**Celebrating World Refugee Day: Welcoming Refugees Communications Contest Winners**

**June 29, 2015**

**Slide 1**

Susan: Thank you for joining us today for our Virtual World Refugee Celebration. We hope you are ready to celebrate, and we have a lot to celebrate. Many of you have hosted World Refugee Day celebrations this month and have found new ways to bring people together and share the positive stories of refugees. We really applaud you for your efforts and have been excited to follow so much news coverage from coast to coast and from around the world. We are really seeing how positive messages of refugee contributions are taking hold. It was really with that thought that we realized there was no better time to also celebrate the Welcoming Refugees Communications Contest Winners. We think that you’ll find the examples highlighted on our webinar today to be both interesting and inspiring, and we hope that they will be helpful to you as you find ways to weave positive communications into your everyday work. So before we hear from the winners and learn a little bit more about their communications approaches, I wanted to share just a little bit with you about the basics of the Welcoming Refugees Communications Contest.

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Susan: First, I wanted to share the selection criteria that we used as we looked at the different applications that came in from across the country. Trying to define what really made for a strong Welcoming Refugees communications effort. So the criteria that we used is listed here; you’ll see that it is fairly straight forward. We were looking for a consistent use of positive language and framing of refugees, refugee resettlement, and refugee welcome. We wanted to make sure that the efforts really had a polished, professional look and that the images of refugees were shown in a positive light. We were also looking or ways in which welcoming strategies might be incorporated; strategies like engaging local leaders or building meaningful contact between refugees and the receiving communities. And, finally, we were really interested in seeing a broader theme that promoted unity between refugees and receiving communities somehow evident in the effort.

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Susan: And to help us with the selection and to help us look at that criteria and judge some of the applications we received, we were really lucky to benefit from a wonderful steering committee. And these folks are pictured here on this slide, and you may know some of them, but I will introduce you to them virtually. Charles Shipman is the State Refugee Coordinator from Arizona, Christa Yoakum is from Nebraska is Home in Nebraska, Denzil Mohammed is with the Immigrant Learning Center in Boston, Fatima Said is with Project Fine in Wynona, Minnesota, Stephanie Franklin is with the City of Washington, DC, Naomi Steinberg is with Refugee Council USA, and Ngoan Le is the State Refugee Coordinator from Illinois. So we were so pleased to benefit from the expertise of this wonderful selection committee.

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Susan: Here are the winners! We had three categories in which people could apply. Those categories included Best Communications Material, Best Event, and Best Innovation. And today you’ll be hearing from the winner of each of the categories. The winner will be sharing with you a little bit about their approach and a little bit about the work that they do. We don’t have time unfortunately to hear from the runners up in each category because there was one runner up identified for each category; however, I will share a little bit about their work with you since our time is limited. We wanted to give you a taste of the wonderful work that is happening in each category.

And after we hear from and learn about the winners, we will have time today for a discussion. So you’ll have an opportunity as we go along to type your questions and comments into the chat box, and our panelists will have an opportunity to respond. And then we’ll share with you some new materials that will be coming out that may be helpful to you in your communications work and in your refugee welcome work.

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Susan: And with that I would like to turn it over to our first speaker under Best Communications Material. We’re going to be hearing from Kathryn Stam who is with Refugees Starting Over.

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Kathryn: Hello, I’m so glad to be here; thank you. Just to give you a little bit of context, I’ll tell you who I am. I’m an anthropology professor at the SUNY Polytechnic Institute in Utica, New York, and I’m also an interpreter in Thai Lao, and I’m on the Board of Directors for the Refugee Center, and I also volunteered at several community centers. So I’ve gotten to see the refugee community from a lot of different perspectives, and that has informed the messages that I get out there and also the quality of the communications materials that we have. Starting Over is and information hub for, by, and about refugees in Utica, New York. It didn’t exactly start that way. It started as a way to connect my students with the community, and then it kind of grew and got a life of its own. Just to give you a sense if you haven’t heard much about Utica: We’re the town that loves refugees, and we have the fourth highest concentration of refugees of any city in the United States in part because we are a very small city – we’re about 60,000 people and about 15,000 refugees have come through the Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees. So, there are a lot of refugees, but for community members it’s a little hard to get to know them at first, and they are sort of concentrated in one area and there’s not that much available in terms of finding out what’s happening and what’s interesting in the refugee community. So I started this project called Refugees Starting Over, and it was a student’s Master’s degree thesis, and we started to post some information about events and local news stories and photographs. At the same time, we were putting together some events of our own: An exhibit of Facebook photos of refugees – with their permission, of course – and then we invited them to a big event where we shared the collages we had made and also did some cultural events with that. And so, Starting Over kind of grew and we put the videos from our events up on the YouTube channel as a way to test out if this was going to work at all. And it’s very popular! It seemed to fill a need that people had to sort of practice their culture and validate what they’re doing, and it’s just been really popular. People sit around and watch all the videos one-by-one from our YouTube channel, so that’s really exciting. So I’d like to welcome you to visit that.

