

February 2014

Experiences of Volunteers in Refugee Resettlement

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Recommended Citation

Thomson, Rita B. (2014) "Experiences of Volunteers in Refugee Resettlement," *The Journal of Public and Professional Sociology*. Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/jpps/vol6/iss1/4>

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INTRODUCTION

Since 1980 the United States has been a resettlement nation for individuals who are refugees as defined by the United Nations (McKinnon 2009). Resettlement is carried out by one of ten agencies that have been chosen by the federal government. Refugees are expected to rapidly assimilate into American life. The resettlement agencies have limited funds and limited staff, necessitating recruitment of volunteers to help in the resettlement process.

A large number of volunteers perform various tasks; the role of family mentor brings the volunteer into close relationship with the refugee family for some period of time. The purpose of this research was to shed light on why people volunteer to mentor refugees, what makes the volunteer experience positive, the volunteer's perception of the success of the resettlement, and what makes volunteers willing to mentor more than once. The intent is to produce information that resettlement agencies can use to recruit volunteers, to train and support the volunteers, and to make the adjustment of refugees to American life a smoother transition.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND BACKGROUND

Refugees are a subgroup of immigrants, and the United States has always had expectations about what immigrants, or refugees specifically, should be like and what they should do. The melting pot view of immigrants has existed since the early days of the nation, dating from even earlier than the 1908 play, *The Melting Pot*, by Israel Zangwill which is the source of the term "melting pot." The concept theorizes that people of various national backgrounds in the fresh soil of the American frontier and, a little later in history, in the crucible of American cities amalgamate into a new type of person, the American (Gordon 1964).

By the 1970s, the melting pot style of assimilation began to be looked upon as forced conformity (Jacoby 2004). Some ethnic groups did not wish to conform, and others, feeling rejected by the mainstream, wanted to build and maintain their own culture. The new vision was multiculturalism, "the coexistence of separate but equal cultures" (Rodriguez 2004:130). Americans, in the census and on government forms, began to be classified into a racial pentagon of Asian-, African-, Native-, Hispanic- and Euro-Americans (Gabaccia 2002). Americans expected immigrants to fit into these classifications, for example, people from China, Burma, and Malaysia all were considered Asian-American in the United States. Immigrants, including refugees, are not necessarily aware of the American racial classification system and may not identify with "their" category. By the 1990s, objections were being raised that multiculturalism divides the nation, forces people into groups, and is counter to American values

(Gabaccia 2002).

During Cold War days, refugee resettlement mainly served a political function (Bessa 2009). The “good people” who fled Communist countries were resettled in Western Europe and the United States. The Europeans who fled communism, having much culturally in common with Americans and having co-ethnics already in the United States, were usually readily “melted” or assimilated. Others, non-Europeans, also fled communism. In the late 1970s and early 1980s as millions of people were displaced due to conflicts in Indochina, the United States received about 750,000 refugees from the region. The American government implemented a policy of deliberately scattering the refugees around to all fifty states to speed assimilation and lessen the probability of violence against them (Aguilar-San Juan 2009).

Purposeful dispersion of refugees has continued to be the government policy as the United States began to admit refugees based not only on anti-communism, but on the United Nations definition. According to the United Nations, a refugee is someone, who “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country...” (Goodwin-Gill 2008).

As a resettlement country, the United States each year establishes a quota for how many refugees it will receive. Due to a stringent screening process, sometimes fewer are admitted than are allowed by the quota. Refugees are admitted to the United States through the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) and are resettled by voluntary non-governmental agencies, often referred to as VOLAGS. Of the VOLAGS contracted to do resettlement nationwide, 6 of the 10 are religiously affiliated and often have local affiliates in the city of resettlement (Ives, Sinha, and Cnaan 2010). The VOLAGS, not the refugees, often determine where refugees initially settle; this is especially true of “free cases,” refugees who have no culturally similar group already in the United States. Although refugees are only a small number among all immigrants to the United States, they are a very diverse group and culturally different from existing populations. Where they are resettled has a high impact locally (Mott 2010) (Brown, Mott, and Malecki 2007).

Mutual adaptation of immigrant and settlement location is a rethinking of assimilation. This view of immigration states that assimilation is occurring and consists of immigrants merging into a mainstream which is itself changing (Nee and Alba 2004). Today legal discrimination has been outlawed, “ethnic” individuals make individual decisions about work, education, and residence that move them out of ethnic communities, and cooperative action within an immigrant community helps newcomers enter the mainstream.

