees) has increased over the years, and he said some of this may be due to refugees feeling “more comfortable calling police.”

As communication is essential to police investigations, he has worked with other officers to give them tools to assist their efforts. Examples of these tools include sheets with pictures of guns and logos of car makes to help refugees, who don’t speak English well, communicate to officers. He also distributed several thousand cards that can act as IDs for refugees, listing their name, address, spoken language and individuals who can translate for them. When interpreters are needed, the department has a list of volunteer interpreters to use. There are also other individuals within the department who speak other languages, including: Arabic, German, American Sign Language and Ukrainian.

James “Pat” Tracy described the Upstate New York Immigration Law Project, which is a collaboration with Rochester and Northeastern NY Legal Aid Societies. It offers representation for a 17-county region in such immigration matters as: travel documents, petitions for asylum or temporary protected status, and work permits. The service is free to clients, but Tracy acknowledges that, “Our resources are really, really limited.” He is the only lawyer with Hiscock who works on the project. The firm has been fortunate to get interns from Syracuse University to help.

In 2011, he helped 30 refugees with legal issues. Many of them came directly through three agencies: InterFaith Works, Catholic Charities and Bob’s School. “They pretty much have a direct line to me,” he said for how the agencies reach him regarding refugees who need help. However, the process is informal, and there is no “official”

procedure. “They just started calling [me],” he said. “[Asking,] ‘What do you think of this problem?’”

Once a potential client comes to him for help, he conducts an intake interview that reviews the problem and the client’s options. Then, he sends duplicates of this information to the Rochester Legal Aid so its lawyer can review it, too.

Helen Malina, from InterFaith Works (IFW), announced three events occurring that week at the organization, including a workshop on Friday, July 13, that offers training for individuals and attorneys involved in the kind of legal work that Tracy spoke about today.

She thanked Tracy and Det. Selimovic for their efforts “to make the departments where they work go above and beyond.” Of the problems the detective addressed, she said alcoholism is a concern that needs to be focused on in the refugee community. An international alcoholism recovery group is being designed by IFW to help, and the meetings will include a translator.

She shared an unfortunate story of a Burmese refugee who was convicted of a DWI and hit and run, and now the woman is in jail and “will probably be deported” after her sentence is completed. She was the breadwinner of the family and had two children. Malina said cases like these are “lose-lose” situations. Also, they “show how hard resettlement is.”

IFW has certified translators who work with the DMV to communicate with refugees the responsibilities and laws regarding having a license to drive.

John Anderson teaches ESL at Henninger High and Dr. King Elementary schools. His wife was a Laotian refugee. He reminded the committee that: “This is not the first country refugees are in. It might be the third or fourth.” And in these other countries, “usually the police are trying to get money from refugees [illegally].”

Anderson emphasized that the problems involving refugees in Syracuse are community-wide problems, and they should be addressed holistically. Students’ success in schools depends on “personal motives, family motives and academic background,” he said.

One way to encourage community engagement (on many levels) is to organize small gatherings, like dinners or picnics, in which police and refugees (or just Syracuse residents) can meet and talk with police. “When you treat people like humans, the anger factor drops incredibly,” he said. He added that these could offer “excellent opportunities to dispel myths about Islam. There are many Muslims in our communities.” And this, he said, included Det. Selimovic, who is a Muslim.

During the Q&A period, Nancy Shepard asked if the school district had a tolerance education program to help refugees transition into the schools and communities.

Anderson said he didn't know, but he thinks the newspaper could be a useful tool in this matter.

Sandra Barrett asked how refugee crime and safety issues usually play out in schools. Det. Selimovic said there are officers in every school. Anderson added that the officers have good relationships with the students. In terms of student safety and prejudice against refugees, Det. Selimovic and Anderson discussed how refugees are just as capable of picking on other refugees as are U.S. citizens. "My brother [who went to Nottingham High School]," Det. Selimovic said, "used to make fun of other refugees." When Selimovic was in Germany, he used to "do that stuff too." The ethnic diversity of the Northside is one reason why so many refugees are placed there.

Peter Sarver said he was surprised that a refugee might be sent back (deported) to his or her homeland because of legal or criminal trouble. "How do you send a refugee back?" he asked.

Det. Selimovic said, "To remove a refugee, it's very difficult." And the U.S. wouldn't necessarily send him or her back to the original country. Sometimes there are holding centers, such as the Buffalo Federal Detention Center in Batavia. This is just like a prison, he said.

Tracy said that if an individual "commits a deportable offense," first he or she must serve the sentence, and it depends on the severity of the sentence for where he or she serves, and then the individual undergoes immigration court proceedings. These can be appealed. There is a parole-like period, too, during which he or she can be released under supervision.

And, there are situations in which individuals don't have a home to go back to. Cubans are not returned to Cuba. "Basically, they're in a twilight zone," he said. "We have loads of these folks in Syracuse," he added (meaning not specifically Cubans, but individuals who don't have a place to return to). These individuals operate "under the radar and are working without [proper] authorization."

The discussion then moved briefly to undocumented immigrants in the area.

Muna Alane, a refugee from Iraq, said her son was ticketed for riding in a car without a seatbelt. She complained about the word "guilty" on the citation, which asked for her son to admit guilt and pay the fine. "The word, 'guilty', in our country is a big word." She would pay the money, but she doesn't like the word, "guilty."

Det. Selimovic said this is a "cultural" concern and that "not having a seatbelt on, you are guilty. This is how it is in America. ... As soon as you start accepting it, it will be easier for you."

Heidi Holtz asked if there could be cultural competency training for officers so that language isn't used that is too offensive or they could use language that is easier understood.

Selimovic said that refugees should be educated about the U.S. and its laws before they come to the country. He said they can't expect each officer to be sensitive to each cultural connotation of the English language and U.S. laws. One of the problems, though, he said is that many officers or younger generations lack social skills in general, and this needs to be improved. "Officers don't know how to speak to Americans," he said. But, he added, "You can't fix everybody."

In concluding comments, Tracy said the firm also offers services to victims of domestic violence through the International Victims Project and works with Vera House in Syracuse.

Anderson's final comment emphasized that we need to "look at the whole Syracuse community in terms of crime and safety."

Malina said IFW is offering a program in which individuals can come in and talk to a lawyer pro bono. This is a one-evening per month event, and there has only been one session so far, but the program seems "priceless," she said.

Det. Selimovic said everyone should reach out to help the refugee community, because refugees' contributions to Syracuse are "priceless."