

Finding Help

Immigrant Women Overcome Obstacles with Assistance

BY SHERRY THOMPSON

Cultural differences, language barriers and legal hurdles are just a few of the challenges facing immigrant women. Here in Omaha, numerous agencies offer services to help these newcomers adjust to their adopted homeland.

"Most are ready, willing and able to contribute to our society," says Dave Pantos, executive director, Legal Aid of Nebraska. "Our job is to get them over that hurdle so they can be self-sufficient, raise their family and contribute to society."

By the Numbers

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Nebraska's total immigrant population reached 99,500 in 2006, up 33 percent from 2000. Omaha has one of the largest Sudanese communities in the nation, estimated at 15,000 to 20,000.

About 4,500 Burma refugees reside in Omaha. Only about 1,000 have actually been resettled here; the rest have come to Omaha after hearing about the city and its low cost of living, says Kim Thomas, interim director of community services, Lutheran Family Services. About 1,300 Somali/Somali Bantus make up the third largest refugee group in Omaha.

Immigrants have a multi-billion-dollar effect on the state's economy, according to the 2008 report "Nebraska's Immigrant Population: Economic and Fiscal Impacts" prepared by Christopher S. Decker, associate professor in the University of Nebraska at Omaha's Department of Economics. In 2006, immigrant spending resulted in an estimated \$1.6 billion worth of total production (or output) to Nebraska's economy, researchers said. In addition, this spending generated between 11,874 and 12,121 jobs for the state. The report paid particular attention to immigrant groups from Latin America. "Our investigation certainly reveals that this group in particular, as well as the total foreign born population as a whole, contributes significantly to our state's economy," Decker said in a press release.

International Center of the Heartland

Staff members at the International Center of the Heartland know firsthand the challenges facing immigrants. Hamdi Guled, originally from Somalia, Nyamouch Jok from Sudan and Anahi Reynoso of Mexico recently took time to talk about their experiences coming to the United States and their work at the center.



Hamdi Guled, Nyamouch Jok and Anahi Reynoso came to America from other countries and now help other women acclimate to the culture.

"We can connect with them in the sense we have been through these experiences in the past," Reynoso says. Her family came to the United States when she was 12. Since she was in school and learning English, it became her responsibility to help the family navigate its way in a new and unfamiliar country. She wishes services such as those provided by the International Center of the Heartland were available to her family. "Then I wouldn't have felt so much pressure trying to be a child and a grownup helping my family."

Today, she finds it rewarding to help others in similar situations. "I will hold their hand as much as possible until they become self-sufficient," Reynoso says. "For me to see them on their own with a job and their own place to stay, keeping up with the bills and getting their education – that is the best reward I could have."

Guled was fortunate in that she knew English when she and her husband came to Omaha so he could attend Creighton University. Still, she knows that language is one of the toughest barriers immi-

grant women face. Her work at the International Center includes helping clients with Medicaid, food stamps, housing, transportation and English classes, as well as medical interpreting.

Most African women, she says, aren't familiar with mammograms and pap smears. "You have to explain to them that they need to get them done for their health," she says. And birth control is a taboo subject. "You have to find a nice way to explain it to them."

Jok was 4 when her family was resettled in Rochester, N.Y. and in second grade when they moved to Omaha for her parents to find jobs. As a youngster, Jok recalls bringing her schoolwork home to teach English to her mom. She also accompanied her to doctor's appointments to translate. "We became the adults because we had to," she says of herself and her sister.

Now, she advocates for other women. She's especially proud of a young woman from Burma who came to Omaha on her own at age 18. "She is able to speak English and is about to go to college," Jok says. "It feels good to transfer everything I learned to somebody, and now she will be able to give that to someone in her community."

The International Center of the Heartland is a United Way community impact initiative that provides comprehensive case management services for refugees and immigrants. Community partners include Lutheran Family Services, Legal Aid, One World Community Health and Catholic Charities.

Clients are primarily from Burma, Somalia, Sudan, Kenya, Mexico and Buhtan, Thomas says. Staff members speak more than 20 languages.

"We are the voice for the people who cannot speak for themselves," says Guled.

One Woman's Story

Omaha is now home for Dina Haqi, her husband and their three children. The family fled Iraq in 2006 after receiving threats because of her husband's work in the industrial arena. They were living in Syria when he came to the Omaha at the invitation of a friend at UNO. Facing additional threats because the factory in Iraq was still operating, her husband applied for asylum and remained in Omaha.

Meanwhile, Haqi went to the United Nations in Syria and pled her case.

Because she was considered to be in danger, she and the children were able to come to the United States in November 2007. The Southern Sudan Community, one of three agencies handling resettle-

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