Refugees have not arrived by individual choice and have not even chosen their location within the country. The resettlement VOLAGS locate an apartment, supply it with basic furniture, meet the refugees on arrival, help them settle in, help them adjust to U.S. culture, and help them find employment with little regard to their skills. Rapid action is required because funding through the resettlement agencies runs out after 90 days. After this refugees are left to make their own way through the American market system and to deal with the governmental and non-profit agencies that might assist them. Learning English and the individualistic American ways can be difficult. Other non-governmental organizations help them (Nawyn 2010) (Ives et al. 2010). Volunteer mentors, often introduced to the refugee by the resettlement agency, can facilitate the refugee's adaptation to their new location.

In a study of Bosnian refugees, Ives found sponsorship by a religious congregation was beneficial, even when the congregation was not of the same religion as the refugee (2007). The refugees wanted to assimilate, to fully participate in American life; they experienced difficulty in getting foreign credentials properly evaluated, a lack of aid in securing jobs with advancement possibilities, and reported that English classes were not offered often enough and at levels of language ability corresponding to need. Identity as an ethnic group can help in accessing resources (McKinnon 2008). The Lost Boys of Sudan fled their homes as boys in 1983 during ethnic conflict. Although as men, they do not identify with either the "boys" or the "lost" part of the label, group recognition via the label has helped them establish themselves in the United States.

Adaptation works both ways, the resettlement city also adapts. Utica, New York, is a welcoming city for refugees because many residents have experience with and an understanding of immigration (Smith 2008). Refugees are accommodated by translators, special clinics, bilingual education, and patience.

The race and residential neighborhood of the immigrant can influence assimilation. African immigrants may experience residential discrimination and assimilate into socially disadvantaged African-American neighborhoods. "Downward assimilation," a concept developed by Alejandro Portes, states that immigrants may assimilate into "street culture" which does not value education, hard work, and personal responsibility the way the American mainstream does. (Massey 2004:118). Some refugees find their initial resettlement location unsuitable and move elsewhere. Mott (2010), when examining secondary migration of African refugees, found that a high cost of living, less support from VOLAGS, and unsafe neighborhoods caused secondary migration, whereas family and friends, ethnic enclaves, more aid by VOLAGS, and a perception of more jobs being available drew refugees to a city

There are a few first person accounts of a volunteer's experiences. Vissicare (2009), as a volunteer, worked with African refugees through dance.

Different ethnic groups chose different ways of interacting, but in all cases dance promoted social interaction and community formation with positive results for the refugees in reducing resettlement trauma. Public performances also helped the refugees interact with and educate the larger community.

Another volunteer, Sowa (2009), describes his experience being a mentor to a Burundi refugee family. He illustrates the frequent disconnect between the generalized policies the U.S. government desires to implement and the actual experiences of refugees. Refugees are called clients, as if they chose us, although we, through government policy and resettlement agencies, keep telling them what to do. We say this family is “from Brundi,” even though they have lived in a refugee camp in Tanzania for years and several of the children were born in the camp. He says that we, the government, the VOLAGS, and volunteers, all have idealized models of what we want refugees to be like and of what they should do. These models keep us from seeing the reality of the individuals and their experiences.

Refugees did not decide to leave their homes to come to the United States, yet their individual circumstances brought them. Here they have the assimilation tasks of immigrants. Volunteer mentors are people who choose to try to assist them. Although volunteers are very important to the resettlement process, other than the first person accounts there is a lack of studies of the experiences of volunteers.

METHODOLOGY

This study interviewed volunteers who have interacted fairly extensively with refugees in the resettlement process and uses grounded theory methods to answer the following questions: Why did the volunteer choose to do this? What was the volunteer’s interaction with the refugees like? Would the volunteer do it again, and why or why not? The volunteer’s view of assimilation is also examined.

There are five agencies that resettle refugees in Georgia: Catholic Charities, The International Rescue Committee (IRC), Lutheran Services, Refugee Resettlement and Immigration Services of Atlanta (RRISA), and World Relief. A sixth agency, Jewish Family Services, resettles a very small number. Volunteers to be interviewed were recruited by contacting the volunteer coordinators of the five agencies. Three of them agreed to assist in recruiting. Volunteers were also recruited through personal contacts.