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I’ll tell you a little bit about Snapshots of Resettlement. This was also a student project at first, and the idea was that throughout the Starting Over project – which started in 2012 and has been growing and changing since then – I’d been collected photographs as we go. And I’ve been inviting some of my friends who are photographers to join us, and some of them are refugees and some of them are staff and faculty from my institution, some are just community members overall. So at this time, I have 18,000 photographs of our community, and I really wanted to share them. They’re really inspiring and beautiful, and they show every different aspect of life in Utica. So Snapshots of Resettlement is basically the highlights from that collection. And what I think is kind of innovative about it is that community members can submit their own photographs. You can see photographs from when they were in the original country before the conflict, photographs from people’s photo albums about what it was like in a refugee camp, and they have lots of different things about what their lives are like now.

So my last thought is advice for other people who might be interested in doing this kind of thing: I think a lot of people who work with refugees have really great photographs and are happy to share them. And I’m also happy to share any of the things that we’ve done. If someone wanted to do Refugees Starting Over in Cincinnati or in any other city that they work in, it would be relatively easy to set you up for that kind of thing. And for Snapshots of Resettlement, I often have students looking for projects, so if there’s an individual or an agency that wants to put together some of the highlights just feel free to get in touch with us, and we’ll help you.

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Susan: I did want to share with you a little bit about our Honorable Mention, which is Refugees Helping Refugees in Rochester, NY.

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Refugees Helping Refugees is a community organization that applied using their organizational brochure and website. Their all-volunteer staff focuses on providing peer-to-peer support; it truly is refugees helping refugees. They are connecting established refugees with newer arrivals. This not only ensures that people are getting their basic needs met, but we’re really seeing how friendships across ethnicities are being fostered by this type of approach. For more examples of their positive messaging, I would encourage you to visit their website: rhrroc.org

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Susan: Our next category is Best Event. We are going to hear from Janet Blair of the Florida Department of Children & Families.

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Janet: Many thanks to Welcoming America for this recognition on behalf on the Florida Department of Children and Families and the Tamp Bay Refugee Task Force.

I just want to set the stage by saying that the Tampa Bay Refugee Task Force is one of eight task forces statewide in Florida, which is each facilitated by a refugee services staff member and all of which put on amazing events for World Refugee Day every year.

Before I go into information on the Tampa Bay event, I wanted to give you a bit of information on our area: Tampa Bay is one of the key locations in the state of Florida for refugee resettlement. In 2014, we had around 3,000 new arrivals, and in the past five years, we’ve had over 13,000 new arrivals. Although the majority of these newcomers to our area are from Cuba, we also have refugees coming from other countries including Iraq, Egypt, Sudan, Columbia, and Somalia. And we have two fairly large established communities of former refugees: A Bosnian community and a Vietnamese community, which are active in our events as well.

So in this context, the Tampa Bay Refugee Task Force, work year round on a number of different issues and projects, including putting on a World Refugee Day festival each year. This event has really gone beyond our wildest dreams. We started about 5 years ago with 200 people in attendance, and last year there were around 700 people there.

I want to say too that this event evolved into much more than just a one day festival. It’s really been an impetuous for creating a web of ongoing relationships with many different facets of our community.

