

Organizational Briefing on the African Community Center of Denver

BACKGROUND

History

The African Community Center (ACC) is a program office of the Ethiopian Community Development Council Inc. (ECDC), a community-based 501 (c) (3) non-profit organization with its headquarters in Arlington, Virginia. The ECDC was established in 1983 by concerned community leaders to respond to the needs of a growing Ethiopian community in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. While initially concentrating on that community, ECDC has from its inception been serving immigrants and refugees from diverse cultural backgrounds with a focus on the African community. In addition to its branch office in Denver, the ECDC also has program offices operating in Washington, D.C., Las Vegas, Nevada, and Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Founded in May 2001, the African Community Center of Denver became the fourth Voluntary Agency (VOLAG) to serve refugees and asylum seekers in the Denver metro area, joining Ecumenical Refugee Services, Jewish Family Services, and Lutheran Family Services. Notably, the ACC is the only secular resettlement agency in Denver. With no congregation base from which to draw funds and support, the ACC has to work a little harder than the other faith-based VOLAGS to find the money necessary to sustain its programs.

When the ACC was first established as a program office of the ECDC, it was with the intention that the ACC would gain gradual autonomy from its parent organization. But the ACC has yet to apply for its own 501 (c) (3) non-profit status. The relationship between the ECDC and the ACC has been somewhat mixed over the past five years. The geographical distance can create problems for the Denver office because the final authority for many decision-making processes is ultimately vested in the organizational headquarters on the East coast. This separation can sometimes delay or complicate important decisions—sometimes even hindering the ACC from quickly realizing its objectives.

The ACC was originally established to respond to the growing number of African refugees in Denver, specifically refugees coming from Sudan. The organizational name of the ACC is somewhat misleading because it implies that the service agency only serves clients from African countries. In fact, African refugees make up roughly 50% of the agency's caseload; the ACC is certainly not discriminatory in whom it chooses to serve. Indeed, the ACC assists refugees from around the world, including those fleeing from persecution in nations as diverse as Bosnia, Iraq and Vietnam. Since 2001, the ACC has successfully resettled 850 refugees from over twenty countries, and the agency currently handles one-third of Colorado's refugee cases.

The ACC employs a qualified staff with ample experience working with refugees and immigrants. Currently, the ACC has twelve full-time employees—this includes case managers, employment developers, administrative personnel, a community resource coordinator, and other program coordinators. The ACC currently employs three part-time employees and utilizes many volunteers.

Mission

The ACC shares a mission statement with its parent organization, the ECDC. This common mission is “to resettle refugees, promote cultural, educational, and socioeconomic development in the refugee and immigrant community in the United States, and conduct humanitarian and development programs in the Horn of Africa.”

To pursue this mission, ECDC (and its various program offices, including the ACC):

- provides programs and services that assist newcomers to the country become productive members of their new American communities;
- fosters greater understanding among newcomers and the wider community;
- conducts outreach and education activities to increase public awareness about refugee and immigrant issues;
- encourages African community-based organizations to increase their capacity to serve their local communities;
- promotes civic participation by newcomers in the decision-making processes at the local, state, and national levels; and
- provides cross-cultural training to service providers on the diverse cultural backgrounds of the clients with whom they work.

More specifically, the ACC conducts educational and social service programs that help newcomers resettle in their new communities, recover from past trauma, gain personal independence and economic self-sufficiency, and quickly become able participants and productive, contributing members of American society. In addition, the agency works with African community-based organizations to provide technical assistance in developing the leadership capacity to serve their respective communities. The ACC’s community outreach program promotes awareness about refugee issues and the challenges faced by newcomers as they move through the resettlement and cultural adjustment process. Finally, the ACC engages newcomers and members of the greater Denver community to enhance cross-cultural communication.

Funding

The ACC was initially founded with a grant from the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) to provide for the “Lost Boys” of Sudan resettling in Colorado. The U.S. State Department then began to fund the ACC to expand its focus to include not only cultural adjustment but refugee resettlement as well. The federal funding from the State Department is given on a per capita basis and provides financial assistance to

refugees for their first 30 days of resettlement in the United States. In Colorado, state-administered federal funds are also available through the Wilson/Fish Alternative Program that seeks to increase the prospects for early employment and self-sufficiency of refugees, thereby reducing the level of their dependence on welfare. This funding is based on formulas and not distributed on a per capita basis.

