

To Support Refugee-Status Individuals and Families, Support the Formation of Strong Social Bonds:
Policy Lessons for Refugee Resettlement Programs
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Introduction

Existing U.S. refugee resettlement processes do not adequately support refugee-status individuals and families in establishing social ties and community support. Numerous studies have underlined the role of social capital and community connection as foundational to the emotional and material well-being of individuals.ⁱ For refugee-status individuals and families resettling in new host countries, this relationship has been observed to be especially pronounced.ⁱⁱ Despite the well-established value of social bonds, today's standard U.S. refugee resettlement agency processes do not formally or adequately support refugee-status individuals and families in establishing social ties and community networks (especially with other resettled individuals) in their new places of residence. By integrating such support into the suite of tools, trainings, and resources already offered during the resettlement process, agencies can improve emotional and material outcomes for refugee-status people. This policy brief applies research results from Tucson, Arizona with literature and policy documents to recommend a three-pronged programming initiative to better support the social element of refugee resettlement in Tucson and beyond.

Too Much to Chance: Lived Experiences of Connection and Resettlement in Tucson

Between 2020-2022 a research initiative funded by the National Institute for Transportation and Communities (NITC) and led by Dr. Orhon Myadar at the University of Arizona conducted 64 surveys and 34 interviews with recently resettled refugee-status people in Tucson. The interviews focused on their experiences of mobility¹ since arriving in the US and uncovered some far-reaching patterns about refugee resettlement.ⁱⁱⁱ These patterns corroborated many of the trends about social connection and well-being discussed above but added nuance and details that can only come from listening and being attentive to individual lived experiences.^{iv}

One theme that emerged from the data was that establishing close social connections (especially with people from the same country or a similar region) tends to happen haphazardly for resettled

refugee-status people upon resettlement. There are no formal programs at resettlement agencies in Tucson meant specifically to connect refugee-status people with broad networks for non-refugee contacts or refugee-status peer-to-peer mutual support networks. Those that do exist are exclusively for youth, are focused on individual educational attainment, and/or are hosted by non-agency non-profits which are difficult to find for those resettling. In cases when refugee-status individuals do get connected to these programs, to refugee-status friends, or, commonly, to faith groups of other refugee-status individuals, there are great benefits. However, in cases when the connection is never found, results can be dire in terms of loneliness and lack of material support.

Many individuals told stories of a chance encounter at a grocery store or a school where they heard another person speaking their native language and found through them a conduit to community and increased opportunity for

¹ The meaning of mobility here draws on the theoretical framework provided by Smith et al. 2022 and concerns "not only how people get from A to B but also how this process is shaped by complex relations that are spatial and social."ⁱⁱⁱ

success (emotional, health-based, financial, career, etc.).^v When these lucky encounters never happened, the stories that interviewees told were harsher and marked by a lack of language support from speakers of the same language, a lack of culturally relevant support, feelings of otherness, and prolonged mental health struggles. One interviewee recounted:

“When we came here, we were the only people from our country or our culture, so we didn't have connection to anybody or anything...I find myself being alone versus being in a group now. Because not just the culture but the way and the thinking way of people. I don't know how to say it. It's just different. So I don't feel like I belong anywhere, honestly. Thinking how I grew up, like I wasn't accepted or anything so I don't have the desires that everybody does, you know, like versus when you have a kid you have motivation to go to work and I don't have anything like that.”^{vi}

Startlingly, this individual came from what is now eastern South Sudan during a period when many others from the same region were also arriving in Tucson. Several other people interviewed during this research had come from the same region and a couple expressed finding great strength and both material and emotional support from the Sudanese community in Tucson. Thus, if intentional socially-connective services were in place, much of the stress of the individual quoted above could have been reduced or even eliminated.

Understanding the central role of social connection to the wellbeing of refugee-status individuals and families upon resettlement, it is imperative and urgent that the formation of such

connections should no longer be left entirely to chance. Resettlement agencies must look beyond providing exclusively individual-level support^{vii} and fold in more intentional social support and scaffolding for community formation.

Recommendations

Refugee resettlement agencies in Tucson (and across the US) can better support their clients by formalizing programming to foster social networks and community support for refugee-status people arriving in Tucson. They can do this by:

1. Continuing to support connections between refugee-status and non-refugee-status segments of the community.
2. Providing dedicated time and space for resettled refugee-status individuals to meet and socialize with one another in an informal setting.
3. Connecting newly resettled refugees with “mutual aid” networks established by previously resettled refugee-status people via volunteer-created resource and contact books^{viii} and social events.