We started 5 years ago with holding a festival for refugee families. We wanted to have a day to recognize and honor them where they could bring their families and have a lot of fun. Each year we’ve broadened our focus to include more and more community partners. In the past year many of our task force members have been impacted by Welcoming America’s trainings and wanted to integrate the receiving community into the event at an even deeper level than we had before. So, we chose a theme: The Refugee Journey for our theme last year, and we reached out to new partners in the community about four to six months prior to the event because it takes a lot of time to put something like this together. We looked for ways to involve them that were meaningful. For example, we asked a local faith community’s youth group to put together a mock refugee camp exhibit. Several of our task members met with these youth several times to give them overviews of the refugee camp experience. At the same time, we wanted to have other types of refugee journeys depicted as well because the majority do not come from refugee camps. So, we recruited faculty and graduate students from the local University of South Florida. They worked alongside the students in our adult education program to put together a beautiful display with photos, maps, and stories of other refugee journeys. This was set up alongside the mock refugee camp exhibit so that as people entered the venue they could hear and see stories of these journeys that had taken place. So that was how we partnered with a couple of folks, and some of those partnerships are pictured on this slide.

A key partner in our annual event has been Hillsboro County Public Schools. Each year, the school system has sponsored our event, and a few years into this event we began to collaborate with them to hold regular in-service trainings with school administrators on working with refugee students. Now these workshops are held twice each year in the fall and the spring terms. This is just another example of a sustainable partnership that has come out of our World Refugee Day events.

Other creative ways that we engage the broader community: Last year we approached the Poet Laureate of Tampa and asked to write and perform a poem for our World Refugee Day event. It was really a beautiful addition to the event.

I do want to say that each of these community collaborations takes so much time and energy beforehand and making sure that everyone who participates really gains an understanding of who refugees are and why they are here in our community. But by building these relationships, we’ve been able to foster connections that last much longer than the planning and the implementation of the event.

Graduate and undergraduate students were worked with have gone on to do research projects, internships, volunteer work at our organizations. Faith communities donate time and resources to help refugee families. So, this web of relationships is truly sustained year round.

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Another aspect of our event that I want to highlight: We had about cultural booths from about 15 to 20 different countries, and at the end we had a cultural fashion show. I can’t say enough about how much of a hit this is. We have ended the event with this the past couple of years because the people just love it. I think it’s because unlike the rest of the event which is speeches made by officials or proclamations, the cultural fashion show really transcends language and allows everyone at the event to get involved. We have children, men, and women modeling traditional clothing.

Other high points include performances from refugee communities. Last year we had a great Cuban band that got everyone dancing, we had Bosnian and Burmese dances, and we really try to incorporate that local talent every year.

We also reach out to community leaders and elected officials. Last year, refugee service leadership invited representatives from ORR, the State Department, and UNHCR, and representatives from all three organizations came.

We had an event last year that really helped people locally to see the global and national connections to the work we do.

The Refugee Task Force really felt that the World Refugee Day event had reached its apex last year, and so we decided to transition this year from having our large event for World Refugee Day to having it during National Welcoming Week. So, this fall for the first time we will hold our cultural festival in September. We’re particularly excited because right now our local board of county commissioners is considering the prospect of officially becoming a Welcoming County.

We know that this even being on the docket has been because of the community exposure and education that the board members and others have received at our events as well as their ongoing relationship with the Refugee Task Force.

Thank you!

Susan: Thank you, Janet. That’s very exciting!

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Susan: I’d like to share a little bit about our Honorable Mention in the Best Events category: The Provider’s Network.

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They are located in Lincoln, Nebraska, and it’s a nonprofit organization that provides services and support to in-home childcare businesses.

Their submission was for “Faces of Our Community: Understanding Cultural Diversity”. This was a seminar for childcare providers that highlighted and celebrated the cultural variety of Lincoln’s refugee communities. The event included presentations on different ethnic groups in Lincoln, a simulation of intercultural communication, a performance of traditional Karen dance, a selection of personal narratives by local refugees.

They also had local organizations that work with refugees present on their efforts and their work and had a chance to really connect those service providers with attendees.

They also had a lunch that showcased different ethnic cuisines from refugees’ home countries and was cooked by some of the refugee families.

For more about the work in Lincoln, you can go to their website pnicacfp.com.

