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**A Briefing on the African Community Center: Colorado Institutional History,
Purposes, Programs & Accomplishments**

Background

Purpose and History

The mission of the African Community Center is, “to resettle refugees, promote cultural, educational and socio-economic development in the immigrant and refugee community in the United States.” The ACC was founded in May of 2001 and is therefore the newest edition to Colorado’s refugee service providers. ACC was originally founded as a program office of the Ethiopian Community Development Council, Inc. in order to respond to the growing number of African refugees in Denver, specifically at that time, coming from the Sudan. ECDC began as a Mutual Assistance Association by the growing Ethiopian population in that area due to the migration of many fleeing the effects of the Ethiopian famine and the political situation in the 1980s. When the ACC was first opened as a program office it was with the intent that there would be an eventual and gradual transition to autonomy. This process is in its fetal stage with the establishment of a local advisory board which in its developed stage will serve as a new NGOs board of directors. The transition will likely take several years, but in a minimum of three the ACC will almost certainly apply for an independent 501 (c)

The relationship between the ECDC and the ACC program office has been mixed. The geographical differences create varied circumstances for the office operating in Colorado even though the authority is centralized in Washington, D.C. This sometimes slows or complicates the decisions made by ACC. For example, some time ago the ACC had an immediate need of a truck and although they were prepared to buy it a day after a particular truck was found it took three months to get clearance from the D.C. office to purchase it. However, as time has past ACC has increasing leeway and freedom of movement as trust has grown and working relationships have progressed.

ACC is one of four organizations which offer services to refugees in the Denver area and in the broader Colorado community that is contracted through CRSP, the Colorado Refugee Services Program. The ACC is self defined as a “Community-Based Refugee/Asylee resettlement agency. Included in this is a furnished apartment (some furniture, toiletries, cleaning supplies, cookery, etc.), the first months rent, clothing, cash assistance, referrals to health, education and employment. They also provide a cash incentive to for those who find employment “early.” During these first 8 months the ACC provides employment placement services, transportation assistance, access to medical and mental health, cash assistance, etc. The center continues service of refugees up to a year but does so through private sponsorship, grants and volunteer contributions.

Although the name of the center suggests services for an exclusive part of the world's refugees, the center serves immigrants from diverse cultural backgrounds. ACC has helped clients from many countries, including: Iran, BiH, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, Liberia, Iran, Iraq, Vietnam, Burma, Congo, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Burundi, Seirra Leonne, Cuba, etc.

Funding

ACC was initially established with a grant from the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) to provide for the needs of the lost boys of Sudan who were due to arrive in Colorado. After 10 years of operating providing community work - the nuts and bolts of cultural adjustments, the State Department began funding them to take on the role of a resettlement agency as well. This means that they receive funding on a per capita basis through the federal government from the Department of State that provides for the first 30 days of a refugees arrival. In Colorado, state funds are also available through the Wilson/Fish or "CARES" (Colorado Alliance for Refugee Empowerment and Success) which is funded through the ORR. This funding is based on formulas and not predictably per capita. This funding stresses the services which help the refugee realize self-sufficiency in 4-8 months.

Sometimes having a credible and large established NGO's name behind her, Jennifer Gueddiche finds applying for grants eased. Simultaneously, some grants favor small community based organizations, and though ACC in many ways fits this profile because it is an arm of ECDC it is excluded from such preferences. For example, the ACC has recently won a grant from the Colorado Foundation for Families which they have used to expand their services to refugees and asylees by offering computer resources. The grant was awarded through the mayor's office and is meant to promote the employment services of the city. It was used to buy computers which are located in the center and will be available to refugees and asylees for their personal use. They serve both as a link to the employment office of the mayor as well as ESL and Microsoft Office tutorials that can increase the skills of refugees and asylees.

Program Overview

Projects

The African Community Center provides a variety of services for both refugees and asylees settling in Colorado. The three primary services include case management, employment, and cultural adjustment. In several ways the ACC addresses the triad of post-flight stressors identified by the American Refugee Committee: language, employment, and housing. The case managers have an active role in the lives of the clients of the center in addressing the triad and providing the contacts refugees need in order to become established and self-sufficient in a new culture. "Case Management" as the center defines it addresses each of these. Case managers pick clients up from the airport. They are a first welcoming face in a new home and importantly are consistent friendly faces that ease cultural adjustment throughout the first year in their new homes.

