

A Practical Guide To Welcoming Immigrants

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Introduction:

Rural communities in Maine struggle to welcome immigrants, particularly refugees and asylum seekers who are fleeing war or famine in their home countries. Such immigrants/refugees often are unable to function in Maine's rural towns because of the language barrier, the culture shock, and their lack of ability to transport themselves, shop, and use government services. Unlike urban centers such as Lewiston and Portland, which have supportive immigrant populations that often greet newcomers and assist them in adjusting to their new environment, rural communities seldom have other sizeable immigrant populations, and often lack programs that help provide the same services (mentoring services, ESL programs, etc). Even if rural communities welcome refugees and asylum seekers into their communities, they often are simply not informed about their needs . Neighbors are often unsure of what to do, which is not helpful to immigrants who need a source of leadership and information in their communities. This guide is designed to share information from veteran volunteers who have worked with refugees and asylum seekers, and provide guidance to Maine communities who are unsure of how they can meet the needs of their new neighbors.

What is the difference between refugees and asylum seekers?

Refugees are immigrants who have been vetted by the federal government before they arrive. They often come from refugee camps, having fled their homes due a natural or man-made disaster. Once they arrive in the U.S., they are assisted by refugee resettlement agencies that are partially funded by the government. They may or may not have green cards when they arrive, but are **granted a green card in a timely manner which then assures them virtually permanent residency** upon arrival, provided that they eventually apply for green cards in the near future (more detail in the next section).

Asylum seekers come with some kind of visa (tourist, student, etc) and have to apply for asylum within a year after their arrival. They are NOT eligible for the same federal funding that serves refugees, but are eligible for federal and state benefits that are available to all Americans. It can be more of a challenge to provide service to asylum seekers because, unlike refugees, they arrive without notice and usually do not have a designated a case manager from a non-profit agency that provides services and coordinates assistance to people in need. People seeking asylum must;

- Apply for asylum within a year, and obtain what is known as an A-number, which means they can stay in the country and work until their case is heard.
- May apply for a work permit, which they will receive after 150 days.
- Interview. Asylum seekers may wait 6-8 years to be granted their first interviews. After the first interview, they may be denied asylum and may choose to appeal to a federal judge, and/or will be put into “removal proceedings”. If they are successful at the first interview, they wait for the next step in the process. ALL asylum seekers have a right to a first interview and the right to appeal.

Unaccompanied minors: A significant number of immigrants are unaccompanied minors, who were able to obtain student visas (or some other temporary visa) while their parents were not. Because they are in the country alone, on a student or tourist visa, they do not follow the typical path of an immigrant seeking asylum and getting access to a work permit. If someone agrees to become their legal guardian (either a friend, family member living in the US, or a community volunteer) they may apply for permanent residency under a special category called Special Juvenile Immigrant Status (SIJS). If successful, they are granted a green card and permanent status in a few months, not the few years asylum seekers face, and they can also receive a work permit and have the opportunity to apply for scholarships not available to asylum seekers, continue their education and live a stable and productive life. There is at least one group in Portland, Maine assisting unaccompanied minors, who are part of the Welcoming Immigrants Network whose Facebook page is linked in the “resources” section below.

The biggest challenges for asylum seekers and refugees and how we can address them as communities.

These challenges are different for asylum seekers and refugees, but there are some major challenges they all face. Mike Mayo, an experienced volunteer in Thomaston, came up with the following major priorities for the group of Congolese refugees he was assisting:

Learning English
Housing/shelter (asylum seekers).
Financial/Legal education
Transportation

Learning English/Integration into the community:

1. English Education:
 - a. Adults vs. children: Children will learn faster, and will have exposure to English in school, whereas adults generally take longer to learn a language and sometimes are less immersed in an English-speaking culture.
 - b. Literate vs. illiterate: Some refugees are not literate in their own language, which makes it extremely difficult to teach them English. The instruction process is very different than the one used for those who know how to read and write.
 - c. Multiple Language Speakers: Many illiterate refugees know multiple languages, which can be helpful as they learn English. Be sure to identify this skill in your students who have it.
 - d. Childcare: Children should be around English speakers as much as possible (so they can learn by osmosis).
 - e. Important vocabulary:
 - i. Buying merchandise
 - ii. Banking
 - iii. Work
 - f. Using Language Teachers: Seek advice from a language teacher. DO NOT assume that just because you speak English, you can teach it effectively.
 - g. Expect a silent period: Language students will not immediately begin talking, and that's ok. During this period, teachers should begin by teaching students to listen to English, and help them build trust with their instructors.
 - h. Adult women: Adult women (<18 years of age) sometimes have the least access to the greater English speaking community, and may therefore .
2. Connecting with Community

Asylum seekers in Portland explained that the biggest challenge they faced when they came to the U.S. was isolation. Finding themselves powerless in a new society in which they could barely function, they became lonely and disconnected from their new communities. It was only through connection with the current immigrant population that they were able to connect with the broader Portland community, and become productive members of society. Here are some guidelines for trying to connect immigrants with their communities.

