

**Denver Immigrant & Refugee Commission  
Hearing on Needs and Issues Facing Denver Immigrants and  
Refugees**

**Presentation by Paula Schriefer, President and CEO,  
Spring Institute for Intercultural Learning  
September 15, 2015**

Madame Chair and Members of the Commission,

I would like to express my appreciation to you for inviting Spring Institute for Intercultural Learning to participate in your important hearing regarding challenges facing the refugee and immigrant community in our city. Spring Institute has proudly been involved in providing integration programs and services for immigrants and refugees, as well as for our receiving community, since shortly after our founding 36 years ago. We firmly believe that immigrant integration is a two-way street between immigrants themselves and the receiving community, so we greatly commend the ongoing work of this commission and the City of Denver for supporting initiatives to make our community more welcoming.

I will focus my comments on four areas of challenges that frequently come to our attention through the programs and services that we provide to this community, falling under the “education” and “safety net” categories in which you have expressed interest. Specifically, I will focus my comments on the 1) need for greater access to general information education about life in Colorado and the United States upon arrival, 2) the need for improved English language access and educational opportunities, 3) the need for greater access to services on applying for citizenship, and 4) the need for both access to quality health care and assistance in navigating the health care system.

## **Educational Issues:**

### **Need for Orientation Information and Education after Arrival**

Immigrants and refugees arriving in Colorado bring tremendous resources to our communities, but they also face daunting challenges adapting to their new surroundings. In a short period of time, they must learn and adapt to entirely new systems of gaining employment, completing education and supporting families. Even to English speakers, navigating new transportation systems, finding adequate housing, securing gainful employment, enrolling children in school, accessing health care, and interacting with police and public officials can be intimidating. To non-English speakers, these obstacles can prove debilitating and can lead to isolation, un- or under-employment, and dependency on social services for individuals who otherwise can and should be contributing members of our community.

In addition to the challenges faced by all immigrants, the approximately 2000 refugees that we welcome to our state annually, often struggle with the added effects of trauma and isolation that result from fleeing ones home because of conflict or persecution and/or years spent in refugee camps without the opportunity to work or complete ones education. Despite the challenges, no populations in the United States are more motivated to achieve economic sufficiency and to become part of the American fabric of society than immigrants and refugees. A small investment in introducing these individuals to the essential elements of life in their new communities greatly hastens their ability to integrate successfully and to become self-sufficient and contributing members of our communities.

From September 2006 to December 2014, Spring Institute conducted the Road to Success Program, a cultural orientation and educational program that provided all refugees arriving in the Denver area with a two-week introduction to life in the United States. Subjects included immediate need-to-know arrival information, such as how to use public transportation, enrolling children in school, what to do in case of a medical emergency, and how to shop for groceries, as well as information necessary for getting more settled, such as accessing health care, understanding basic rights and laws, and how to engage with police and public officials. Unfortunately, as a result of funding cuts, the

program was discontinued at the end of 2014 and currently the two Colorado-based Voluntary Resettlement Agencies (Volags) provide just a two-day orientation for newly arriving refugees. Immigrants receive no orientation whatsoever.

It is our view that some type of cultural education program offered as a partnership between the City of Denver (and Aurora, where the bulk of immigrants and refugees settle) and one or more of the civil society organizations that work with this community would be a cost effective way to introduce both immigrants and refugees to the services, rights and responsibilities of all citizens. Ideally, informational courses could be offered at several different times throughout the year in evenings and on weekends, so that newcomers to our community can access information both outside of work hours and at times in their lives that it is most useful for them. Informational courses could be offered on a recurring basis on issues such legal rights and responsibilities, as well as basic life skills, such as nutrition, navigating the health system, accessing mental health services and engaging in civic life. Likewise, courses could be offered on financial literacy and stability and could provide information on setting up bank accounts, creating household budgets, accessing credit and applying for benefits and services. At a relatively small cost to the city, such informational programming could greatly shorten the process of integrating, achieving self sufficiency and becoming contributing members of our community for our large population of immigrants.

### **Need for Improved Language Access and Educational Opportunities**

Without question, English language ability is the single most important factor in how well immigrants and refugees are able to integrate. According to the 2014 Refugee Integration Survey and Evaluation (RISE) Study:

Not at all surprisingly, ability to communicate in English trumps everything. Those who knew how to speak English before they arrived in the U.S. appear to have a leg up on everyone else in many areas. When you can speak and understand some English: Jobs are easier to get...The health care system and insurance/Medicaid/Affordable Care Act (ACA) are easier to

navigate...Other bureaucratic/governmental processes are easier to negotiate.<sup>1</sup>

While refugees are afforded English language acquisition classes free of charge for five years as part of their resettlement services, many of them lack even a basic education and literacy in their own language, which makes learning English and job skills extremely difficult. Supplementing the funding from the Colorado State Refugees Program (CRSP) for the Career Readiness English for Refugees training currently provided by the Emily Griffith Technical College with community-based adult basic education and after school tutoring for refugee students would be extremely helpful to ensure that the most needy of our immigrants don't become lost and unable to integrate or become economically sufficient.