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Our third and final category is for Best New Innovation. This was kind of a catch all category. These were not necessarily materials or events, but these were innovative ways that people were communicating a positive message around refugees.

The winner of this category is Kentucky Refugee Ministries, and I will turn it over to Dana now to share a little bit more about this innovation.

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Dana: Thank you, Susan.

My name is Dana Lea, and I work with Kentucky Refugee Ministries. We are located in Louisville, Kentucky, and we have a sub office in Lexington, Kentucky.

In Louisville, we resettle nearly 1,200 refugees a year. This includes populations from Cuba asylum seekers that walk in to refugees from Iraq, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bhutan, and various ethnic minorities from Burma as well.

In Louisville, we provide a range of services to our clients that we bring here from ESL to case management to legal services to mental and physical health. As well as employment services, which has been such a good way to connect with the local businesses in Louisville and get our clients plugged in.

I work as the Cultural Orientations Coordinator, our Social Media Coordinator, and an ESL Instructor.

Welcome Wednesdays came about in November of last year when I was thinking of a way to really put a face to refugee resettlement and allow the community of Louisville to see what clients we have coming and allow them to welcome them. It’s a cheap and easy way for nonprofits who do not have a budget for marketing to communicate with their local community and even the nation through social media.

We use Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook regularly for this project. It’s #WelcomeWednesday which started as an Instagram and Twitter trending feed, so when you click on it you can see everything that has been tagged with that hashtag. I started to think of catchy things. On Instagram, we have things like Throwback Thursday and Flashback Friday, so I thought what is something that we could really utilize and came up with #WelcomeWednesday.

Many people in Louisville do not realize how much of an international community we have of both refugees and Cubans, so this was really a way to use photos and short stories to capture the local community and let them be able to see the faces of who is coming here. So it’s not some stranger coming to live in your city; it’s a human, and this allows them to be fully welcomed by the community.

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Dana: I have two more examples of Welcome Wednesdays.

It’s just enough information to capture people on social media.

This allows our staff, our followers, and former clients, national affiliates to engage in these Welcome Wednesdays.

It’s very important that our staff shares the post. It allows the posts to have more reach.

It’s a great outreach tool. We’ve had people ask “What do these families need”.

We have also gotten inquiries about volunteering through this.

It’s also a very useful way to thank our co-sponsors.

The first photo (on the last slide) shows our first family resettlement from the Syrian war. Their co-sponsors were the Bosnian Islamic Center. It was a way for the Muslim community to welcome this family and to show solidarity we have behind these refugees we have escaping the war.

The photo with the two young girls also has co-sponsors. It’s another way to thank these co-sponsors for what they are doing to help resettle these families.

We try to make our posts very diverse with the communities we have, so that everyone in Louisville can see how varied our refugee community is.

Thank you!

Susan: Thanks, Dana! I can see how it can really have a great transformational power.

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Susan: Our Honorable Mention in this category also happens to come from Louisville: The Louisville Free Public Library.

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Susan: They received a Muslims Journeys Bookshelf grant from the American Library Association and with that were able to establish a collection of books and movies related to the Muslim experience. They wanted to draw attention and excitement around the new collection, so they hosted a special month-long series, which built upon years of work the library system had undertaken with leaders in the immigrant community and other volunteers to welcome newcomers and inspire civic engagement.

The series brought together a very diverse group of Louisville Muslims, providing a space for community and education. Programs were designed to complement the library’s system wide signature program - the English Conversation Club - and bring attention to their one-of-a-kind language Salons (French / Arabic/ Spanish/ Nepali). This effort provided an opportunity to connect people across religions and ethnicities.

You have the email here of Sophie who is the main contact: sophie.maier@lfpl.org.

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Susan: That concludes our description of the six different efforts that we wanted to highlight today. And now we have some time for you to send in your questions or comments. You can ask questions about the contest itself or about how our three panelists led their projects.

Question One: Why did you decide to apply for this contest?

