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## **Ecumenical Refugee Services, Inc: Briefing Paper on Self-Sufficiency Services**

### **Background**

#### *History*

Established in 1978, Ecumenical Refugee Services, Inc. (ERS)<sup>1</sup> is the local affiliate of two national voluntary agencies (VOLAGs), Church World Service and Episcopal Migration Ministries, which work in affiliation with the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), a branch of the United States Department of Health and Human Services. In addition to working with other agencies and community volunteers in helping refugees integrate, as the local affiliate for the Church World Service Immigration and Refugee Program, ERS involves congregations within Colorado to create hospitable communities for refugees and to provide for certain materials upon arrival in the U.S. ERS' primary goal is to ease the struggles of resettlement for refugees within the Denver area and to assist in the establishment of self-sufficiency as quickly as possible. (*Refugee Times*, Spring 2003, ERS newsletter).

#### *Purpose*

ERS provides services to refugees for their first year within the United States. To assist refugees in transitioning to life in America, ERS services include case management, medical appointments and referral assistance, housing assistance, all necessary household furnishings, assistance with English and job preparedness classes, employment counseling and placement, assistance with social services and school enrollment, and emergency assistance. (*Refugee Times*, Spring 2003). ERS has been working with refugees in this manner since its establishment, resettling about 300 new refugees annually. The refugees ERS serves come from Afghanistan, Bosnia, Burma, Cuba, Ethiopia, Iraq, Nigeria, Russia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, and Vietnam among other countries.

All services offered by ERS are considered to contribute in the establishment of self-sufficiency. However, the fundamental goal of ERS is to find employment for the refugees it serves. In other words, having a job is equated with self-sufficiency.

### **Program Overview**

#### *Projects and Goals*

Nationally, refugees who resettle in the United States receive cash assistance, varying according to family member size, for a period of eight months. For example, a single adult may receive \$335 per month. The ORR mandates that VOLAGs contracting with them through the Matching Grant program, as with ERS, must find employment for the

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refugees they serve within four months of their arrival in the U.S. However, if after eight months a refugee is not employed, he/she is eligible for TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) public assistance. If a refugee is not employed after their first year in America, ERS refers him or her to the Colorado Department of Human Services' Colorado Refugee Services Program. ERS only has official contact with and provides services to refugees for their first year in the United States.

To assist refugees in obtaining employment, ERS employs two employment specialists whose sole concern is to identify employment opportunities for refugees within the Denver community. An underlying philosophy of an employment specialist's job is that a person's identity is wrapped around self-sufficiency. Immediately upon working with recently arrived refugees, ERS conducts an orientation session which entails performing an in-take assessment of a refugee's education level and previous employment experience. Employment specialists must convey and make relevant a refugee's previous work history to a potential employer. For example, although a refugee may have been a cattle herder in Sudan without receiving standard wages as is customary in the U.S., an employment specialist must consider this as previous work history. With the information from the in-take assessment, ERS employment specialists begin the task of finding employment opportunities. Each refugee is assigned an employment specialist and refugees are free to discuss their employment possibilities with their specialist at any time. ERS uses the U.S. Guidelines for Poverty to determine when a refugee is considered self-sufficient. For example, within a family of four adult relatives, if 2-3 are employed in the service industry making \$6.00 per hour, then they are considered to be self-sufficient. Past employment obtained for refugees has included positions such as machine operators, cashiers, housekeepers, carpet cleaners, kitchen personnel and factory personnel to name a few.

ERS is one of five local VOLAG affiliates within the Colorado Refugee Network. This network is comprised of Colorado's voluntary agencies, other organizations, and the Colorado Refugee Services Program. All work together to provide durable resettlement for refugees in Colorado. Because of the strong organizational capacity of this network, ERS is able to rely heavily on referring refugees to other organizations which can provide assistance in other service areas and thus enable ERS to reach its ultimate goal of finding employment for the refugees it serves.

For example, within 10 days of arrival refugees assisted by ERS are referred to the AF Williams Clinic which performs physical screenings. In addition to assessing a refugee's physical health, the AF Williams Clinic is also used as a referral source to assess a refugee's mental health. The services of the Rocky Mountain Survivor's Center are also utilized for refugees who have suffered from trauma experiences or torture. It is important that ERS is able to use these organizations as referral sources because they can enable a refugee to achieve sound physical and mental health and thus further enable him or her to become self-sufficient.

ERS does not conduct any skills training. However, it does have a strong referral process with the Emily Griffith Opportunity School whereby refugees can take English language

classes. Depending on a refugee's education level and/or needs, ERS may suggest that a refugee enroll in the language classes at Emily Griffith rather quickly. However, some refugees choose not to take the language classes because their first and foremost priority is finding employment. For those refugees who have advanced English skills, ERS will refer them to the Spring Institute for Intercultural Learning where the refugees can participate in the institute's WorkStyles program which is a 60 hour pre-employment training program. Additionally, the Spring Institute may take select clients to job fairs.

While a large majority of the clients it serves are refugees, ERS also serves asylees. According to employment specialists, there is a distinctly noticeable difference between these two populations. ERS finds that its refugee population for the most part has experienced little or no acculturation to life in America. Contrary to this, asylees are more likely to be more acculturated to America because they may have been in the U.S. for a longer period of time. The difference in the degree of acculturation between the two populations has an impact on a refugee's level of employability. An asylee may be more ready for the American job market whereas a refugee may require more assistance. This may pose challenges to the self-sufficiency services that ERS offers. In a similar vein, refugees may have very few skills upon arrival in the US. At times ERS has had to teach a refugee how to count change so that that refugee may become a cashier. Therefore, a refugee's skill level may pose challenges to an employment specialist's ability to find him or her employment.

Additionally, since September 11, 2001 the Bush Administration has decreased the number of refugees allowed to enter the U.S. This has decreased the number of refugees that ERS has been able to assist and as such ERS does not feel that it is meeting its goals. Subsequently, although ERS receives 80% of their funding from the ORR this source has been decreased as well.

### **Key Accomplishments**

Because of its 26 year history of experience, ERS has been able to establish solid relationships with business enterprises throughout Colorado. ERS has been able to secure a number of enduring relationships with employers in the Denver area who are more than willing to offer employment opportunities to refugees. Since ERS is so embedded in the community, it is able to make many contacts and thus find and establish relationships with employers who truly want to help refugees. In fact, 95% of the refugees ERS serves become self-sufficient within their first year in the US. Since 2000, ERS has only had to put one refugee on TANF.

### **Policy Recommendations**

1. ERS should conduct evaluations of the self-sufficiency services it provides. Currently, ERS does not perform any such program evaluation. A program evaluation is necessary to determine whether ERS' "self-sufficiency" services are sufficient, whether they need to be expanded, or whether ERS needs to secure better referral sources.

2. ERS should provide better follow-up services with its clients. ERS does not maintain official contact with its refugee population after a period of one year. If however a refugee contacts ERS after a year has passed, they are referred directly to the Colorado Refugee Services Program. It may prove beneficial to a refugee to continue an alternate form of contact with ERS for an additional year after the first. Because ERS has been a support system for the refugee's first year, it may be detrimental to cut off this source of support.
3. Because ERS states that its primary goal is self-sufficiency and employment is equated with self-sufficiency, ERS should provide a skills training component to the services they offer. ERS could provide computer skills training for example. Knowledge of computers and at least one computer program may enable refugees to obtain better paying jobs.