In-person interviews were conducted with ten individuals who, within the last three years, have mentored at least one refugee family for a period of three months or more (one of the ten had done so for only 2 ½ months). All interview subjects were in the Atlanta metro area. Interviews were done with an agreement

of confidentiality.

The interview questions are shown in the APPENDIX.

Interview subjects

The interview subjects were eight women and two men ranging in age from 27 to 65. All, but one, have mentored multiple refugee families, and all, but one, are currently mentoring. Their length of involvement ranges from 2 ½ months to 17 years. They were between ages 24 and 53 when they began mentoring. Eight are American citizens by birth, while two are immigrants. One of the immigrants is a citizen now and the other a permanent resident. The immigrants did not come from refugee sending countries.

All interview subjects have had some college education. Five hold bachelor's degrees, one, who had not yet graduated when mentoring began, has since earned a master's degree, and two others also hold master's degrees. The race of the subjects was not asked; however, based on observation, seven are white and three non-white. At the time the subjects began mentoring, six were employed full time, two employed part time, and two not employed. Although inquiry was not made about the family or marital status of the interview subjects, several of them mentioned a spouse or children who were also involved in mentoring, a sort of family to family relationship.

Seven interview subjects indicated some level of previous international involvement before encountering any refugees. Their backgrounds involved experiences such as being an immigrant themselves, extensive travel, living abroad, and interaction with exchange students and international students. One was a self-described "geography nut." Interview subjects have mentored refugees resettled through Lutheran Services, IRC, and World Relief.

Interviews were conducted between October 1, 2012, and November 12, 2012, in various locations around metro Atlanta.

The refugee families mentored

Most of the mentors have interacted with several refugee families. This section describes the first family mentored. That first family, as reported by the various individuals, came from Somalia, Iraq, Bosnia, Congo, Bhutan, Burma, or Eritrea. Most of the families consisted of a husband and wife with children. Some families were larger, extended families. A few of the families consisted of a woman and her children, this woman might be a widow or a woman whose husband was still back in the home country. In nine cases, the first family mentored was resettled in Clarkston, Georgia. The tenth case was resettled in Roswell, Georgia.

After the mentor initially formed a relationship with one family, the family typically introduced the mentor to other families, usually relatives or fellow

countrymen of the initial family. Also the mentors chose further involvement to help refugees. All mentors reported involvement with multiple families. Interview subjects with years of experience reported interacting with up to 100 families. The refugees came from numerous countries, in addition to those previously listed Ethiopia, Tanzania, Ghana, Burundi, Sudan, Chad, Iran, Afghanistan, Syria, Nepal, Malaysia, Cuba, and some other African countries were also mentioned. Most refugees were resettled in Clarkston, but several families were placed in Roswell, and some in Decatur, Cobb County, and Cherokee County.

RESULTS

Reasons for mentoring

The volunteers voiced a combination of motivations. Many expressed a desire to have a purpose and make an impact in the community. This desire was shaped by their religious faith, empathy for the refugees, and life experiences. Some expressed a desire to be ambassadors for our county, while others seeing need, sought to make use of their skills to fill that need. Most had some previous experience with refugees, such as donating stuff, coaching basketball, or helping refugees find jobs, before becoming mentors to a family.

Questions about religion were not asked, however, religion was mentioned by eight of the volunteers as significant in their actions. Six identified themselves as Christian, one as Muslim, and one as atheist of Jewish background. The latter is “religion” as Jewish background and the experiences of a Jewish upbringing were important to the person.

Four individuals were first introduced to the refugee community by a friend, in two cases specifically by someone of their religious faith. Three first encountered the refugee community through a church activity – Compassion in Action Weekend, Bible study, basketball. The remaining three volunteers initiated contact by calling one of the refugee resettlement agencies, one person after being moved by the news on TV, and the others out of a desire to give to the community.

Mentor training

Several volunteers, who got into the mentoring situation through informal means, report no specific training but cite their personal backgrounds as preparation for the task. Those who have volunteered for a longer time are more likely to say they had no training. Those who became mentors more recently have gone through a more formal process with the resettlement agencies. Three individuals reported submitting to a background check by the agency before being assigned to a refugee family.

