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Crafting A New Life in the Treasury Valley

March 20 - May 2, 2010
Idaho State Historical Museum

Boise, A Welcoming Community

How do refugees find their way to Idaho?

Boise is considered a "preferred community" by the U.S. Department of State and the Office of Refugee Resettlement. The city's range of services, high quality of life, and welcoming spirit make it a promising place for incoming refugees to start anew.

It is a complex process and large network of organizations that bring refugees to Boise. The United Nations first establishes a person's refugee status and then the U.S. Department of Homeland Security determines his or her eligibility for resettlement in this country. International NGOs (non-governmental organizations) interview people living in refugee camps. The Department of State contracts with ten national resettlement agencies that have local affiliates. The destination for incoming refugees is decided at a national level. Unless they have family living in a particular place, refugees have no say over where they will land in the U.S. Technology helps refugees keep in touch with other community members scattered across the country. Sometimes people relocate from their original resettlement sites for employment or to live near family or friends, a process known as "secondary migration."

Once refugees arrive in Boise, a host of agencies assists them in making a home. In recent years, local refugee service organizations and the Idaho Commission on the Arts have joined forces to support newcomer arts and cultures. Patty Haller, Assistant Director of the Idaho Office for Refugees, says of Boise, "It is a 'soft landing site' because it is a large enough city to have services available, but a small enough city that you don't fall through the cracks easily. These are factors that the government looks at in determining where refugees should land."

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Idaho Commission on the Arts

Folk & Traditional Arts Program

The Idaho Commission on the Arts (ICA) promotes artistic excellence, access to, and community investment in the arts for all. As the number of languages spoken in Boise tops 100, the ICA's long-range plan counts support for immigrant heritage arts among its core services. Michael Faison, ICA Executive Director, explains, "As an agency, we're here to assist in the state's thriving cultural life. Through our Folk and Traditional Arts Program, we have seen that people who are new to our state come with a myriad of traditions that are integral to the everyday lifestyle that they experienced back home."

The ICA's Folk & Traditional Arts Program documents and assists in the continuation and presentation of Idaho's traditional folk arts. Folk arts are shared cultural expressions in families, communities, ethnic and occupational groups, tribes, regions, or religions. They are passed on informally through oral tradition and practice. The folk arts program serves newcomer communities through apprenticeship grants, research, and partnerships with social service and community organizations. Folk & Traditional Arts Director Maria Carmen Gambliel notes, "My concern is to spread the scope of services already provided to long-established residents to immigrant and refugee communities. I'm an immigrant myself, so it's part of my living experience to get to know a new place and fit in, without shedding my identity."

Idaho Office for Refugees

Mountain States Group

The Idaho Office for Refugees (IOR) coordinates the state's resettlement and integration services in Boise and Twin Falls. It operates under the umbrella of Mountain States Group, a private non-profit organization. In Boise, the IOR contracts with the International Rescue Committee, World Relief, and the Agency for New Americans to provide support for employment, case management, English language training, and cash assistance for refugees. The IOR also cooperates with organizations that assist—although it is not their primary responsibility—with refugee education, housing, and health care.

In the face of these urgent needs, traditional arts and culture also have an important place. IOR Assistant Director Patty Haller reflects, "Ultimately, the goal of our programs is to help refugees return to a sense of normalcy, become contributing members of society, and regain control over their own lives. The arts help people feel grounded in the midst of so many things over which they have no control. Practicing their traditions, doing things that use their creativity and remind them of what they loved about their lives before the trauma and the tragedy, are really important in making resettlement services work. It can give people a center and a safe haven."

English Language Center

Mountain States Group

The English Language Center (ELC) offers English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, accommodating students from vastly different backgrounds. Ten course levels range from pre-literate through advanced. The program's curriculum centers on "survival topics" that help students negotiate life in a new home, including health literacy, community economics, citizenship, and most importantly, employment. The ELC gets students out of the classroom to ride the bus and visit the library, museums, and the supermarket, where they can apply their English skills to real-life situations.

English Language Center classes bring students from diverse cultures together. Director Steve Rainey finds that interest in each other's cultures promotes learning, as English becomes the language of communication. Rainey believes, "There's a huge element of mental health intertwined in language and culture and art. All refugees are survivors of trauma. As their culture is valued, it brings more meaning to their lives, and provides an indirect psychological support system. It's almost cyclical—more access to expressing one's own language and culture develops a better sense of mental health. Research shows that when the instructor and community are more open and accepting of people's cultures and languages, they actually learn English faster."

Agency for New Americans

Mountain States Group

The Agency for New Americans (ANA), a Mountain States Group program, provides services to help refugee families integrate into the Boise community and gain self-sufficiency. The agency's services include individualized case management, employment training and placement, English language tutoring, health assessment and medical referral, immigration assistance, cultural and community orientation, and interim financial assistance. The ANA works simultaneously with diverse cultural communities. Director Christina Bruce-Bennion observes, "Part of the challenge of helping people make Boise home is that the definition of 'home' is very different from group to group. Though we provide essentially the same services, with each new culture it's almost like starting from scratch, identifying which connections are important—whether it's their faith community or a soccer team or some kind of art, something that has a healing effect. To the extent that we can, we connect them in ways that aren't just about the social services."

In the current economic climate, the ANA is coordinating with other agencies serving refugees to help newcomers cope with the housing and job shortfalls confronting many Americans. Through enhanced communication and collaboration, service providers are strengthening the safety net. Looking ahead, Bruce-Bennion is optimistic: "Out of the crucible of crisis comes a better way."

International Rescue Committee

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) is a global organization whose Boise branch assists recently arrived refugees with housing, health care, English language classes, residency and citizenship status, children's education, and general community support. Their services help build job, computer, and financial literacy skills. In addition, the IRC develops innovative programs addressing clients' needs. For example, a knitting class gives women a

place to socialize while honing marketable skills. An after-school art program provides refugee youth an outlet for self-expression and releasing trauma. The Peace Bird origami project prepares refugee seniors for citizenship exams.

Director Leslye Moore is often asked why the U.S continues to resettle refugees during tough economic times. Having worked overseas in refugee camps and war zones, she responds, "We're providing humanitarian protection, and I would hope that the same warmth and welcome would be extended to me if I were in that situation. It's not a matter of jobs, it's a matter of saving a life. It's important to remember that human connection—we're all in this together." Working with a large volunteer base, Moore finds abundance even in lean times. She considers Boise "a very rich community, as far as people being willing to give of themselves and their time and the resources they have."

World Relief

World Relief connects refugees with local resources needed to adjust to life in a new and unfamiliar place. In Boise, World Relief offers employment training and placement, services for the elderly, church partnerships, immigration assistance, and other programs fostering integration and self-sufficiency. These services begin the moment a refugee steps off the plane. Church and volunteer coordinator and former case manager Sue Hagler greeted clients at the airport, helping them settle in apartments found and furnished in advance. She remembers Bosnians especially loved "beautiful lace tablecloths and lace over their sofas and dining table. I tried to find those things at garage sales and different places so that when they arrived, they were coming to a good place. We tried as hard as we could to make that home welcoming." In her work, Hagler found that cultural orientation was a two-way street. Regardless of their background, all of her clients served her coffee or tea and food during home visits. Reflecting on the personal rewards of her work, she says, "I've learned to be more hospitable in my own life, when people come into my home. I learned that from them, the refugees, that I need to take time with people."

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