- a. Language barrier: Language training should be begun as soon as possible (see the section on Language Instruction). If the immigrants in your community don't speak English at all, try to find members of your community that can speak a language with them. For example, many immigrants from Central Africa (Congolese, Burundians,) are fairly fluent in French, even if it's not their native language, and most communities in Maine have at least a few Franco-American residents that can prove extremely effective translators and mentors.
- b. ESL programs: Most schools are required to have ESL programs (English as a Second Language) that can help school-age children. It can be more challenging to teach adults, and a separate program may have to be arranged.
- c. Mentors/conversation partners: Mentors and conversation partners are important services in any community that is hosting immigrants. Try to find at least one community member for each adult immigrant, and have them develop a positive mentor/mentee relationship. A mentor is there as a companion, a teacher, and someone who can listen to the needs of the immigrant and voice them to the rest of the community. Many refugee resettlement agencies provide mentoring programs (see the last section of resources).
- d. Hobbies/interests: An immigrant's interests can be used to connect them to the community in meaningful ways. This works well with children and teenagers. For example, in Thomaston, which is currently hosting two Congolese families that total 15 people, volunteers identified several young artists in the group. They honed their drawing skills in the refugee camp, and thus were given opportunities to take art classes at local studios, meet other artists, and take part in programs for other young people in the community. They were eventually able to get their work into galleries in Thomaston, which made them well known locally and inspired more of the community to become more informed about immigrants!
- e. Food: It is helpful for immigrants to have access to food that is similar to what they ate at home. Even if immigrants eventually adapt to food that is easier to find, it is important for volunteers to understand that this can be a big cultural shift for the family.
- f. Making connections: In addition to organized activities, just reaching out and making friends with new immigrants is important. In rural communities in Maine,

the hardest adjustment is not being around people all the time, especially for refugees who were living in crowded camps.

- g. Skills: It's important to learn the skills and expertise of immigrants in one's community, and how these skills were developed. This will help with understanding how to get them active in their skill areas using community programs.
- h. Rural/Urban shift: moving from city-sized (population 200,000+) refugee camp to a rural Maine town often results in culture shock; just the sheer difference in the amount of people is jarring, and should be taken into account by community members.

Housing/Benefits.

- 3. Assistance applying for and updating state and federal benefits. The primary benefit programs that refugees and asylum seekers apply for are Mainecare (the name for Medicaid in Maine), SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, commonly called food stamps) and WIC (women, infants and children).
 - a. The DHHS is a complete mystery for new immigrants--a community member has to get in there and try to sort out eligibility for benefits and advise on compliance with various reporting requirements.
 - i. Names, birth dates, and other information may not match government records--refugees are given a January 1st birth date if they don't have proper documentation on their arrival. A volunteer should be ready to correct all of this data, and it often requires long hours at the telephone.
- 4. Medical and immigration status.
 - a. Refugees are usually assigned one public health nurse or enroll in a free clinic that makes sure they are connected to medical personnel and get proper inoculations and other testing. Transportation, fundraising, and organisation of vaccinations and other routine procedures often have to be done by members of the community. Refugees also sometimes will have access to mentoring connections for a period of time.
 - b. While refugees may have been screened by the federal government, they still often do not have a green card, which provides them with virtually permanent residency. Obtaining green cards requires fundraising: it costs about \$1000 per person to apply, unless they apply and receive a waiver of that fee.

Transportation

5. Transportation

- a. Many refugees, especially those that lived in camps for extended periods of time, do NOT know how to drive. If they are old enough to skip driver's ed, they will need to be taught how to drive by a volunteer and before take a written permit test. The study guide for the test is typically in English, so it is advisable that a volunteer work closely with the immigrant to help them study. Sometimes it is helpful to use the knowledge of teens in the area that are in Driver's Education programs. They will be able to explain what is most important for immigrants to learn. It's helpful if someone is on hand to translate the most important information into a language that the immigrant knows (such as French for many Congolese). Be aware that the written test for a permit is taken on a computer; however, it may be taken in many different languages.
- b. After passing the written test, driving students will need to log 70 hours of driving with a licensed driver more than 21 years of age. All of this work will need to be done by volunteers, so this is a big part of any community organisation's job.
- c. Furthermore, refugees from camps often have no knowledge of how cars work, how much they cost, required maintenance, how to navigate roads, insurance requirements and inspection, and registration. Even if immigrants are not from refugee camps, they may have very little understanding of U.S. driving laws and how to deal with law enforcement and the Department of Motor Vehicles. Some volunteer must be available to help them navigate this system, and it's always helpful to have someone who can function as a translator. Keep in mind that in some instance, women may tend to be more apprehensive about learning to drive and get around on their own because such activity is frowned upon at home.
- d. Until immigrants are licensed to drive, they need to be transported to various activities. These include shopping, programs for children and young adults, visits to healthcare facilities, sports, etc. A network of volunteers will be needed to help with this. For example, the New Americans Welcome group in Thomaston has a well-functioning system where a number of adults from the area are "on call" for various amounts of time, and through effective communication they are able to delegate tasks among nearby drivers.
- e. Some immigrants will assume that they can bribe their way out of tasks such as driving tests, permit and license acquisition, as this may be commonplace in their countries of origin. Be prepared to educate them on how law enforcement works,

and be prepared for the apprehension and, in some cases, fear that immigrants can have towards law enforcement.