In the more formal process, an individual became an official volunteer after a general orientation session with the resettlement agency. This instruction varied in length from 15 minutes to 1 ½ hours. Volunteers mentioned being instructed in the need for confidentiality, respect for the culture of the refugees, and being told not to discuss religion unless the refugee brought it up. The volunteer then received some background information specific to the family before being introduced to the family by the volunteer coordinator.

The mentoring process

The volunteers report being a friend and helper to refugees, a bridge to American culture, and a guide to American facilities and attractions. In a few cases the volunteer went to the airport, along with agency staff, to meet the refugee family upon arrival. If they met then, or very soon thereafter, the volunteer helped the refugees with the initial activities, such as taking them to health screenings, signing up for food stamps or other benefits, and helping register the children for school. However, usually the refugees complete these tasks with the assistance of agency staff before the mentor meets the family.

Usually the refugee family has been in the United States a couple months or more before the volunteer meets them. The volunteer visits the refugee home, is a friend to them, and helps them. English practice is always part of this and is sometimes, but most often not, the main focus. Two volunteers, who did focus on English, mentioned talking to the ESOL teacher, getting the curriculum used, and practicing from that. The curriculum teaches life skills, for example, the calendar, money, hygiene, food safety, along with language.

Refugees, initially, are dependent on walking and public transportation to get around. Driving them places, both to fulfill needs and to familiarize them with the area, seems to have been the major activity for most volunteers. Mentor and family went shopping together at stores like Kroger, Wal-Mart, Target, and Costco. Volunteers also took refugees to stores where they could get culturally familiar foods not so commonly found here. The volunteer and the family went to fun places together – the park, the library, cultural events, restaurants, downtown Atlanta, Stone Mountain Park, and the north Georgia Mountains. They did bike riding, played basketball, or went swimming together.

Refugees realize their transportation needs and want to learn to drive and to acquire a car. This is quite a challenge, with the written test often being a bigger obstacle than the actual driving. Some volunteers have been the licensed driver riding with the learner, but most do not feel brave enough to do that out on the street in their car. Mentors rejoice with the refugees when a driver's license is obtained and sometimes assist in finding a car.

Some volunteers gave things such as school supplies, books, and games, and, in one case, bikes at Christmas, to the family they were mentoring. Some

also collected items such as winter coats and school backpacks to give not just to the one family, but also to neighbors in the apartment complex.

Refugees often do not understand junk mail and think all mail is important. The mentors help them learn the difference, showing them what can be disregarded, but also what is important. They help them understand medical bills, insurance forms, and requests for status updates to continue receiving government benefits, such as food stamps.

Assisting refugees in getting medical care was important in some cases. One volunteer was called by the family when a child was sick and helped take the child to the doctor. In another situation, a woman refugee needed to see a doctor, but culturally it had to be a woman doctor; the volunteer helped find one. Along with helping to find a doctor or dentist, the volunteer may drive refugees to appointments.

Mentors help refugees cope with everyday problems, for example, talking to apartment management about an appliance that is not working, going with the refugee to talk to a school teacher, and helping understand how utilities work. One family got a bill for \$900 from Georgia Power, and the mentor helped resolve the situation. When a family wanted to move to a new apartment, the mentor helped them make the utility connections. Sometimes the mentor helps with resume preparation and job search, but usually these things are done by agency personnel or by other organizations that assist refugees. Once a refugee is able to acquire a credit card, the mentor helps him learn how to use it.

Most of the mentors spoke of visiting the refugee family in their home. A few also mentioned having the refugees over to the mentor's home. Together they shared cultural ceremonies, such as kids' birthdays, and a coffee ceremony.

A few of the volunteers mentioned graciously accepting hospitality or a refugee's expression of gratefulness. Refugees may offer a meal at their house or give small gifts. A refugee hosted one volunteer at an Ethiopian restaurant, a place where "strange" food is eaten with one's hands. Although feeling outside her comfort zone, the volunteer went and ate.

Evaluation of experience

All the mentors felt that they had connected to the family and had been able to help. One person found it "slow going," slower than expected, but rewarding. Another said that it turned out, "In some ways, better than I thought it would. I expected, sort of, to be the giver, but very soon felt peer to peer." Two individuals felt that although they had been able to help, things did not go well for the family in an overall sense. Family members were still suffering from trauma and had mental health issues that kept them from being able to adjust and adapt to American life.