These interventions together can be imagined as a three-legged stool of social support with each leg representing one of the suggestions above (See Figure 1 below). These suggestions would be integrated into existing individual-centered resettlement programs and would make establishing social bonds less haphazard and precarious. Likewise, they would ensure that more refugee-status people are able to connect with other individuals throughout Tucson to gain friendship, support, and mentorship. Ultimately, this approach would result in greater interpersonal bonds for resettled refugee-communities, allowing them to lean on non-refugee-status contacts, informal peer networks, and more formalized peer-peer mutual aid networks for advice, connection, and care throughout their resettlement journey.

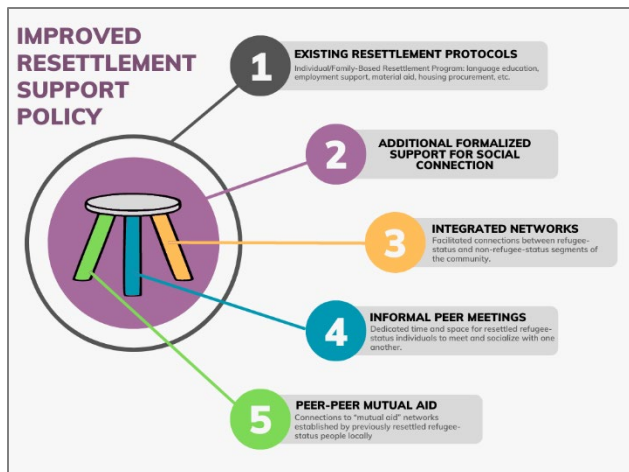


Figure 1. Recommendations for resettlement support policy

Moreover, this approach has the double benefit of reducing the burden on agencies' case managers who will no longer have to be an exclusive node for all types of support. Instead their clients will now have a diffuse network of community members on which to lean. As such, case workers will be able to focus on their specific roles (language, housing, employment, and health system support, etc.) instead of having to be a jack-of-all-trades for each of their many clients.

This policy recommendation is made with serious consideration of potential costs and critiques of this approach, two of which are addressed specifically below:

Will focusing on connecting refugee-status people with people from their own regions/language groups/cultures/etc. facilitate social segregation rather than full integration into new host communities?

The three-legged stool approach to increasing social connection throughout the resettlement process will augment opportunities to connect with both refugee-status and non-refugee status individuals. Further, connecting refugee-status people with others from their own regions, language groups, and cultures will help them attain material benefits (access to transportation, and language learning, etc.) that may help them to connect more quickly with other groups of

people in Tucson, including those from other regions or those without refugee status.

Will relying on refugee-status volunteers to spearhead mutual support unjustly overburden them?

This is a serious concern and is rightfully raised when programs to serve communities rely too much on the labor, time, and material/emotional resources of those already impacted. To this critique it is important to emphasize two things:

First, that these mutual aid networks will comprise just one piece of the resettlement support package that we suggest agencies should offer. They should supplement, not replace, the individual-based educational, employment, and material support already offered by agencies (see number 1 in Figure 1). These networks will not take on the jobs of the agencies or their case managers but will serve to offer more understanding and culturally-based resources in situations when refugee-status individuals would prefer to connect with peers (for example, with questions on navigating the public school system and concerns about parenting through cross-cultural perspectives).

Second, this policy suggestion comes directly from the input of refugee-status people in Tucson. Throughout the interviews and surveys mentioned previously in this brief, refugee-status people in Tucson expressed a great desire to volunteer and help their newly arrived peers. In fact, many resettled refugee-status people already work in this capacity, but their impact is limited because they do not hear when new refugee-status people arrive and are therefore unable to connect with them. Bringing the experience and motivation of peer volunteers into the fold and furnishing them with more institutional support will lift burden both from the agencies and from the refugee-status people who are working harder than necessary to identify and support their recently resettled peers. Formal coordination can reduce overall burden.

Conclusion

Without intentional social support programs, refugee resettlement agencies in the US will continue to put the happiness and well-being of refugee-status people at risk by leaving the social capital factor too much to chance. By formalizing support to help refugee-status people connect with their fellow-Tucsonans (including both non-refugee-status people and refugee-status individuals/families), refugee resettlement agencies can improve their effectiveness and promote better outcomes for their clients. As such, it is imperative that the three-legged social

support stool outlined above become formally integrated into refugee resettlement programs in Tucson and throughout the US through funding, staff, and other resource support.



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^v NITC project interview data.

^{vi} NITC project interview data

^{vii} Refugee Resettlement Agencies in Tucson AZ such as Lutheran Social Services, The International Rescue Committee, and Catholic Social Services almost exclusively focus on providing individual-level programmatic support for refugee-status people such as language courses, employment training, and assistance with housing procurement.

^{viii} Development of such a resource is underway in Tucson led by members of the community of resettled people with refugee-status.