The Colorado Refugee Services Program (CRSP) monitors the Wilson/Fish funds, contracting with the ACC and the other three Denver-based VOLAGS to serve and coordinate services for refugees resettling in Colorado. As self-sufficiency is one of the ultimate goals of resettlement agencies, the ORR funds terminate after the first eight months of refugee resettlement. Certainly, not all refugees are self-sufficient after the first eight months, so additional funding is necessary to support some refugees until they become independent and economically stable. The ACC also receives generous support from the following local funders: the Denver Foundation, the Colorado Trust, the Denver Office of Economic Development, and the Colorado Division of Workforce Development. Notably, the ACC also annually receives individual gifts-in-kind donations with an estimated worth of \$100,000. Such items have included computers, apartment furnishings, toiletries, and coats.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The ACC provides a variety of services to its clients resettling in Colorado, and its particular services fall within one of five overarching programs: Refugee Resettlement, Employment Training, Community Outreach, Translation/Interpretation Services, and Computer Training Services. Each program is detailed below:

Refugee Resettlement

The Refugee Resettlement program includes case management services, housing assistance, employment services, and cultural adjustment services. ACC case managers act as advocates and cultural brokers for incoming refugees, providing clients with intensive support in the areas of housing, medical care and education. Their services include welcoming the clients during their arrival at the airport, helping them find safe housing, referring them to medical assistance, enrolling them in schools as well as in federal, state and local assistance programs (social security, food stamps, Medicaid) and simply being there to listen and comfort them during their adjustment process.

The ACC provides housing assistance to its clients by locating suitable housing, completing appropriate applications, helping with the moving process, and establishing utility services. With its many in-kind donations, the ACC is also able to provide a supply of essential household furnishings for all incoming refugees.

The ACC employment department supports the efforts of refugees to become self-sufficient and productive members of the Denver community. Understanding that employment is vital to this goal, the agency assists its clients with preparing for, locating, and keeping a job. In addition, the ACC helps refugees develop the skills and attitude

essential for success in the American workplace. The ACC employment service also helps clients access training programs in an effort to increase employment opportunities. In addition, the ACC reaches out to the Denver business community, assisting local employers in locating and hiring individuals who are skilled, hard-working and creative. Importantly, the ACC has developed successful relationships with local employers who recognize that refugees possess the qualities vital to business success: determination, focus and toughness of spirit. By educating employers, the ACC gets local businesses behind its important cause. The employer services of the ACC include screening, referral and follow-up of applicants.

The ACC cultural adjustment program is essential for the long-term adjustment of refugees. Adjusting to a new homeland can be quite stressful, particularly when refugees may have not yet mastered the official language of their new environment or may not have any family members to whom they can turn for support. The ACC helps refugees overcome culture shock by organizing cultural adjustment workshops and by matching its clients with their first American friends. The ACC Refugee Mentor program, which has included students from University of Denver's Graduate School of International Studies, is one of the many ways that people from the local community can volunteer with the organization and make a difference in the lives of refugees as they adjust to life in America.

Employment Training

The ACC recently began a program to help its most vulnerable refugees with the establishment of the Safari Seconds Thrift Store. Many of the refugee groups resettling in Colorado arrive with numerous barriers preventing them from finding employment and, therefore, ultimate independence. In 2005, the ACC received funding from the Denver Office of Economic Development and the Colorado Division of Workforce Development to aid Denver county TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) recipients achieve self-sufficiency and economic stability. This unique program provides intensive ESL and Life Skills classes, retail training, and employment search assistance to refugees suffering from significant barriers to employment. Some refugees need more support than others, and the training programs offered by the thrift store allow these refugees to develop employment skills in a less stressful environment, thereby increasing their chances for employment elsewhere in the community. By working at Safari Seconds, refugees receive on-the-job experience, which gives them work history while meeting TANF requirements. Since July 2005, this employment training program has successfully served 45 clients.

