

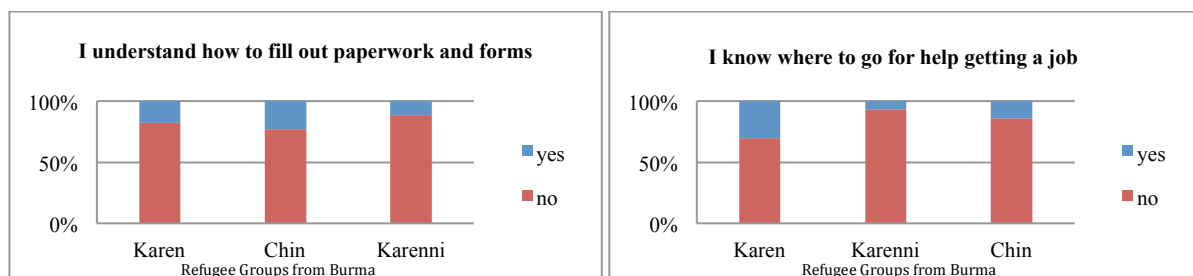
# Des Moines Refugee Planning Group

## [ ISSUE BRIEF ] **Serving Refugee Families in Iowa: Equitable Access to Services and Opportunities**

### BACKGROUND

An estimated 10,000 refugees have made Iowa their home in just the past 5 years. They are one of the most vulnerable, often exploited and largely invisible communities in Iowa.

- Many languished in camps for decades
- Unfamiliar with modern life
- Significant rate of illiteracy in native language
- Tremendous diversity in languages



Resettlement agencies provide 90 days of basic assistance **only** for refugees resettled directly to Iowa. Post-resettlement services are fragmented and very limited in scope. 2011 survey of Des Moines service providers conducted by Lutheran Services in Iowa:

- 100% of Des Moines area service providers reported that language was a barrier to serving refugee families
- 100% reported that if those barriers to service reduced they would be receptive to serving refugee families
- 78% percent of providers reported feeling overwhelmed by the needs of refugee families they had served

### ISSUES

#### ***Inequitable and Inaccessible Services and Resources for Refugee families***

- Language and cultural barriers inhibit or prohibit refugees from accessing services
- Refugee families have unique barriers and disparities due to their years in refugee camps: learned helplessness, lack of self advocacy, trauma
- Existing structures are not responsive to needs of refugee communities; lack cultural knowledge and linguistic capabilities to effectively serve refugee clients

#### ***Communal Cycle of Poverty***

- Refugees who speak some English become de facto caseworkers called upon 24 hours/7 days even though they struggle to support their own family or advance their education.
- Community members with greatest barriers remain in constant state of crisis
- Community members with experience and potential are unable to advance their learning and skills to take higher paying jobs and become upwardly mobile

### ***Discrimination and Violation of Civil Rights***

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964: “No person in the United States shall, on the ground of race, color, or national origin, be...subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.”

- Federally funded entities have a legal obligation to ensure that Limited English Proficient persons are provided *meaningful access* to services
- Consequences: Loss of funding and legal action
- Current large gap between what is required and what is enforced, leaving families without necessary language support to connect with critical resources

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### ***Build Capacity within Communities: Refugee Community Navigators***

Build the skills and leadership of refugees to teach fellow community members self-sufficiency life skills

- Trained staff from within the communities will be seen as trusted “peer experts” on core services and resources, like housing, public transportation and benefits
- Utilization of service providers in developing curricula and mentoring community navigators makes best use of existing resources and expertise
- Offering home-based, peer-group learning sessions about resources makes it more likely that individuals will attend training, absorb the content, access those resources, and further spread the information

### **RESULTS**

- Empowers and builds upon strengths and assets of community
- Develops leadership within refugee community while serving those with greatest needs
- Fosters long-term sustainable community growth and development
- Existing services and resources are utilized
- Increases economic and social self-sufficiency and integration
- Increases mutual cultural understanding between refugee and mainstream community
- Improved efficiencies in state government increases capacity to serve all lowans
- Reduces telephonic interpretation costs (average \$100 to \$130 an hour)
- Affirmation of Civil Rights and Human Rights

### **RECOMMENDATION**

#### ***Improve Access to Language Learning: Community-based ESL (English as a Second Language)***

Provide English language learning opportunities that help adult refugee learners overcome barriers to attending and succeeding in developing their English language

- Provide English language training that recognizes the low literacy levels and lack of formal education among most adult refugee learners
- Provide additional supports to students in attending class so that they can overcome barriers of transportation and child care to be able to attend

### **RESULTS**

#### ***Results of 10-site Polk County Pilot Project (Oct. 1, 2014 – Dec. 31, 2014)***

- Served 104 students at the preliterate level (little to no English speaking and/or writing)
- Served 87 students at levels 1 through 3 (low beginning)
- Demonstrated effective learning: an average 89% of students showed learning progress
- Demonstrated community need: 11 classes at full capacity for spring 2015 semester