The center often acts as a resource of information and refers refugees and asylees to other service providers that cater to specific needs. For, example the center does not provide

ESL, but provides a link to ESL, or to employment services and training, connecting refugees to the Spring Institute or other service agencies. The center and the case managers provide the connections and social and material sources which refugees have been so uprooted from in their own societies, and without a sponsor have no access to in this new culture. The African Community Center has assisted over 300 people since they began in 2001.

In addition to these projects, ACC is seeking to start a thrift store to benefit refugees. ACC is also preparing for a complete health services resource and reference for refugees who no longer fall under the benefits provided to them during the first 8 months but need continued care. One of the programs ECDC has traditionally been involved with the training, encouragement, and support of fledgling Mutual Assistance Associations (MAAs). Their publication of the African Refugee Network highlights the accomplishments of these MAAs and other happenings in the refugee service world. The March 2003 edition includes a photo of the Houston MAA and the recipients of educational scholarships, refugees entering higher education. The African Community Center currently has a pending grant up for re-approval which would provide the necessary funds for them to begin training, encouragement, and support of their own fledgling MAAs. They hope to start a Somali MAA, a Liberian MAA, as well as a Somali Women's MAA with the help of the grant.

The Lost Boys of Sudan

Was the glass half full or half empty? Jennifer Gueddich views one of the centers pioneering accomplishments critically. She doesn't believe the lost boys received the care that they deserved arriving soon after the center's establishment. She remembers, "we just didn't have the resources, time or experience." However, all 19 of the Sudanese clients received in 2001 are now adjusted well, living in community with each other and attending college - a success story. In those hectic first months of the center, with only two months to setup office and a staff with no case work experience, health problems fell through the cracks, and there was inadequate housing. Despite the hiccups, it was a tremendous learning experience as the African Community Center received 19 refugees within weeks of opening their doors. One of the lessons they learned was the importance of active volunteers. Gueddiche attributes success to the strength of the brotherhood between the men. "They always took care of each other in the Sudan, and they still do." The group has just received its most recent member when the 20th lost boy arrived last week. He was welcomed by a group of 10 at the airport and is living among his new brothers.

The Somali Bantu: A Challenge

On May 22, 2003, Colorado received the first family from the Somali Bantu's. The Somali Bantu are a group which has come under particularly ferocious persecution as a result of the civil war in Somalia, despite their presence in the country for thousands of years. Thousands fled to Kenya in the 1990's and settled in Dadaab refugee camp and were resettled to the more secure Kakuma camp in northeastern Kenya in 2002. The U.S. has agreed to receive 11,800 Somali Bantu. Of these, Colorado expects 300 over the next three years. A curious and intriguing fact about the newcomers is that they are all related.

These three hundred coming to Colorado are all extended family. In a leaflet produced by the Somali Bantu Community Organization, Inc., it states that, "The extended family is the main family structure among the Somali Bantu. It generally consists of grandparents, children, uncles, and aunts, and sometimes other family members living in the same household." The ACC has been awaiting the arrivals expectantly for some time as the process has been slowed and even stymied due to an increase in security reviews in the U.S. post 9/11 and the transition from the INS handling refugee resettlement to the increasing role of the Department of Homeland Security.

The resettlement regime on a national scale is on shaky ground these days. Many fear if the economy tanks, so could the whole resettlement apparatus. The refugee service community has been greatly impacted by budget cuts on both the federal and state level. Although most funding is allocated through the federal budget, funds flow through the state which has an interest in "balancing" and even though it gets reimbursed has to maintain a particular image of spending. Last year the ACC was forced to cut their budget by 11%, and in the coming weeks they will be informed of the cuts for the coming fiscal year beginning in September. The Somali Bantu may have a role in this if the prevalent rumor in circulation proves true: that the Somali Bantu are a **test** of the refugee service providers, with future funding pending on their successful resettlement. Whether or not the service providers are deemed "fund-worthy" by the government may depend on the transition of 300 pre-literate, pre-English, primarily agricultural persons into self-sufficient and employed life in Colorado within 8 months of their arrival with the help of their resettlement agency. The ACC expects to manage an estimated 20 Somali Bantu cases, and hopes to pass "the test" with flying colors, both for the sake of the future of their organization as well as for the individuals seeking refuge and a new life.

Acknowledgements & Sources

The previous information is a synthesis of information graciously provided by brochures provided by the ACC, their website, several ECDC newsletters from March 2003 and January 2001, the refugee 101 Information booklet sponsored by the Colorado Refugee Network Council, and through conversations with members of staff at the African Community Center, including Jennifer Gueddiche, the Program Manager, Chitahka Flore, the volunteer coordinator, and Yelena Fritsch, a case manager.