Community Outreach

The ACC works with community-based organizations to provide the technical assistance needed to develop leadership capacity within local ethnic and immigrant populations. The community outreach program also promotes awareness about refugee issues and the challenges faced by newcomers as they progress through the resettlement and cultural

adjustment processes. In addition, the ACC strives to encourage greater intercultural communication among refugees and the greater Denver community.

One of the most important sub-programs falling under the Community Outreach program is the Youth Outreach program. With grants from the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment and the Colorado Trust, the ACC provides youth development and leadership programs to refugee children ages eight and up. Since its inception in 2005, the Youth Outreach program has served approximately 75 refugee children.

The Youth Outreach program is committed to increasing community awareness and understanding of the refugee experience as a means to prevent bullying behaviors in local schools and communities. The objectives of this program are to:

- 1) Cultivate strength, confidence, and leadership in refugee youth, enabling them to lead successful lives as new Americans;
- 2) Educate local students about refugee issues and experiences, fostering community-wide appreciation of all cultures; and
- 3) Promote active participation of refugee parents in their children's educational experiences.

The ACC's Youth Program Coordinator, Kathy Batalden-Smith, and Youth Trainer, Adriana Lucatero, recently developed the REACH curriculum, designed to educate America's youth about "refugeeness." REACH (Refugee Education for Awareness, Change and Hope) challenges youth to think critically about refugee-related issues, encourages empathy toward refugees and their particular experiences, and motivates youth to "REACH out" and befriend refugee youth. This curriculum will debut in several area schools in the fall of 2006 and is also being marketed throughout the city and country.

Translation/Interpretation Services

The ACC provides referral services to organizations, businesses and individuals who are in need of translation/interpretation services. With access to the largest community of translators and interpreters who speak the many languages of Africa, the ACC is able to help many. With an aim to reflect the ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity of its clients, the ACC's staff speaks 17 different languages, including Somali, Arabic, Amharic, Kiswahili, Dinka, Hindi, Oromigna, Russian, French, Spanish, German and English.

Computer Training Services

The ACC holds computer training sessions for its refugees in conjunction with Metro Volunteers' Impact Group. Refugees receive computer training on subjects such as basic computer skills, e-mail and internet, job searching, and typing. ACC's computer lab is available to refugees, asylees and immigrants during regular business hours. Computer equipment and software are generously provided through a grant from the Colorado Foundation for Families and Children.

KEY ACCOMPLISHMENT

The ACC prides itself on its ability to assist refugees in their employment search and their ultimate realization of economic self-sufficiency. Recent statistics indicate that 86% of its clients are employed within the first eight months. The remaining 14% are enrolled in the TANF program—and recently have shown a 50% employment rate.

ORGANIZATIONAL DIFFICULTIES

The ACC recognizes that it is understaffed. Each case manager employed by the ACC handles 90 to 120 individuals at a time. This workload can be quite taxing on case managers, and it unfortunately means that the more outgoing clients get most of the attention while the less outgoing refugees have a greater chance of falling through the cracks. One proposed solution to this gap is to perform home visits to those more timid clients in an effort to better meet their sometimes unvoiced needs. As of now, however, the ACC does not have the capacity to undertake home visits to these less outgoing refugees.

FUTURE GOALS

The ACC has two major goals for the near future. First, the ACC would like to have its own building—and really become a “community center” in both name and fact. The goal is to create a safe place where refugees could socialize and feel “at home.” The community center would include such things as a daycare center, after-school programs, and community events. The ACC hopes to have a building plan finalized by the end of its fiscal year. Second, the ACC hopes to expand its cultural orientation program for all refugees to be taught in their native languages. This second goal is in the very early stages of development.

Acknowledgments and Sources

The information provided on the African Community Center was generously supplied by the ACC, its website (www.africancommunitycenter.net), ACC literature, the Office of Refugee Resettlement website (www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/) and through an informative interview with Julia Paul, the ACC’s Community Resource Coordinator.