All interview subjects responded to the question, "Do you think it was

successful from the refugee's point of view?" with comments about the refugees' overall success. Some of the volunteers expressed concern that the refugees would develop a pattern of dependency, both economically and in decision making. They found the refugees called them a lot about little things; therefore, they had to make efforts to encourage the refugees to do things on their own. The volunteers generally explained this dependency as being caused by the trauma the refugees went through before coming here. For example, a refugee woman called the volunteer saying, "I have run out of food stamps. How will I get food?" After the two talked a while, they realized that the woman had cash; she could just go and buy food. Volunteers with concerns about dependency were very concerned about refugees acquiring job skills.

Two of the more experienced volunteers explained some of the differences in adjustment. There are two measures to consider when measuring success, financial independence and a sense of social belongingness. Previous education and economic ability outweigh all other factors in attaining financial independence success. Refugees with marketable skills, a knowledge of how to use money, a reasonable education, literacy, and a culturally more "Western" background have an easier time, in contrast to those who have spent years living in tents in camps, sleeping on the ground, cooking over an open fire, are not literate in any language, and whose culture is more different from American culture. Also some families, for example, the illiterate widow with several young children, are just going to have a hard time.

Several volunteers commented that some refugees, a small minority, come here with a sense of entitlement, the feeling that this is America and money falls from trees. They come here expecting to be given a lot – a house, a car, a job. These refugees become disappointed and do not adjust well. The volunteers thought this perception was caused by viewing American media and by word of mouth reports. "Everybody has a friend or brother doing so well." Refugees do not get these ideas from the people in the agencies who work with them.

Experienced volunteers had the opinion that all refugees could achieve success in social integration. Although some families will not be able to be financially independent, they thought all could develop a sense of accepting their situation, understanding how society works, and of feeling home.

When preparing for this research, a friend who had mentored several refugee families several years before was consulted. Upon hearing the question, "Do you think it was successful from the refugee's point of view?" His reply was, "I never thought about that. They didn't have any choice in getting us as mentors." The ten interview subjects did not take the question in that direction, but it is an interesting thought. Volunteers choose to mentor and perhaps even choose the type of family to mentor, but do the refugees have any choice?

Would the volunteer do it again?

All ten said yes, definitely yes. In fact, most have been doing it continuously. Some of their reasons are:

- I have a gift to help the disenfranchised.
- I love the people and want to help. I receive more in friendship and love than I give.
- The need is there, and I can do it. It is part of being a good citizen.
- I want to empower their lives, teach them sustainability, and integrate them into life in the U.S.
- It is very rewarding. You see how their confidence and self-esteem grows. As Christians, our calling is to be ambassadors.
- I want to volunteer as much as I can. Refugees really need to connect to their new country. It really shows what it means to be an ambassador.
- It helps both ways. It helps you appreciate what you have and you can help somebody else.
- I would like to see them fluent in English, acculturated, and with good jobs.
- I feel we are called to love the stranger, scripturally speaking. We have gained a lot of understanding. I feel very empathetic. I feel a need to extend friendship.

Nine of the ten interview subjects were currently mentoring. Some were still in touch with the first family they mentored, while others are not. Two reasons were given for losing touch: One was that the family became acculturated and had less need, while the mentor became acquainted with and assisted other families that had more need. The other reason was the family moved out of the area. The moves were often to be with family and friends living in another area or to pursue economic opportunity. The one interview subject, who was not currently mentoring, was too busy with a job when interviewed, but hoped to mentor again.

Advice to future volunteers

When asked what advice the volunteer had for other, future mentors, most focused on the approach to take:

- Don't have expectations or an agenda; let the relationship develop organically.
- Be patient, kind, and considerate.

- Be extremely flexible.
- Learn from the refugees. Learn about their culture and about each of them as individuals. Be educated about the political and economic background of the group, but be aware that each individual has different needs.
- Remember they have been through trauma and are not here voluntarily. Often, because of the trauma, they do not sleep well and do not function well.
- Don't be afraid of language and cultural differences. They have the same concerns that we do. A smile and a hug go a long ways.
- Look at people's strengths.
- Realize that your heart gets captured.

Although most advice was about attitude and emotion, other advice was of a more practical nature:

- Have enough time to mentor and have a reliable vehicle
- Have a reliable, updated resource list.
- Speak slowly and use simple words.
- Get the ESOL curriculum. Talk about idioms. Everything can be a teaching moment.
- Some are shy and do not let you know when they do not understand.

