



UNH Report: NH Refugees Get Most Support From Communities, Not Social Services

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DURHAM, N.H. - A new report from the University of New Hampshire shows that refugees, most of whom relocated to New Hampshire to escape war or persecution, found community support was critical to their success while social services were lacking.

"In response to the struggles of refugees, many residents of New Hampshire have come forward to personally and collectively provide community-based support for the newcomers. Refugees also receive vital assistance from other refugees, many of whom come from other countries of origin," the researchers said.

Researchers noted that refugee voices serve as the proverbial canary in the coal mine. Shortages in services for refugees have helped to identify and publicize problems that all low-income people, and increasingly all residents, face in trying to build a decent life.

The report, "Refugee Resettlement in New Hampshire: Pathways and Barriers to Building Community," was conducted by Nina Glick Schiller, professor of anthropology and the James H. Hayes and Claire Short Hayes Professor of the Humanities; JerriAnne Boggis, UNH director of diversity programs and community outreach; Molly Messenger, founder of the UNH Committee on Rights and Justice (CORAJ); and Emily Douglas, assistant professor of social work, Bridgewater State College.

The report points out that the new refugees settled in New Hampshire between 1997 and 2008 represent .04 percent of the New Hampshire population of 1.3 million. Although various cities and town have been sites of refugee settlement, most refugees have been resettled in Manchester and Concord.

Researchers interviewed 76 refugees who had been recently settled in New Hampshire by a resettlement agency in 2006-2007 and who had been in the United States more than eight months, and 26 people involved with refugee resettlement in Concord and Laconia. Interviewed in 2008, these people included city officials, police officials, church leaders and activists, employers, journalists and community-based volunteers.

The researchers found that the main obstacles to refugee resettlement include:

- The federal policy of "sink or swim" limited settlement assistance
- Insufficient federal funding for resettlement
- The requirement to begin full time employment before sufficient ESL education

- Lack of transportation
- Lack of affordable housing
- Low wages
- Lack of health care
- Shortage of dentists
- Isolation of women at home taking care of children
- Insufficient assistance in continuing education
- Lack of recertification of professional qualifications

Community members surveyed saw refugees as a resource for the state. Most offered two complementary answers when discussing whether New Hampshire has benefited from refugee resettlement.

"First, they believed that welcoming refugees strengthens New Hampshire's social and moral fabric. The resettlement process allowed residents to reaffirm their common humanity by engaging in the acts of kindness that make us human. These respondents built on their understanding of their own family history and the unheralded immigrant history of many of New Hampshire's towns. Second, they also saw refugees as contributing to a vision of New Hampshire as a place of supportive and welcoming local communities," Glick Schiller said.

Recommendations made by the researchers to improve the lives of refugees include:

- Increase federal funding for refugee resettlement.
- Discard the "sink or swim" refugee resettlement philosophy and funding strategy.
- Improve the amount and quality of English instruction and link it to driving instruction and green card application.
- Maintain the priority of rapid employment.
- Fund driving instruction.
- Provide free legal assistance for refugees and immigrants and their families to facilitate their ability to obtain US citizenship.
- Utilize experienced translators as sources of social and emotional support within the settlement process.
- Recognize community volunteers as a vital resource within the settlement process and provide them with technical support.
- Educate NH citizens on US immigration law including the restrictions that severely limit most legal immigration.
- Facilitate the recertification of refugees and immigrants who are skilled professionals.
- Discuss refugee needs as part of the overall challenge to the state to provide basic services to its residents, including health care, public health services, public transportation, and adequate public education from elementary school through university.

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 11,800 undergraduate and 2,400 graduate students.

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