Kathryn: I’m always looking for opportunities to share what we’re doing in Utica and to share the stories of refugees in our city. This goes back to the time that I meant people in the interpreter training, and they shared some of their stories with me. One was Tek Monger: He was in a refugee camp for 18 years, and I just could not imagine that. I feel like I’m sort of worldly in some ways, but I realized that I don’t know anything about this. I thought that this contest would be a good opportunity to share positive images and messages and increase awareness about what it’s like to be a refugee in the United States.

Susan: One thing Welcoming America tries to do is give you all recognition for your work.

Janet: I so appreciate you giving us these opportunities. I can’t take any credit for the idea of applying for this contest; it was actually my very supportive supervisor who nominated us, and I really thank him for seeing the potential in our event to win because it’s been a tremendous experience. It’s given us a chance to see the apex of our event last year as we shift our focus to Welcoming Week.

Dana: For us, some of my staff members actually receive newsletters from Welcoming America and saw the competition. I hound them all the time at staff meetings to share, share, share. So they sent it to me, and I thought to give it a shot as it’s such an easy tool to share with other agencies. I thought it would be great if other agencies started hashtagging “Welcome Wednesday” as well and see refugee stories from all over the United States.

Question Two: Dana, what about Louisville in terms of fairly long-standing refugee communities or the infrastructure for refugees has given way to these innovative outreach programs? Can you speak to the climate in Louisville and why we’re seeing such great communications coming out of your city?

Dana: I do have to give a lot of credit to Sophie who is from the Louisville Free Public Library. She does and awesome job and is very connected with KRM. A lot of what we do here is very well connected to the library, and we’re very thankful for her English conversation club. We also have Catholic Charities, and our communities here are very strong and have very strong and active community. These communities just keep giving back. We see our refugees if they are higher-level speakers, they come back as staff or as interpreters. At KRM, we have young staff, and young staff can bring new ideas and new innovations to our community. In these events in particular, we have a very excited community to welcome refugees. You see a lot of international activities happening in Louisville.

Question three: What are some of the challenges with balancing out the positive with some of the need? How do you balance out all the needs you see with all the potential that refugees have and how you communicate that with the broader community?

Janet: In Tampa Bay, we have established communities of former refugees that have been very active in helping newer refugee communities resettle. When we have presentations in the community or meet with community leaders, we say, “Here are where the new arrivals are coming from, and initially it’s a very difficult adjustment. Try to put yourself in that position where you’ve lost everything you’ve ever known: Your language, your professional identity, your entire life, and now you’re starting over in a brand new country. Of course it’s going to take time, but we can look around us locally and see examples of businesses that have been started by Bosnian and Iraqi refugees or Vietnamese refugees. We can look at community organizations that have been founded by these same groups”. So I think that helps people in this community to be able to see the long-term, which is a truly thriving refugee community that’s well-integrated.

Kathryn: There are a lot of services available to people even after the 90 days, and the local refugee center is really focused on getting them immediately settled. There are other needs that go on for many years, and what I would see with my project was an information gap and that’s what I’m trying to fill. There are just so many people in the community that want to help, but they don’t know how to help; and a lot of people who need help but don’t know who to ask. So there’s a combination of our information hub and our community center that was designed to help people with all those kinds of needs later on: A place where they can dance, for example. As for the images, they all look really happy and bright. I try to keep it positive. In our community, it’s hard to get too negative because there are so many wonderful things going on.

Dana: I agree. Many people in the community want to help, and they don’t always know how they can. By seeing these positive posts and who the families are and what jobs they had in the past and how they’re going to contribute to our society, people reach out more. With family reunifications, you’re really seeing these pieces coming together.

Kathryn: One thing that strikes me with the local news is that the stories about refugee success always seem to be a formula: If they start a business or bought a house. That’s sort of the marker of success. For some refugees, they’ve been through so much and just sort of functioning is a huge success right there. Let’s not always look to the students who are A+ students; we also want to celebrate the C+ student who keeps trying.

Susan: Sophie is on the line listening from the Louisville Free Public Library. She also mentioned having an active and engaged interfaith scene has really helped create community in Louisville and that partnerships really mean the world. Having partners who can also be advocates for needs are really important. Having more and more people out there to help families.

Question Four: What are some really key or unusual partnerships you have? Could you also share a little bit about how you’re building individual connections with the refugee community?

