

Fostering Refugee Empowerment in Community Building Efforts Webinar
Transcript
October 9, 2014

Slide 1:

- Thank you for joining us today.
- Thank ORR for making today's webinar possible. This is the last webinar in this fiscal year's webinar series. Together we've covered a lot of territory: schools, communications/reframing refugees, engaging mainstream leaders in our work, and now arguably the most important aspect of our work of all: engaging refugees. How is it that we move beyond basic service provision, which no doubt lays the groundwork for all that is possible, and provide refugees the opportunities and the encouragement to be civically engaged in our communities?

Slide 2:

- As we look across the different strategies we use to foster greater refugee welcome, it's clear that whether we're talking about contact, leadership or communications, refugees need to be a meaningful, central part of our work

Slide 3:

- If our efforts to help receiving communities understand refugees in a meaningful way don't involve refugees themselves – front and center – then we will always fall flat.

Slide 4:

- Today we will hear from a number of experts who have been successfully engaging refugees in the community. We are very excited about today's line-up, because each speaker looks at these issues from a very different, yet complementary, angle.
- Bao Nguyen is going to be providing our opening remarks today, to provide some inspiration on what's possible when we encourage refugees to engage in the community. Bao is a graduate of the New America Leaders Project, an effort to help immigrants develop the skills to successfully run for political office and help shape our democracy. Bao serves on the school board in Garden Grove, CA (part of Orange County) and is currently running for mayor. If you google Bao, you'll see that he's considered to be one of Orange County's rising stars. Bao is originally from Vietnam.
- Then we'll hear from Muktar Idhow, who leads an ethnic-based community organization in Manchester, NH called the Organization for Refugee and Immigrant Success. Muktar is from Somalia and will discuss the special role EBCO's can play in helping engage refugees in the community.
- Our third speaker is Folabi Olagbaju. Folabi is an immigrant from Nigeria and works for LIRS, where he leads and directs the LIRS national grassroots mobilization program. Folabi will discuss his community organizing work.
- Our final speaker is Zeljka Karvavitzza who arrived to the United States as a refugee from Bosnia and works as a case manager and promise jobs counselor with Iowa Bureau of Refugee Services. She is also a UNHCR Refugee Congress Delegate representing the State of Iowa.
- After our speakers make some brief remarks, we encourage you to send in

your questions and participate in our moderated discussion. We have some great talent on the phone with us today, so let's all make the most of this opportunity to get our questions answered.

- So now I will turn this over to Bao to kick us off.

Slide 5 (Bao Nguyen):

- Came to the U.S. as a small child after being born in a refugee camp in Thailand
- Did not possess any citizenship anywhere until he became a U.S. citizen at 12
- Inspired by how his story connects to the stories of others
- Wants to make community better for all Americans, including immigrants and refugees
- Grateful for the New American Leaders Project for helping him frame his story to inspire others
- Running for mayor of where he grew up
- Excited to hear remarks from the panel

Slide 6 (Mukhtar Idhow, Organization for Refugee and Immigrant Success)

- Former refugee from Somalia
- Formed Ethnic Community Based Organization in order to support refugees and immigrants
- Evolution of ORIS' Work
 - o Created in 2006 by Somali Bantu leaders in Manchester
 - o Provided translation and interpretation regarding U.S./NH schools, healthcare, and social services
 - o Received two rounds of ORR funding
 - o Variety of services to Somali Bantu, Bhutanese, Congolese, adolescent refugees, and refugees interested in agriculture

Slide 7:

- New American Sustainable Agriculture Project & Fresh Start Farms marketing collective (2008)
 - o Developed multiple programs to respond to variety of needs from community
 - o Way to give Somali women a place to go to work and support their families
 - o Supported 40 refugees over the last 5 years

Slide 8:

- Farm and Food Leaders and Community Computer Lab Program
 - o Two programs for youth
 - o Response to lack of skills in youth
 - o Training 30 youth in computer lab and 12 in farm and food

Slide 9:

- Refugee Leadership – Interpretation for Social Justice
 - o Partnership with National Immigrant Farming Initiative
 - o Brought refugees and immigrants together for two day workshops
 - o Training young leaders to effectively help their community

Slide 10:

- Diverse Leadership – inclusion of receiving community

- Need partnerships to be successful
- Manchester Immigrant Integration Initiative
 - Opportunity to bring national leaders to meet with local refugees

Slide 11 (Folabi Olagbaju, LIRS):

- Community Organizing: Empowering Former Refugees to be Leaders and Advocates
 - LRS' long track record of successful refugee resettlement
 - Priority to empower migrants and refugees to be strong advocates
 - LIRS offers opportunities to contribute talents, mentor others and exercise leadership to create a more robust and longer-term welcome

Slide 12:

- Leadership Training and Advocacy
 - Bringing together refugee leaders for 3-day training designed to hone leadership skills, network; and advocate for issues of concern
 - Lifting up the voices of all refugees to promote welcoming communities around country

Slide 13:

- Academy Highlights
 - 51 former refugees from 23 states and representing 16 countries of origin
 - Key portions of training led by refugees
 - Legislative advocacy training and Congressional visits
 - Action plan development – to make sure that the work continues after the academy
 - Each region had a team coordinator to make sure that they stayed engaged

Slide 14:

- Lessons Learned (during the training)
 - No substitute for face-to-face meetings to build a network of leaders and develop lasting relationships
 - Training is not a one off experience. Important to build a structure for sustained engagement
 - Create leadership opportunities for team members and support network for their efforts
 - Be cognizant of, and respectful of former refugees' time and prevailing situation (make sure you are scheduling so that they can attend)

