



THE SEVEN THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT REFUGEES IN THE UNITED STATES

There has been a lot of heated political discussion about refugees lately and how they maintain their livelihood once they arrive in the United States. The fact is, most of us are probably a little in the dark when it comes to understanding the employment process for a refugee. Some people assume that refugees live fully on the government's dime (not true), while potential employers may be wary of hiring refugees due to potential language or cultural barriers (another common misperception).

Nizama Tikvina, the Employment Program Manager for Lutheran Social Services of the National Capital Area shares the seven things you need to know about refugees and their employment here in America:

1. Refugees need to pay rent, just like everyone else.

Although LSS/NCA employees and volunteers work hard to secure low-income housing for refugees and furnish it with all of the basic necessities, the fact is, refugee families need to earn a living and find a way to manage day-to-day finances, just like the rest of us. Did you know that even the plane ticket to America, if not paid for by the refugee outright, is provided through a loan that must be paid back to the U.S. government?

2. Refugees face a several obstacles in employment...

According to Tikvina, the job search experience is far different overseas than here in the United States. For example, often a client's resume may be five pages long or read like a biography. LSS/NCA makes it a priority to work with refugees to adapt to American employment customs. Tikvina explains that often they must be shown how to "write a cover letter, resume, and thank you card."

Refugees and employers may also encounter miscommunications due to slight cultural or language differences; for example, an employee may assume that they are not allowed to attend an important function at their child's school because they don't realize they can just ask about the time off.

Perhaps most significant hurdle is transportation: when they first arrive, refugees usually must rely on public transportation, since they do not have a license, a car, or money to fuel it. This reality further limits job options to those near public transportation and can add an additional complication to employment, as the refugee is at the mercy of public transportation.

3. ...but are more equipped than you may think.

One might imagine a wide language barrier with a newly-resettled refugee, but according to Tikvina that has changed over the years and more and more individuals arrive in America with good English language skills. One shouldn't assume to encounter significant cultural barriers with refugees, since many of the refugees resettling in our area are fleeing persecution after working with our American Troops overseas. Their work alongside Americans has already taught them a great deal about our customs. Plus, many refugees today are leaving countries where they had respected jobs, degrees, or backgrounds, and are prepared for the workforce in that regard.

4. LSS/NCA has several measures in place to prepare refugees for the workforce.

After a client arrives, they are paired with a job developer: an individual to help them find and prepare for interviews and arrange transportation. Job developers also work with clients on important employment documents like resumes and cover letters.

"Job developers meet with clients to discuss employment history and employment goals, both short-term and long-term," explains Tikvina. "We try to make the best match considering the client's wishes as well as the market situation."

In addition to job training, LSS/NCA offers financial literacy training. Imagine the stress of learning a new currency and banking system, on top of all of the other things a family must learn when settling into a new nation! LSS/NCA support doesn't end with a job placement. Tikvina's office follows up with both clients AND employers for 90 days after employment begins to assess and address any needs from both employer and employee.

5. The employment process may be a particularly humbling one.

Skills and professions established in their homeland might not be available to refugees when they arrive here, which can be a humbling experience for some. One recent LSS/NCA client came to America having been a lawyer in her home country. At first, she was passionate and determined to find work in a court. While LSS/NCA encouraged her to apply for opportunities that matched her experience, she was also cautioned that finding a match could be difficult.

After two months of searching, the woman realized she needed to adjust her expectations. While disheartening, this is a realistic process that many refugees have to go through when they arrive. However, Tikvina notes that the struggles are outpaced by the success stories where clients find work that they love. And, many of them eventually work their way back to their original field. "Recently, a client stopped by to say hello and tell us about his success in finding a job back in IT," she shares.

6. Refugees are worth hiring.

"Refugees are hard-working, determined individuals," Tikvina explains. "They came to America with the desire to build a new life, often from scratch. They are very honest, exemplary workers." She noted that while each family has their own unique story about what brought them here, they share a common goal: to find success, particularly for their children.

7. There are things that *you* can do to help refugees seeking employment!

Are you interested in hiring a refugee, or have connections with organizations that might? LSS/NCA is always looking for [new partnerships](#). Don't have a company? You can volunteer with LSS/NCA. Driving individuals to interviews and other important meetings is a critical need and a simple way to help. If you can't give of your time, there are other ways to serve - you can donate loaded Metro cards for individuals to get to interviews, or [donate in-kind items](#) to ensure a family will have what they need to be comfortable while they are still job hunting.

Refugees are no different from the rest of us. They share the same hopes and dreams and concerns as we all do. Yet, they face the added challenge of finding a job, supporting a family and building a life in an entirely new country and culture. Helping a refugee family become successful helps us all become stronger.