Difficulties and suggestions

When refugees arrive in the United States, the resettlement agencies are given funding to use in assisting them for three months, four in some cases. Agencies are too busy to continue to give much assistance to the families. Volunteers suggested other agencies are needed to teach job skills and to help refugees learn to drive.

When heavily involved in assisting refugees, a potential exists for burn out from seeing so much need. One volunteer said, "You need to be able to have roaches crawl on you and not freak out." Sometimes volunteers feel uncertain about whether they were doing too much or too little and would like guidance. One volunteer reported a friend's negative reaction to her activities. The friend, having no understanding of what a refugee is, said "Are the families here just to get a green card?" and "We just give them stuff." The volunteer was surprised, hurt by criticism of a cause she believed in, and found it difficult to immediately respond with a suitable reply. The support of the volunteer coordinator of the resettlement agency and of other volunteers is important in dealing with uncertainty and negativity. One agency started a family mentor buddy system so

volunteers can support each other.

Three volunteers mentioned roaches. No inquiry was made about specific apartment complexes, but apparently there is at least one apartment complex that the volunteers feel is problematic. "The housing they live in is really poor . . . The heat and air are inefficient. There are bugs everywhere . . . For them it is a step up, but for me it was shocking." Another said, "They come from a camp and it seems like paradise, but you and I see roaches, rats, beds on the floor." Another reported that petty crime was common at the apartments. These volunteers thought the agency should demand more from the apartment complex.

Most refugees are resettled in Clarkston, because it is near agency offices and it places newcomers near others of their ethnic community. Being resettled in other locations has benefits and disadvantages. One volunteer who mentored refugees in Roswell said, "agencies WANT to help, but due to case loads and that Roswell is not as convenient a location as something inside the Perimeter, they just don't have the manpower to be readily available to these refugees, which is why an office here in Roswell would be optimal." Refugees resettled in Cobb and Cherokee Counties were described as very much a minority ethnic group in those areas. However, these were also described as better educated refugees who seemed to be doing all right. When many refugees of the same ethnic group are resettled very near each other, they have a lot of social support, yet they often make little use of English outside of ESOL classes, therefore they learn the language much more slowly. This can be a hindrance because reasonable English skills are very important in getting jobs. Location relative to transportation is an issue since public transportation to jobs must be used until the refugees are able to make the often difficult step of getting a driver's license and a car.

One volunteer expressed frustration with government agencies. The Health Department was described as impossible to deal with on the phone; one had to appear in person, and then one would often find out that one did not have the right paper. Some agencies demonstrated a lack of awareness of cultural specifics, for example, the Women's Infant's and Children's nutrition program (WIC) is food specific. The program includes coupons for a lot of dairy items. Refugees of certain ethnicities do not eat dairy products, and stores would not let them substitute other items for the coupon items.

Refugee children, after being here a few years, assimilate to American culture rapidly and consider themselves American. One volunteer found that Sudanese teens related more to white Americans than to African Americans. Another reported that, in general, black African refugees did not identify with African Americans. Sometimes certain Asian refugees, especially when living in apartments with many Latino residents, are mistaken for Latinos and addressed in Spanish which, of course, they do not understand. The refugees often see and have to deal with some of the less desirable aspects of American life. An

individual who was not one of the ten interview subjects, but who tutored refugee teens, told of one 8th grade girl's confusion. She asked, "Why do girls in this country get married so young?" The reason she asked was that two girls in her class were pregnant, and she assumed they must be married. This was a school in a lower income area, and the pregnant girls were not married.

Some of the refugees come from camps where they cooked over open fires and never had a stove top or an oven. They can have difficulty realizing how stoves work here. One volunteer reported catching a potential apartment fire just in time to prevent it. The refugee had failed to turn off the stove, a pot was smoking, and there were towels nearby that could have caught fire.

Mentoring leading to deeper involvement

All individuals interviewed feel a strong commitment to assisting refugees. Even if the agency only asked for a three month commitment, all wanted to continue it longer. One indicated a preference for staying with one family until it was well established in the United States; another expressed an intention of working with one ethnic community so as to concentrate effort. Several individuals were involved with refugees in other ways, including tutoring, Bible study, or job search programs. Some talked about building a bridge between their fairly wealthy, middle class, North Atlanta metro world and the refugee world in Clarkston.

