

The Linking Communities (TLC) Project: Creating Welcome for Refugees

June 2015

Launched in July 2013, the TLC Project is a laboratory for innovative ideas for educating communities about the benefits of refugee resettlement and helping those communities support local resettlement. It is also a model for local action guided by nationally coordinated training and support.

In the project's first year, organizations in Ohio and Pennsylvania were invited to submit grant proposals for local and statewide projects to highlight the benefits of refugee resettlement and increase welcome in their community. While organizations were encouraged to think creatively, grants were awarded to projects that aimed to promote interaction between refugees and more established community members, prepare refugees to share their stories with the public, and collect and share data on the impact of resettlement. In the second year, North Carolina and north Texas were chosen as TLC Project sites. In the third year the TLC Project will expand to Minnesota.

The TLC Project: Best Practices

Creating and Strengthening Connections: The TLC Project been successful in establishing and strengthening connections among refugee advocates, service providers, resettled refugees, government officials, and other stakeholders who have an interest in maintaining a strong resettlement program and promoting welcoming communities. This has had the effect of prompting hundreds of engaged, interested, and newly connected people to strategize and join forces to spread the word in their communities about the humanitarian, cultural, and economic benefits of refugees. For example, The TLC Project funded the Immigrant and Refugee Welcome and Support Committee of the City of Toledo, Ohio to hold a series of roundtables on local refugee resettlement. The TLC Project also provided funding to Project 658 in Charlotte, North Carolina, to hold monthly networking workshops for refugees with the community at large.

Training, Networking, and Planning: The TLC Project hosted meetings in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, and North Carolina that allowed stakeholders to receive training on a variety of topics, engage with one another, build relationships, and develop ideas. The statewide meetings provided participants with time to develop plans to promote resettlement and focus on critical issues beyond their daily responsibilities, and enabled them to connect with other stakeholders who support this agenda.

Raising Awareness in Communities: Educating the public and dispelling common myths about refugees is key to generating support for resettlement. TLC-funded projects helped refugees to expand their networks and get to know other community members, who in turn learned about the importance and benefits of refugee resettlement. The TLC Project funded the International Institute of Akron, Ohio to hold a series of community events to bring refugees and their more established neighbors together to get to know one another. In Erie, Pennsylvania, a collaboration of organizations created the *Thank You Erie Project*, which connected refugees to the larger community by setting up volunteer opportunities throughout local neighborhoods. TLC Project funding enabled the International Rescue Committee to proactively reach out to the community of Midland, Texas in an effort to break down barriers between native residents and the refugee population.

Educating Policymakers: Educating policymakers is key to building local and state support for refugee resettlement. Policymakers not only have the potential to create and support pro-refugee policies and legislation, but their views also influence their constituencies. The Pennsylvania Immigration and

Citizenship Coalition (PICC) brought together community leaders, legislators, and refugees to delve into education, leadership, and organizing skills, and sponsored and coordinated an advocacy day to share common concerns.

Creating Resources for Media: Media is a valuable outlet through which refugees can share their stories, educate the public, and dispel myths. In Eastern Pennsylvania, Catholic Charities Immigration and Refugee Services worked in collaboration with other organizations to produce videos highlighting the successes and contributions of refugees. These videos were shared on various websites and shown at events to amplify these stories to the broader community. The project caught the attention of a local news channel, which invited refugees to tell their stories live on air. The Forced Migration Innovation Project in Texas is working with partner organizations to create a series of short video interviews with refugees that focus on livelihoods, family, civic engagement, neighborliness, and the values of diversity, sacrifice, and giving back. The interviews will become part of a larger story bank available via social media. Charlotte Awake, a program of Ministry Alliance in Charlotte, North Carolina developed narrative-driven infographics via social media, traditional media, and public display to tell the stories of refugee families and provide data-driven infographics to the public.

Lifting up Refugee Voices: Refugees who can successfully and confidently tell their own stories can become the strongest advocates for resettlement. The Acculturation for Justice and Peace Outreach and Advance African Development, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, provided leadership and communications training to ten local refugee women who were able to speak to groups about their experiences. The Art Therapy Institute of North Carolina worked through the public schools to help refugee adolescents to tell their stories of hope and resiliency through visual and written narratives. The refugees' art was shared by social media and the art was exhibited at a public art show.

Providing Concrete Data about Benefits of Resettlement: Economic data showing the benefits of resettlement is critical for refugee-receiving communities, particularly elected officials who want to support refugees. In Columbus, Ohio, Community Refugee & Immigration Services (CRIS) began work last year on a regional economic impact study to show the ways in which refugees add value to the Central Ohio area. The project has gained support from local politicians and other stakeholders. Two grant recipients worked on data-driven reports to illustrate the benefits of resettlement. Church World Service's Greensboro, North Carolina Refugee Resettlement and Immigration Program will promote a Greensboro Annual Report on Refugee Communities to highlight the economic, social and cultural contributions of refugees, and Refugee Services of Texas' Amarillo office will conduct an economic impact evaluation project to understand the varied benefits refugees offer the local economy and community.

Next Steps

In year three, which began in June 2015, the TLC Project will expand to Minnesota while continuing engagement in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Texas, and North Carolina. TLC project partners are working on developing outreach materials in which best practices are highlighted and models are provided for different subject areas such as social media outreach, advocacy toolkits and training, and the importance of data. We intend to share information about the projects and their impact and outcomes broadly in order to strengthen local efforts across the country. The TLC project will continue to strengthen the ability of local actors to proactively build up and engage new allies and supporters of resettlement in their communities.