** Refugees in Charlotte **

According to the Immigration and Nationality Act of1980, a refugee is a person who is unable to return to his or her country of origin because of **persecution** (i.e. rape, murder, genocide, torture, enslavement) or conflicts based on their race, religion, nationality, social group or political beliefs. The NC Resettlement Office estimates that approximately 3500 refugees came to Charlotte in the past five years.

Many come here never having used electricity, plumbing, refrigerators, heating and air, cars (and car seats), running water or even a simple can opener. They don’t know how to buy groceries, store food, use a microwave, use a bank account or pay bills.

Refugees are very community oriented and will help each other as much as they are possibly able. They unselfishly give their time, money, transportation and food to help their friends. They assist each other in learning our culture and language. However, there are many things that as a whole they just don’t know yet.

The following needs were determined to be significant after speaking with the refugees themselves, many volunteers who work independently helping their friends, as well as speaking directly to the members of the agencies and organizations that work with them.

For the first 6 months after their arrival in the United States, refugees have the support of a caseworker from their resettlement agency. After that time, they often do not know specifically who to turn to when they are not able to fully support themselves.

Though there are many refugees enrolled in ESL classes, the process of learning to read and write English does not typically happen within 6 months. Because of this language barrier and the extreme cultural differences they encounter in America, many refugees are not able to navigate our complex system of social services, employment, medical services and transportation. They are often frightened and do not know who to turn to for help.

Having a phone number that they can call to seek advice from someone who speaks their own language would be invaluable to them. In addition, literature written in their own language with important information would go a long way in easing their fears and helping them to become self-sufficient.

**Food**

Often times, refugees do not have food or money to buy food. They frequently depend on friends to help them, but often, the friends themselves are experiencing economic hardships and unable to fully provide for the needs of their own family, as well as the needs of their friends.

* Determine if they qualify for food stamps
* Verify whether they have applied for food stamps
* If they have applied, find out if DSS needs additional documentation
* Help them find a food pantry until they are able to get food
* Teach newcomers what a can opener is and how to use it
* Teach them about proper food handling and storage
* Teach them how & where to shop for groceries

**Health Care**

When they initially arrive in America, refugees are entitled to 8 months of Medicaid. After that time, they must follow the same procedures and have the same eligibility requirements as Americans. This can be an extremely confusing process and they need assistance in finding out what they qualify for.

* Determine if they qualify for Medicaid
* Verify whether they have applied for Medicaid
* If they have applied, find out if DSS needs additional documentation
* Encourage them to go to the doctors for initial evaluations
* If they do not qualify for Medicaid, help them find a physician they can afford or a free clinic
* Assist them filling out paperwork and seeing doctors (translation is important)
* Teach them how to make appointments and keep them
* Show them how and where to obtain medications
* Coordinate transportation to appointments, if they do not have a vehicle
* The physicians have stated that they have a problem with refugees not keeping appointments with specialists
* They are frightened to go to specialists because they don’t know how to get there and once they arrive, they can’t fill out the paperwork. They also can’t communicate with the doctors and don’t have money to pay, if they went.

**Transportation**

Refugees with cars help their friends by taking them shopping, to appointments and to work. However, they are frequently not able to provide for every need for all of their friends. They live near bus lines, but it is an intimidating process of navigating the bus routes and with the language issues, nearly impossible for refugees who haven’t been here long.

Transportation has proven to be one of the biggest needs when speaking to the refugees and volunteers. If they had the ability to get to potential employers to fill out applications, their job prospects would be expanded. If they could get to non-profit organizations that offer assistance with bills, Medicaid, food stamps and reading their mail, they would helped tremendously. If they had transportation, they could enjoy the rewards of working in a community garden, as many come from agricultural backgrounds and are excellent farmers.

* Organize volunteers to drive them to various places
* Investigate how to have access to a bus or van, possibly from a church who doesn’t use theirs on weekdays
* If access to a van(s) is made possible, have someone who could review the weekly needs and coordinate a schedule
* They need help in studying for their driver’s license
* They need people to teach them how to drive
* They need car seats
* They need instructions on the importance of car seats
* They need instructions on how to properly use car seats

**Schools**

The children in the school system face many daunting challenges, with language being the biggest. Even once they learn to speak English, comprehension still remains a factor in their studies. They need tutors to give them the extra help they need to succeed in school. The parents also need help in communicating with the school about their children.

Also, activities for the children and teens are extremely important to help keep them occupied and out of trouble. Since they have limited resources and transportation, their options are very limited.

They have expressed a desire to get to know American children better and though often shy, they would like the opportunity to “hang out” with them.

* Tutors
* Transportation to and from after school activities
* Sponsorships for them to enjoy various activities such as sports, Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts etc.
* Liaisons between the teachers and parents (with proper authorization)
* Mentors
* Friends

**Friendships**

“It’s as if no one cares”. These are saddest words to hear. I believe that people in Charlotte really do care, they just don’t realize there are families here who need them. It may seem hard to get to know someone who doesn’t speak our language, but in reality, it just takes a little time. The children do not face language barriers, play is a universal language and bonds between parents are formed just by bringing the children together. Many of the children already know English and are happy to translate for their parents.

Because of their transportation problems and their timidness in such a large city, many families do not venture out. They would love to have someone introduce them to their new town. The time spent on an outing is the best way to get to know each other and break the ice. It doesn’t take money your money, just your time!

* Take them to a park
* Give them a tour of downtown
* Play soccer, Frisbee, baseball, football etc.
* Take them to a pet shop
* Invite them to your house for dinner
* Experience their joy as they eat an ice cream cone for the first time in their lives
* Have a picnic
* Go to a pet shop or local farm
* Help them with reading their mail
* Just be a friend

If you are interested in helping in any of these areas, please contact the organizations present at today’s meeting. Or, you can call Carla Fuller directly at (864) 476-0960 HelpTheRefugees.com. I am not an organization, just a friend of many refugees hoping to help them find the resources and friendships they need to live a better life here in America.