Financial/Legal Education

6. Financial Literacy
 - a. Refugees who have spend multiple years in camps will often have little or no experience using money and selecting products to purchase, so volunteers should be prepared to provide instruction on how to use bank accounts, credit cards, and checks, and explain how to shop selectively and try to find the best deal. This is a new concept for people who have spent their lives using vouchers for all their purchases.
 - b. Paying utility bills and rent are often entirely new experiences, which have to be carefully explained by mentors and volunteers.
 - c. Many refugees have to pay back their airline tickets, which is many thousands of dollars for a big family. Sometimes it can be helpful to organize this without getting in the way of the family's affairs.
 - d. Once refugees are working, they will likely need to file income tax returns. Find a local attorney who can assist with this.
7. Sending money home: Many immigrants still have family members in their country of origin or in the refugee camp where they lived. They may feel obligated to send money back to assist their families even though it might appear wiser for them to keep it for themselves. Remember to be sensitive to this. Immigrants often receive intense pressure from family members back home who may believe that coming to America automatically makes you rich.
8. Legal Education: Be aware that the concept of laws and government agencies is often foreign or very different in the U.S. than in the country of origin for immigrants.

Organizing as a community

1. Timing: Forge strong connections with area resettlement agencies to ensure that the community is aware of future new neighbors. Local churches, schools, and other community organizations should contact resettlement agencies and other immigrant networks in the state so that they can monitor and facilitate the arrival of immigrants.
2. Fundraising: There are several unexpected things that cost money for immigrants and may require fundraising, either using a GoFundMe page or some other events. Fundraising needs include:

- a. Activities for school kids that cost money including field trips, meals, sports equipment, instruments, etc. Frequently, new immigrants are at a disadvantage in these programs simply because they are unable to put money towards these activities.
 - b. Transportation: Written and road test fees, buying a car, gas, etc.
 - c. It's also important to realize that fundraising activities can negatively impact the benefits that the family receives. Be aware of this, and as a rule of thumb, try to raise funds to offset the cost for a specific activity or item as it arises rather than to provide cash directly to the refugee family.
3. Areas of Interest/Skills: It's important to learn the ways in which immigrants are already technically adept, expert or have a strong interest in a particular area. For example, if a child shows a strong interest in musical instruments, get him/her involved in a local music program, look for donated instruments, and communicate with area musicians.
 4. One of the most effective tools to use when trying to assist immigrants in one's community is a "network" that connects all relevant services and organisations in the community and nearby communities. Through monthly meetings, online forums, and social media, the network will be able to ensure all services are being used in the most effective way, and in cooperation with each other. This is the model that the Welcoming Immigrants Network in southern Maine uses, and it has been crucial to the community's success. A link to their Facebook page is provided in the resources section.
 5. Forming a committee: If you're doing work on a smaller scale, or just starting a community organisation, you may have fewer than ten people who are full members of the group. People with the following specific skill sets are essential to have in such group:
 - a. English Teachers: anyone with a background in teaching a new language to students will do , but it's even better if they have background teaching English and local ESL programs.
 - b. Attorneys who understand laws around immigration, benefits and taxes.
 - c. Someone with knowledge of the DHHS who is willing to make many long phone calls. The attorney may be able to fill in this role.
 - d. Friends: People who have the time and inclination to just make friends with the immigrants and provide transportation are the key to success.

These people can be helpful too:

- e. Doctors/nurses or people with knowledge of health care providers.
- f. People who are willing to provide daycare for children can be particularly helpful, especially if the adult immigrants have jobs . This helps the children learn English as well.
- g. Representatives from churches, synagogues, and other community centers.
- h. Representatives from shelters, food pantries, and other similar services.

i. Students, who are often in a position to provide companionship for young adults and can lend skills to immigrants from their generation.

Helpful resources to get started

Here are some helpful resources sites to explore if you're interested in learning more about how to make your community more welcoming to immigrants:

[Catholic Charities Refugee Immigration Services](#), the only refugee resettlement agency in Maine. They provide other services for immigrants that are important for rural Maine communities to replicate.

[Welcoming the Stranger](#) in Portland, Maine, is a mentoring service that matches asylum seekers in the greater Portland area with mentors who help them adjust to their new lives in Maine. This kind of service could be replicated on a larger scale in rural Maine.

[Welcoming Immigrants Network](#) in southern Maine, is a network of organisations throughout southern Maine that meets monthly to coordinate immigrant services.

[In the Middle of Everywhere](#), a book by Mary Pipher examining immigration in America. It lends an interesting perspective on how to think about the issue.

[Maine Immigration and Refugee Services](#), an organisation that focuses on helping immigrants integrate into their new communities.

www.ilapmaine.org, Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project, that provides free and low-cost immigration information and legal assistance to low-income Maine residents.