Slide 15: World Refugee Day Advocacy Event

- “My greatest success has been my ability to encourage and empower fellow refugees to have a voice” – Omar Bah, 2013 Refugee Academy Participant and Trainer for 2014 Refugee Academy
- Former refugees led the training

Slide 16 (Zeljka Karvavitz): Lessons for Refugee Resettlement

- There are limitations in the services that refugee resettlement agencies can offer. However, you can empower your clients with some good planning and the right people.
- A story about refugee woman from Burma. Resettled with our agency and we provided basic services. Later she stopped going to ESL classes. When she visited the woman in her home she found out that the client did not know how to walk in winter shoes and was struggling to leave her home due to ice and snow. They were able to help her get better shoes, so that she could continue going to class and leaving the home. Often agencies think about the big barriers, but not the smaller barriers.
- Individualized case management
- Extended cultural orientation
- Empowering refugees to reach self-sufficiency
- Elderly services

Slide 17: Lessons for Refugee Resettlement

- Women's empowerment program
- Medical and mental health case management
- Advocate for receiving expanded health and mental health screenings overseas
- Ensure that refugees are aware of and have access to the benefits of the new healthcare reform laws.
- Resettlement agencies start the process of helping refugees in their later community building efforts.

Slide 18: Moderated Discussion

- How could we better engage refugee youth in community work?
 - o Mukhtar – Bilingual staff who already have ongoing relationships with the families are a great resource for reaching out to youth. By supporting the family, you build a good relationship with the children and can recruit them later.
 - o Folabi – If youth are engaged, they can help integrate their parents into the community. Mentorship is very important. We have used youth soccer as a way to do mentorship and engage youth in work. Important to meet them where they are. When you actively engage them, the impact goes beyond just them.
 - o An audience member mentioned that s/he was able to include leadership and community building activities in ESL classes.
- Advice or resources for training refugees in public speaking and storytelling
 - o Folabi – During the training he described, people were trained in storytelling. Purpose of telling stories is to connect with people about shared values. Part of this is giving refugees help in being comfortable sharing their stories and telling them in ways that are very impactful.
 - o Bao – Saw some images in a Southeast Asian archive that told people's stories and were very moving. Art can play a role in this storytelling. Also, the New American Leaders project which he participated in does

trainings around the country to help new Americans run for office. Part of that is sharing stories. Foundation of this work is creating a safe space.

- Are there examples of long-term and established ECBOs guiding newly arrived and newly established ECBOs? How do you bridge different refugee groups with different experiences?
 - o Zeljka – In Iowa, Southeast Asian refugees were the first to be resettled. There is a very strong Southeast Asian community in Des Moines. When the first Burmese were resettled, many community members and organizations jumped in. Beneficial for both sides. Eventually helped establish Burmese Association.
- How do I empower a refugee community to organize itself without taking over the effort myself as an outsider?
 - o Mukhtar – Sometimes you can identify early leaders through resettlement agencies. Then you can start gathering contacts. Try to invite those contacts to events, so you can meet them and get to know them.

Slide 19: Speaker Contacts

- Bao Nguyen, Orange County – trustee.bao@gmail.com
- Mukhtar Idhow, ORIS – midhow@refugeesuccess.org, www.refugeesuccess.org
- Folabi Olagbaju, LIRS, FOlagbaju@lirs.org
- Zeljka Krvavica, Iowa Bureau of Refugee Services, zkrvavi@dhs.stat.ia.us

Slide 20:

- We have some additional resources for you. Visit the [New American Leaders website](#) for this hot-off-the-press score card and see how your state ranks when it comes to electing immigrants to public office. We promise there are surprises in here for you.
- Another great resource to keep in mind is UNHCR's refugee congress. Check out their website to learn who the refugee delegates are who they have identified as leaders in their own communities – these folks are potentially great resources for you. The refugee congress's most recent work has brought together refugee resettlement and asylum partners and government agencies with LGBTI organizations. The aim of the conference was to strengthen the connections between those who work with refugees and asylees and those who work with the LGBTI community, with the goal of improving access to services and support to LGBTI refugees and asylum seekers. The Refugee Congress will continue to foster similar conversations in the months ahead and look forward to making stronger connections with members of their communities. Check out [their website](#) for more.
- Welcoming Institute: every year Welcoming America hosts a one-day session on how to foster welcoming communities. We just had a very successful training in Atlanta in August, and are looking forward to making the in-depth training even bigger and better next year. We love to receive applications

from people with a refugee background, so whether you are a refugee yourself or you work with other refugees in your community who would benefit from this training, we hope you will look for application materials when they are released this spring. Visit www.welcomingrefugees.org to sign up for updates.

- Finally, we just want to thank everyone who made National Welcoming Week such a success. From Alaska to NH, from CO to FL, from CA to VA and everywhere in between, there were festivals, citizenship ceremonies, gardening projects and welcoming proclamations that celebrated the rich diversity in our communities. Thank you for all of you who hosted your own welcoming events the week of September 15, and we are looking forward to making 2015 an even bigger celebration.
- So that wraps up our session today. We will be sending out links to the webinar recording, and all of the materials will also be available on our Welcoming Refugees website, www.welcomingrefugees.org. If you haven't signed up for updates yet, please do, and please do share your refugee engagement promising practices and success stories with us.