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Lutheran Family Services of Colorado: Refugee and Asylee Programs

Background

History

Lutheran Family Services of Colorado's Refugee and Asylee Programs is an affiliate of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services. This program is part of a voluntary agency that is primarily funded by the U.S. Department of State and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Lutheran Family Services of Colorado began its refugee resettlement program in 1975 when the modern refugee resettlement program took shape nationwide in response to the fall of Saigon. Since then the Lutheran Family Services of Colorado (LFS) has been dedicated to helping refugees rebuild their lives by equipping them with the skills they need to obtain self-sufficiency within their first year of living in Colorado. They serve clients from 39 countries and have more than 400 open cases a year, including 150-250 new cases.

Purpose

The Federal government typically describes self-sufficiency as being economically sufficient, but LFS takes this idea of sufficiency further by placing importance in community services and integration. For LFS there are two main indicators of successful resettlement; employment and integration into new communities. LFS takes many steps to ensure that refugees are self-sufficient within their first year of arrival by offering several types of services. Employment services include: language classes, job coaching, vocational training, cash assistance and drivers education. Community services include: health and mental health services, English classes, citizen classes, youth programs, community development and involvement in Mutual Assistant Associations (MAA). Several of these rely on referrals. LFS is lucky to have a wide reaching network system between other local service providers that allows them to branch out their services and capabilities. They are able to go beyond the peripheral idea of economic self sufficiency and support community enhancement and genuine integration within those communities.

Funding

The Federal government, through two types of grants, reception and placement (R&P) and matching, mainly fund LFS. Each grant serves a different purpose in the case management process. The first type, R&P, provides for a refugee's needs for the first 30 days of resettlement, while the matching type provides resources for an additional two months of service. A timeline of three months is all the Federal government allocates for the resettlement process to successfully take place. In some states, and Colorado is one, if a refugee has not effectively resettled by the time allocated by grants their case is passed on to the state. This is known as Phase II. The Colorado Refugee Services Program handles it.

Fortunately, LFS receives additional state support through Fish-Wilson package grants. These grants, which are distributed every three years, allow agencies 12 months to provide services for refugees. This extended amount of time gives LFS the ability to offer services such as; health services, education and training that would not be offered in the short time span of three months. This greatly helps in the overall self-sufficiency process and alleviates a lot of direct state intervention. This also allows the state to concentrate on the more difficult cases (Phase II) more efficiently. LFS also receives donations through its parent agencies and through the generous support of the community and congregations throughout the region. A wide array of voluntary services available to participating refugees creates many more options and a sense of community. LFS relies on the continued commitment of community members to help refugees feel at home

Program Overview

LFS better serves its clients and provides them with more opportunities through its extensive networks of local providers that offer complimentary services of all types. Rather than being a solely independent agency that attempts to spread its resources very thin in all directions it can refer parties to other outside agencies and concentrate on a few direct services. This beneficial arrangement provides a high quality of service to those that use it.

Although LFS offers many high quality services there are some areas that could be better developed. There could be more emphasis on women and their resettlement issues. Women can easily be left behind in the integration process because they are often left at home with the children and left out of the overall integration process. There is a need for language classes and “acculturation classes” designated especially for women. Another key service that would assist women, and men, is affordable or free childcare. This would provide refugees with more school and employment opportunities by allowing them to take advantage of an often very expensive necessity for a very inexpensive fee. Another issue that needs careful consideration is the idea of a “one size fits all” approach to helping refugees from many different cultures. This method is not always going to work. The overall goal for most refugees, integration, is the same, but because there are so many different backgrounds and cultures trying to achieve it there must be some flexibility in the approaches used to obtain it. Representatives of some cultures tend to clash with the current system or services because they have no reference for what Americans consider normal or acceptable behavior. Some services (e.g., within the mental health arena) are insufficient and lacking for some populations that are arriving in Colorado. These services need to be re-evaluated as to how they can better serve certain populations with dramatic cultural and lifestyle differences. These are general challenges in case management.

Key Accomplishments

The extensive network of providers in Colorado is an innovative feature that many states do not have as well developed. This network provides a high quality of services for refugees and greatly assists them in their goals of putting down new roots and reaching new opportunities throughout this state.

LFS has also been deeply involved in helping develop local MAAs. Through the Ethnic Self Help Initiative the government and LFS have pushed to support networks within communities. LFS has realized the importance of community involvement in achieving self-sufficiency among refugees.

LFS is constantly trying to expand the definition of self-sufficiency by emphasizing less quantifiable standards of acculturation compared to economics, which is highly quantifiable and most often used. Especially in this time of economic downturn that has been so detrimental for everyone including refugees it is important to stress other areas of integration and resettlement. LFS regularly examines its programs and services to make sure they are able to respond to the necessary needs of refugees. Short-term and long-term refugee residents have continually changing needs that must be addressed to make Colorado a hospitable place to resettle.