Since mentors had to volunteer to be interviewed by me, it would be expected that people dedicated to the cause would respond, therefore this is not a representative sample. A number of the interview subjects have taken other actions beyond mentoring a family. One has been the subject of a newspaper article about resettlement and supports helping refugees in the online world by commenting on blogs that criticize doing so. Another, a licensed associate professional counselor, regularly volunteers to do mental health assessments for a resettlement agency. A third has expressed interest in working for a resettlement agency. A fourth has started a green cleaning company to employ refugee women to open the door to a better life for them. A fifth has placed the family house on the market, intending to move to Clarkston, just to be neighbors.

CONCLUSION

Volunteers who mentor refugees come from a variety of backgrounds and tend to have at least some college level education. Most initially meet refugees through friends or through church activities. They become mentors because of humanitarian concerns and a desire to help others. Even with the training given by the resettlement agencies, volunteers may feel uncertain about how to mentor. The ongoing availability of the agency volunteer coordinator is helpful and

encouraging.

Mentors and the refugee family visit together and do a wide range of activities together. Volunteers commonly feel they have formed a friendship with the family they mentor. They are pleased as the refugees become self-sufficient, able to handle tasks of daily life, and settled in; however, sometimes the refugee family cannot become financially self-sufficient. Volunteers find that poor housing, transportation difficulties, and government bureaucracy make the refugees' lives and the mentor's job more difficult.

Volunteers find mentoring very emotionally rewarding and wish to continue doing it. Typically they get involved with several families in the refugee community. Some become so involved that they change jobs or change residence.

The volunteers want the refugees to assimilate, to become American, while at the same time stating that it is important to respect the refugee's culture. Mentors meet the refugees soon after their arrival in the United States at a time when simple survival issues, such as how to get around or how to get medical care, are the major needs. Both mentors and refugees see the need of immigrants to learn English. Mentors would prefer refugees to have a balance of both being near supportive countrymen and also having opportunity for interacting in English with others. Mentors are optimistic that most refugees will master the skills needed for life in the United States and will successfully become American. They did not express any need for refugees to give up cultural habits, rather just to learn new things, such as cooking on a stove, speaking English, and driving a car.

Some mentors expressed concern that a few refugees, those who feel entitled, those very poorly educated, and some with serious mental health issues, will not be able to fit into mainstream society and will remain social dependents. Perhaps, as sociologists, we would say these mentors have concerns about downward assimilation of these few refugees. Other mentors, perhaps noting that a certain number of native born Americans are also social dependents, believe all refugees can come to feel themselves to be American.

Volunteers observed that refugees do not identify with the five racial-ethnic groups into which Americans commonly divide themselves. Refugees either identify with their country of origin or as American, with children especially identifying as American. Strong family connections within their culture are one thing refugees wish to preserve. Some of the behavior of some of the Americans around them offends the refugees. Generally this is behavior that the mentors also find offensive or inappropriate.

Mentors feel the American mainstream needs to adjust, to broaden, and to be more flexible. Government programs need to take other cultures' food needs and preferences into account. The availability of more assistance, both financial and educational, would facilitate refugees' integration into society. Some mentors believe the resettlement agencies should do more to ensure that housing is of

adequate quality. American institutions have difficulty evaluating foreign credentials. Several mentors believe that after initial resettlement other community agencies are needed to assist refugees in finding jobs more suited to their qualifications and in learning to drive. Overall mentors see refugees as culturally different from themselves, yet fitting into the diverse nation that the United States is.

APPENDIX - Interview Guide

1. How many refugee families did you interact with? When? What nationality were the refugees? Where were they resettled?
 2. How did you come to the decision to volunteer in refugee resettlement?
 3. (If multiple families - Let's just think about the first family you interacted with.) What training or preparation did you have?
 4. Did you receive training in cultural awareness?
 5. Describe the main ways in which you interacted with the refugees?
 6. Did it turn out as you thought it would? Was the experience a success from your point of view?
 7. Do you think it was successful from the refugee's point of view?
 8. What advice would you have for anyone doing something similar?
- (If participant mentored multiple families, I asked if they had anything to add based on their experiences with the other families.)
9. Would you do it again? Why or why not?

Demographic

10. Gender?
11. What is your age?
12. What is your citizenship?
13. What is your educational level?
14. What was your employment status at the time of interacting with the refugees?

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