

Increasing Refugee Civic Participation: Starting with the Schools

Web-Based Conference Call Training for Refugee Service Providers

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Technology Questions

- To access the audio for this training, dial (800) 264-8432 and use passcode 467098
- This call is being recorded
- Recording will be posted with PowerPoint slides on CLINIC website shortly
- We'll announce the link on our list serve when it's posted

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Objectives for Today's Webinar

- To look at refugee involvement in the school system/education issues as an important form of *civic participation*
- To identify the benefits and challenges of "getting people involved" in the school system and education issues
- To review the continuum of models and approaches to participation
- To discuss the role that organizations like yours can play and "where to start"

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What is Civic Participation?

“Civic participation is the process that draws newcomers into collective problem solving to improve conditions in matters affecting their lives.”

From *Pursuing Democracy’s Promise: Newcomer Civic Participation in America*, Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees, 2004

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Examples of Civic Participation

- Volunteering with a community-based organization, church, temple, or mosque
- Organizing or participating in neighborhood meetings, clean ups, or cultural festivals
- Organizing or participating in meetings or forums to discuss community issues
- Attending city council meetings or giving testimony at public hearings
- Taking part in rallies, marches, or vigils
- Helping with voter registration and voter education – and voting!

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Why is it Important to Promote Refugee Civic Participation?

- Participation in the civic life of the community is an important part of integration
- Participation builds skills, confidence, and leadership within the community
- Participation can build bridges between different racial and ethnic communities
- Through participation, the voices of refugee community members can be heard and part of decision-making about the issues that affect their lives

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What are Some Barriers to Civic Participation for Refugees?

- Fear of involvement
- Reluctance to speak out
- Limited knowledge of how “the system” works
- Lack of time
- Limited-English proficiency

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What Can Organizations Do to Encourage and Support Refugee Civic Participation?

- Providing education about civic rights
- Leadership development
- Community organizing
- Involving refugees in advocacy
- Voter registration and education

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A Place to Start: The School System/Education Issues

How can organizations that serve, advocate for, and represent refugee communities support refugees – parents, students, and other concerned community members – in getting involved with the schools system and education issues?

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The Benefits of “Starting with the Schools”

- You most likely already deal with the schools in your role serving and advocating for refugees
- Education is an important issue for refugee communities and one that people care about
- Public schools are open to and have some structures for participation already
- Involvement builds the confidence and skills of community members
- Participation makes a difference on educational outcomes and ensures that voices of refugee communities are “at the table” when decisions are made and resources are allocated

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The Challenges of “Starting with the Schools”

- Experiences from home countries that discourage participation
- Lack of understanding of the U.S. school system
- Not “feeling welcomed” by the schools
- Language barriers
- Time constraints

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What You Can Do: A Continuum of Approaches to Participation

- Offer workshops that educate parents about “how the system works”
- Educate schools about refugee communities
- Assist and support parents getting involved – in helping their children with homework, attending school meetings, and volunteering at the school
- Sponsor community meetings on education issues
- Use social events to bring parents and schools together
- Develop parent leadership to do advocacy
- Participate in or help to build local coalitions

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Examples of Refugee Civic Participation in Schools/Education

- African Women's Coalition
 - Evelyne Ello-Hart, AWC Coordinator
 - <http://www.awc-portland.org/>
- Hmong National Development
 - Nou Vang, Executive Director
 - <http://www.hndinc.org/>
- Southeast Asia Resource Action Center
 - Soumary Vongrassamy, Education Advocate
 - <http://www.searac.org/>

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Where Can You Start?

First, do your homework:

- Talk to refugee parents and students about their needs, concerns, hopes and fears – use focus groups or community meetings
- Learn how “the system” works in your community, meet with school officials
- Learn about and meet with other organizations in your community working on these issues

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Where Can You Start? Contd.

Next:

1. Have a series of planning meetings within your organization:
 - What are your goals for civic participation?
Improving education for refugee students?
 - How can you build on what you already do to develop a more structured program?
 - Where do you want to focus?
2. Decide how to move forward and make a plan

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Questions and Suggestions?

We would like to hear from you!

- What is your organization doing in this area? Do you have a project, program, or effort you would like to share with us?
- What have been your experiences dealing with the school system?
- What additional information would be helpful?
- Are there particular approaches you would like to learn more about?
- What kind of technical assistance would be helpful?

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A Good Resource for You: BRYCS

Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services (BRYCS) - a national TA project that provides information and builds collaboration among service providers to strengthen services to refugee youth, children and their families.

BRYCS website has links to many different articles on refugee parent involvement in schools. Goto: www.byrcs.org

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Increasing Refugee Civic Participation: Starting with the Schools

For more information, go to:
<http://www.cliniclegal.org/Refugee.html>

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