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Emily Griffith Opportunity School Program:
Home Tutoring ESL Program for Refugees

Background

History

The Emily Griffith Opportunity School has offered English as a Second Language (ESL) since it opened in 1916. It was not until after the Vietnam War that the school started receiving numerous refugees from the Pacific Rim, Vietnam and Cambodia. This is when the Colorado ESL program became independent from the general education curriculum and became one of the many programs offered by the school.

The ESL program broadened in the 1980s. Nonetheless, the staff realized that the program was set up to encourage self sufficiency and workplace readiness, which meant that the most employable person in the family was the one going to school. In many cases, the men in the family were the ones who attended school and the women in the family were staying home to take care of the small children. They found that there were many women isolated and who were getting left behind. Their kids were learning English at school and their husbands were learning English at school and at their jobs. This is when the home tutoring program started.

At first only a dozen students in any given time were receiving these services. It was in 1997 that the home tutoring program expanded because of the break up of the former Yugoslavia and the war, which produced a big influx of refugees from Bosnia.

Now, home tutoring is not only offered to women that have to stay home because of childcare, but numerous elderly people. Furthermore, a significant number of traumatized people were identified, who could not go to school because they had post-traumatic stress disorder. These people would try to come to school, but could not concentrate; they needed therapy and time to adjust, so the school offered home tutoring to them. Between 1997 and 2003 the ESL Home Tutoring program has worked with an average of over a hundred refugees per year.

Purpose

The home tutoring program utilizes the same written mission the Opportunity School possesses. The mission statement reads as follows: “The mission of Emily Griffith Opportunity School is to provide knowledge, skills and values that enable students to compete successfully in the workforce, to be self-sufficient citizens and lifelong leaders.”

The program reaches refugees who are not capable of attending classes at the Opportunity School by offering tutoring in English as a Second Language in their homes. Nonetheless, the program is more than just teaching English. It works with workplace readiness, social integration and life skills. Moreover, the program offers refugees the

opportunity to interact with someone "neutral," a volunteer with no power over them. The volunteer is in many cases the first consistent friendly face from the community that they can trust. This helps in the resettlement, from a psychological perspective. Volunteers sometimes become their first friends and help the refugees in reading the energy bill or accompanying them to the super market, for instance.

The main purpose of the program is to assist people who are left behind by the traditional programs offered in Opportunity School. In addition to assisting this group, the program builds goodwill in the community and connects the community to their programs so that people can learn who the refugees are and how their lives have been impacted. The key initiative is not to separate the refugees from their new society, but to get the Denver community to link to what the center does.

Funding

The home tutoring program utilizes federal funds. It is funded by a grant from the Office of Refugee Resettlement, which is a subsidiary of the Department of Health and Human Services. The grant goes to the State of Colorado through the Department of Education and in this manner Emily Griffith Opportunity School holds the contract to administer these classes. These funds are sufficient to buy books, provide for training and pay for volunteer Sharon McCreary's salary.

Program Overview

The home tutoring program trains between fifty and sixty people a year. The volunteers receive training in teaching English as a Second Language and quarterly in-service workshops. The center asks volunteers to dedicate a minimum of two hours per week for four months, to have initiative, to be responsible and resourceful, and most importantly to have sensitivity to other cultures. Some tutors give two hours a week of service and others give twenty-six hours per week; it all depends on availability. The refugee program has a prescribed curriculum; it focuses on employment readiness and it is short term. The refugees receive the bulk of their resettlement assistance in their first four months and then they have to be self-sufficient, even when language trauma and adjustment barriers persist. For this reason there has to be a selective program for refugees.

Debra Ratliff, from the Colorado Refugee ESL Program Department of Education, started this home tutoring program. Ratliff ran the program until 1997. This same year, she hired Sharon McCreary to help her with the training of volunteers. In 1998, Sharon McCreary was given the responsibility to work in the northwest area, Jefferson County and Boulder. A year later, McCreary was given the opportunity to serve as a Volunteer Director. Since then, she has had the responsibility of recruiting volunteers, interviewing clients and matching them with their students.

Those qualifying are women who have to stay home to take care of their children, elderly, psychologically impaired, and people who are working who cannot come to school. Before, there were many isolated women, but now they target a large number of people that arrived to Denver and started working immediately. The jobs these refugees

find often do not give them the best shifts. They want to get better jobs but they cannot because they do not have the language skills. This is where the programs steps in.

Goals

Attained Goals:

1. To expand the program. Being able to expand their services to more refugees in need and to increase the amount of volunteers for those needs. By 2000 they had over 200 volunteers in the program.
2. The capacity to network within the community. The program has partnerships with local universities like the University of Denver, the University of Colorado, and Regis University. It has networked with people from universities that are already interested in these services. With this, the program is benefited since they get dedicated, qualified candidates for the program. On the other hand, volunteers get to work directly with what their interests reflect.
3. Community education. The program has aided awareness within the Denver community. In general, the average citizen cannot differentiate between a refugee and a regular immigrant. They do not like to have to differentiate one type of people from others, but they believe that refugees arrive to the United States with a certain disadvantage and they want to lessen that disadvantage. Much of what they are doing is to educate the community. Some have a political agenda. All are constantly advocating for the clients they serve.

Goals Not Attained:

1. A library for the tutors. One library dedicated to teaching resources, which from a fiscal perspective right now is not attainable. The volunteers need a place that they can use to access teaching materials and resources.
2. There is a waiting list that they would like to eliminate or further reduce. They would like to never have a waiting list of refugees waiting for tutors. Since the program was started, the waiting list has been reduced, but there are still clients on it. Two years ago, they could have fifty people at a certain time on a waiting list, and people would wait up to a year for a tutor. Despite having a hundred and ten tutors working, the program was in need of fifty more. Today, the waiting list has been reduced to ten clients. To fully accomplish this goal they need more recruiting. The factors that keep the program from this goal are funds and time. Sharon McCreary is funded part-time to run this program; it is a twenty-five hours a week job. In reality, she spends about forty-five hours-a-week working on it.
3. The ultimate goal is the expansion of the program. The program needs more workers, but for the same reasons listed above this is not possible. They would like expansion, not to bureaucratize the system, but to better reach refugees and to have their needs better met.

Key Accomplishments

1. Over one hundred refugees are served in the program a year, just in home tutoring. The biggest accomplishment of the program has been growth. Since they started, their program went from twenty-seven clients and tutors to over a hundred of each. This required McReary to recruit more volunteers, to train them,

- to continue to provide them with technical support and also to coordinate all the referrals for the students.
2. The majority of the students in the program have been able to break through their psychological problems and with the help of volunteers they can go to regular classes with other refugees. McCreary had a woman student from Ethiopia who when she arrived to Denver, was abandoned by her husband alone with two little girls. The woman did not speak any English, was psychologically devastated and could not come to school, both because of her emotional state and because of childcare. After a year working with her, she was able to come to school and after her first year in school she became ESL Student of the Year. Now, she owns a home and works for Wells Fargo bank. She goes to the Community College of Aurora and she is a great success story.
 3. The program has established excellent working relationships with all the voluntary resettlement agencies. The recent course of historical events worldwide has changed the program. Now, it is getting a lot more referrals from the case managers of refugees at the African Community Center and the Colorado Refugee Service Program. The Colorado refugee network is very interrelated, since all members work with the same client pool. For this reason, shared information is necessary.