Kathryn: We have a new partner that is kind of unusual: We were contacted by Fort Stanwix, which is a national park in Rome, NY. They are interested in honoring all Americans in their Honoring America Day. They got together with us and members of the community center and do some performances. The park is sending us some school busses and a video to promote national parks and getting refugees and all Americans to appreciate and know about them and wants some of our refugees to be in the music video. We have open office hours, and community members just drop by. It allows us to seize on these opportunities. It’s always surprising who the partners turn out to be.

Janet: Under the Tampa Bay Refugee Task Force, we had a very unique partnership form between two faith communities. They came together to found a refugee garden, and it’s been in operation for a few years, and they got a national grant from ORR. The garden is housed on the grounds of an Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and refugees primarily from Burma and some from Sudan garden there. There’s another church that’s closer to where the refugees live that has been transporting them out there. We also try to work with former refugees; we always invite refugees to be involved in planning World Refugee Day events. We have had former refugees do everything from our graphic design to our flyers and our promotional materials to organizing parts of the event.

Dana: Our most unique and most interesting partners is when we had our first Syrian family arrive. The Bosnian Islamic Center stepped up to be sponsors and help them out with anything from transportation to KRM, to health appointments, to helping with school enrollment. The Bosnian Islamic community came from war, but they understand the plight of the refugee. They have been settled for quite a while now, and that’s allowed them to establish themselves and give back. To have former refugees understand the process and can show you this is where I am now. This is a very hard time for you now, but look at my success.

I teach English to adults, and I see my students on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter. Former clients leave comments, like posts, and ask how they can help. It’s a wonderful tool for keeping in touch. Our community of former refugees can stay in the know and involved through these tools.

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Susan: I want to share with the audience what is coming next for Dana, Janet, and Kathryn. So you’re thinking, “They won this prize. What exactly does that mean? Do they get a new car?” Sadly no! We are sending them on a trip to the National Immigrant Integration Conference, which is happening this December in New York. I would encourage everyone on the phone to visit integrationconference.org. This is the biggest convening of the broadest immigrant integration field that’s out there. We’re so delighted that Welcoming America will be sending the three contest winners to the NIIC, so they can be part of the conversation. Please check out the website and stay updated as the agenda comes together and more information becomes available.

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Susan: There are a few other tools that you may be interested in. We have a booklet we’re putting together based on the 6 winning entries for this contest. We’ll be able to feature their work in a little bit more detail and provide guidance for those who would like to use some of these approaches.

We also will be releasing the Guide to Community Planning, which was written by Jan Reeves the Idaho State Refugee Coordinator and really details how Boise went about creating a community-wide welcoming plan for refugees. That should be coming out in the next month, so look out for that.

Finally, we’ve almost finished up our community consultation report. We went out and visited a handful of sites and observed the community consultation process in action and come up with some ideas of how refugee resettlement providers and others could be using community consultations that maximize the support of the receiving community. The report will outline our findings and recommendations.

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Susan: In the meantime, we have some tools that can be valuable to you. Especially as you think more about your positive communications work and what you heard from our speakers today. We encourage you to take a look at the Reframing Refugees tool that was developed last year where you will find more about some of the winning messages out there and messages that resonate with the receiving community. Some guiding principles and how-to’s, sample press releases, sample FAQs.

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Susan: It’s available on our Welcoming Refugees website along with this recorded webinar and many other recording webinars. We’ve had three webinars on positive communications. If you missed those, I’d recommend watching those as well!

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Susan: As Janet mentioned, Welcoming America works with communities all over the country on welcoming week events. It’s not too soon to get started working on it! It’s time to gear up and think about National Welcoming Week. Learn more at www.welcomingweek.org.

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Susan: Finally, we would invite you to share your World Refugee Day examples with us. We’re always looking for great stories and media coverage about how communities are using World Refugee Day to send out these positive messages about refugees.

If you will send in your examples to alaina@welcomingamerica.org or on our website at www.welcomingrefugees.org under the “Promising Practices” section.

This ends our webinar today. I want to thank our selection committee who worked so hard on reviewing the submissions. I want to thank Dana, Janet, and Kathryn for sharing their approaches today.

I wish you all a wonderful day!