

Cultural Orientation Smooths the Way for Refugees

By Karen Brodsky

Out of the darkness came light, so the Chanukah story tells us. One of the leitmotifs of the holiday, light, reminds Carolina Refugee Resettlement Agency's (CRRRA) caseworkers, who were refugees themselves, of how much they learned overseas before coming to Charlotte — and how much they had yet to learn.

Not all the refugees CRRRA resettles are completely in the dark when they arrive in the U.S. While their cultural orientation (CO) overseas may not scratch the surface of what life will be like once they arrive in the U.S., they do receive instruction designed to help refugees develop realistic expectations about life here.

Not all refugees are literate — even in their own languages — and they may not have the capacity or previous knowledge of a classroom situation, or they may have no conception of modern living. The success of CO depends also on the number of hours trainers have for training and the needs of the group being trained.

"It is critical for refugees to be provided CO overseas and even more important that it be continued in the U.S.," said Ellen Dubin, CRRRA executive director.

Overseas CO is funded by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration. The Cultural Orientation Resource Center website provides an overview of the CO program that is carried out overseas. An edited version is printed here.

Overseas CO is provided in more than 40 countries. These are usually countries of first asylum—that is, countries that refugees flee to for protection and assistance—although in special cases refugees are processed in their home countries.

All refugees over the age of 15 who have been approved for resettlement to the United States are eligible to receive CO. Due to childcare obligations, logistical considerations, or class size, sometimes only one family member can attend CO. Some of the overseas programs also periodically conduct special classes for refugee children and youth.

Based on State Department guidelines, overseas CO addresses



Bhutanese refugees in Nepal work together to learn about life in the United States. Photo courtesy: International Organization for Migration (IOM), Damak, Nepal

11 essential topics related to processing, travel, and resettlement:

* Pre-Departure Processing: Familiarizes refugees with the steps they need to complete before leaving for the United States.

* Role of the Resettlement Agency: Helps refugees understand the roles of a case manager and other resettlement agency staff so that they can develop realistic expectations about the help they will receive from the resettlement agency.

* Housing: Familiarizes refugees with housing types and costs, ways to find low-cost housing, and housing leases and laws.

* Employment: Covers topics such as the importance of early self-sufficiency, the job search, job interviews, types of U.S. jobs, salary deductions, employment benefits, and legal documents needed for employment.

* Transportation: Familiarizes refugees with the different types of transportation they may find in their communities; highlights laws and information concerning owning and driving a car.

* Education: Familiarizes refugees with educational opportunities for adults and children in the United States; the need for adults to work while studying is emphasized.

* Health: Provides the basic facts of U.S. health care, contrasting it with health care in the countries of origin; the importance of health insurance is discussed.

* Money Management: Introduces the concept and practice of a monthly budget; includes information of the U.S. banking system and ways to save money.

* Rights and Responsibilities: Covers U.S. laws that are most important for refugees; of special interest are family reunification and adjustment of status regulations, common legal problems encountered by refugees (such as

driving without a license), cultural practices that may conflict with U.S. customs, and laws relating to domestic violence.

* Cultural Adjustment: Deals with culture shock, community mental health resources, and changing family roles; covered only when time permits.

* Travel: Familiarizes refugees with each step of the transit process, from pre-departure to arrival in the resettlement community; addresses in-flight safety, customs and immigration procedures, and security issues.

The refugees come out of the darkness and into the light when

they arrive safely—and maybe bewildered—in the U.S. but need a lot of care and education. This is the job of each CRRRA caseworker. CRRRA relies on continuing support from the community—gifts of cash and furniture and housewares donations. Visit the CRRRA website for more information, or call 704-535-8803. ✪

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