Non-refugee immigrants must learn about and pay for classes among the various community-based English language and adult education providers around the area. Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) funding continues to be a critical source of funding to many of the community-based providers of English language and adult basic education classes, allowing many immigrants to receive free or reduced rate classes. The new authorizing legislation, the Workforce Investment and Opportunities Act (WIOA), promises to make it easier for all individuals interested in adult education and workforce training to register for and enroll in various programs and services, reducing time and effort spent researching and physically getting to different offices. This will be a much welcomed development in reducing barriers for immigrants and other low-income individuals to access educational and training services, including AEFLA funded English language and adult basic education classes.

However, concerns remain over whether the increased emphasis on workforce readiness and ambitious evaluation indicators in the new law will leave key audiences ineligible to participate. These include very low English-language proficiency (LEP) individuals who want to improve their employment prospects but who will do so on a much longer timeline than WIOA allows, as well as primary care providers for children, who are not interested in either workforce or post-secondary

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<sup>1</sup> The Refugee Integration Survey and Evaluation (RISE) Study: Year Four Report, A Study of Refugee Integration in Colorado, funded by the Wilson-Fish Grant Program, September 24, 2014, p. 25.

educational opportunities for themselves but who seek to ensure their childrens' success. As the State of Colorado develops its implementation plan under WIOA, we encourage the City of Denver to emphasize the need for the plan to address the needs of our highest need LEP individuals and maintain adult education opportunities for them. We also encourage the city to support more initiatives, like the partnership between Spring Institute and the Denver Public Library, to offer community-based English language conversational groups.

### **Need for Greater Access to Services on Applying for Citizenship**

While the next challenge I am raising falls more into the category of a service, rather than an educational opportunity, it is a need of sufficient importance that I feel it is worth raising to the attention of the Commission. Applying for a permanent resident (green) card and/or for citizenship is of utmost importance for many immigrants and refugees, but can be a complicated process to navigate. Currently, several organizations, including Spring Institute, provide citizenship classes in and around the Denver metro area, so there are a number of educational opportunities available, but only a small number of organizations currently provide actual legal assistance (Lutheran Family Services, Catholic Charities, Rocky Mountain Immigrant Advocacy Network, and the City of Littleton) in our area. Legal assistance by Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA)-accredited organizations is critical given the complexities of immigration law and the dangers of accidentally initiating removal proceedings as a result of incorrectly submitting paperwork or applying for status in circumstances of previous civil or criminal offenses.

With immigrants comprising one-sixth of Denver's population, demand for such services far exceeds the supply. Due to the repeated demand for such services that we receive in conducting our integration programs and services, Spring Institute is currently in the process of attaining Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA) accreditation. However, this process can be long and arduous for nonprofits. Individual employees must go through 40 hours of training to gain a knowledge of immigration law and should accumulate an additional 40 hours of supervised time by a trained immigration lawyer before submitting the EOIR application form to the Justice Department. Once accreditation, or

even partial accreditation is received, additional legal services are necessary for organizations that do not maintain lawyers on staff.

The City of Denver could play a pivotal role in assisting immigrants in gaining permanent residency or citizenship by providing free or reduced rate training and legal services to schools and nonprofit organizations interested in attaining BIA accreditation. Models such as the City of Littleton's Immigrant Resources Center at Bemis Library provide positive examples for directly assisting immigrants to connect to community services, learn English, and apply for U.S. citizenship. However, such models may not work for a city the size of Denver and it may be more practical to assist more nonprofit providers, who can assist larger numbers of immigrants at more diverse locations throughout the city.

## **Safety Net Issues**

### **Need for Access to Quality Health Care and Assistance in Navigating the Health Care System**

While the Affordable Healthcare Act (ACA) has greatly expanded access to health care for many Americans, particularly for low-income Americans, the health care system and the process of acquiring insurance and understanding what it provides, remains complicated even for native-born Americans. Research has shown that a combination of barriers—all of which are common challenges for many immigrants—including poverty, limited education, low reading levels, and inadequate English-language skills—are major obstacles to basic health literacy. Low health literacy results in poor nutritional and health choices, a lack of preventative care, poor understanding of the referral process and limited follow up for specialty issues, and a greater tendency to rely on costly emergency care once a health issue becomes critical.

Recently arrived refugees have added special health challenges, often resulting from limited or poor quality health care while living in camp conditions, making them one of most challenging population groups in mainstream efforts to improve health outcomes. While most are eligible for Medicaid, they are often confused about what it covers and fall into similar patterns as other immigrants, resulting in poor health outcomes.

Since 2010, Spring Institute's Project SHINE has been providing health literacy training and patient navigation services to elderly refugees and, since 2011, to children under five years of age in their care. Spring Institute also runs the Interpreter Network, which provides both interpretation and translation services to a number of health care facilities in Colorado and New Mexico, as well as a training certification course specifically for medical interpretation. Based on our experiences, there is an ongoing need not only for culturally sensitive patient navigation at health care facilities, but also for community health workers and patient navigation right in the neighborhoods where immigrants and refugees live. At the same time, there is a greater need for health care providers overall, particularly those with diverse cultural backgrounds. Spring Institute's Colorado Welcome Back program assists over 500 foreign trained health care professionals get accredited here in our area, but the obstacles for recertification for doctors, nurses, physician assistants and dentists, are prohibitive.

In light of these challenges, the City of Denver could do more to support educational programs that promote health literacy for immigrants and refugees in the neighborhoods where they live, work to educate health providers on the need to provide interpretation and culturally sensitive care to this community, and support changes in legislation to reduce barriers to accreditation for highly qualified foreign health care workers.