



Welcome to My World of Confusion

by Slavica Olujic, Dean of
Instruction/ESL, Emily
Griffith Opportunity School,
Denver and former Colorado
refugee from Bosnia

Volume VII, Issue 1
April 2005

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I come from a country that does not exist anymore. I speak a language that does not exist. The town where I used to live does not exist anymore; it was destroyed. So, what am I? I am a number. Not just any number, I am an alien registration number. I am a refugee from Bosnia, but at least I still have a name. Although, when pronounced by Americans, even my name sounds strange.

I was 19 years old when I became a refugee. At 19, I had dreams and problems typical for my age, and anything connected with war didn't even enter my thoughts. It was the spring of 1992 when my life changed. I lived in a house in the middle of town. It was beside the river Ukrina and next to an old bridge, one of the landmarks of Derventa. That bridge became the dividing point between the Serbian part of town and the Moslem-Croatian part, and I didn't know to which section I belonged. I couldn't tell which

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Colorado Refugees

by Cheryl Asmus, Director – Family and Youth Institute,
College of Applied Human Sciences, Colorado State
University

Today, one in nine individuals in the United States is foreign born. An immigrant is defined by the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) as any alien in the United States, except one legally admitted under specific nonimmigrant categories (INA section 101(a)(15)). In comparison, a refugee is a person who is unable or unwilling to return to his or her country of nationality because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution. In the 1967 Status of Refugees Protocol, the definition of refugees was formally incorporated into U.S. law based on the 1951 United Nations Convention definition: *A refugee is defined as a person outside of his or her country of nationality who is unable or unwilling to return because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.* To establish a basis for determining refugee eligibility in the U.S., the Refugee Act of 1980 was enacted to attempt to emphasize persecution instead of origin, and to eliminate any geographic or ideological preferences.

In the years between 1983 and 2000, 1,699,827 refugees entered the United States. Refugees in Colorado make up

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Services for Colorado Refugees

by Barbara Carr, Director, Colorado Refugee Services Program, Denver

As the director of a program that serves Colorado refugees, I am often asked to clarify how refugees receive services as well as to clear up confusion about terminology. I offer a list of frequently asked questions with the hope that essential information will be conveyed.

Who qualifies for refugee status?

Legal status as a refugee can only be granted by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS is a part of the former Immigration and Naturalization Service [INS]). Annually, the President of the United States sends a proposal and budget (the Presidential Determination) to the Congress allowing X number of refugees into the country from different regions in the world. The allocations by region shift over the years, depending upon U.S. interest and will to assist specific populations. Asylees are individuals who have met the same criteria as refugees but who, at the time of their application to USCIS, reside in the United States, legally or illegally.

What does Colorado's refugee population look like?

Colorado usually receives about 1 percent of all refugees coming into the U.S., and they represent more than 60 countries of origin and over eighty languages.

How are refugee services in Colorado organized and funded?

Our organization, Colorado Refugee Services Program, is a federally-funded partnership of public and private agencies dedicated to assisting refugees and refugee-like populations toward attaining self-sufficiency. Our service partners use a mix of federal funding and private donations to provide direct services to refugees and asylees.

How does a person attain refugee status?

Generally, groups of displaced individuals are identified as probable

refugees by international aid organizations and are interviewed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees staff. Candidates meeting the United States' entrance criteria are referred to the State Department for further evaluation. USCIS staff then individually interview people meeting U.S. criteria with Homeland Security completing the background checks. Depending upon the circumstances and country of origin, refugees are then processed to enter the United States through one of the national Voluntary Agencies (Volags). There are 11 national Volags and Colorado has local affiliates for five of those organizations.

What would refugees experience when they come to Colorado?

Refugees are met at the airport and taken to their home or apartment by Colorado Refugee Services staff. Full case management services by the staff ensure that primary needs are met and initially include orientation, accessing health care, enrolling children in school, teaching public transportation, teaching food shopping, and some financial training. Continuing services include follow-up to health care, interpretation and translation, English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, employment services, and temporary cash assistance for the first eight months in the country. Refugees are eligible for ongoing services for the first five years they are in the United States.

How have the events of September 11, 2001 changed Colorado refugees' experiences?

September 11, 2001 forever changed the face of refugee resettlement in the United States. Immediately, all movement into the United States was stopped. Changes include extensive background checks, additional screening

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Refugee Services *continued from page 2*

procedures including photos I.D.s, limiting the number of refugees eligible to fly on any one flight, all of which added to delays in admittance of people already approved for resettlement in the U.S. The number of proposed arrivals has still not been restored to the 2000 level. Refugees and other foreign-born individuals experienced harassment, beatings and other discriminatory acts post-9/11. We had clients unwilling to leave their homes for several weeks and who suffered the triggering of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) because of the suspicion and animosity directed toward them. We also had neighbors visit refugee families offering assistance and expressing concern for the safety of our newest community members.

What are typical challenges that Colorado refugees face?

Refugees face numerous challenges in the acculturation process as every social structure they have known is changed. In health care alone, there are many obstacles to overcome. Refugees have often lived in camps for years where health care was minimal, at best. There, chronic diseases were often not treated, there were outbreaks of infectious diseases because of poor immunization capacity, dental care was limited or nonexistent, malnutrition was common, and reproductive health issues were ignored.

Many refugees do not understand health insurance, often asking "If I'm not sick, why should I pay for health insurance?" There are problems with the use of male health care providers for female patients and traditional medicine versus western practices. In addition, other cultures often have different ideas about mental health and treatment of individuals with mental health concerns.

Family relationships and structures are often different in other countries. Differences can mean anything from village/clan parenting to having a government decide what school coursework a child may complete. The role of elders in the community is often disrupted as families enter the U.S. in nuclear groups. Disciplining children is often a concern and children learn very quickly about reporting incidents. The role of men and women may be very different in other parts of the world, and refugee families that are no longer intact may find themselves at a loss for skills in vital areas or being challenged from the receiving community's expectations about decision-

Understanding How Refugees Adjust to Life in Colorado

*By Daniel Savin, Assistant Professor of Psychiatry,
University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, Denver*

Refugees contribute to Colorado communities in important ways. They work, pay taxes, bring strong family values and add needed diversity to our society. As they learn to live in a new society where they generally do not yet speak the language, they must also deal with trauma, grief and loss.

Refugees are faced with adjusting to a new culture with new values, norms, dress, food, housing, work and recreation. The process of adjustment is often difficult. Individuals who have been exposed to western culture in their countries of origin may have a relative advantage. Higher education and prior knowledge of English may be helpful. Children and youth generally have an easier time learning English and adapting to American customs compared with middle-aged and older individuals. Healthy individuals have an

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making and responsibilities. Children are often thrust into unfamiliar and culturally inappropriate roles as they adapt more quickly to American culture and acquire language skills before adults.

The areas of health and family roles are just two of the social structures that newcomers must learn about and then must acquire skills for navigating the applicable U.S. systems. Refugees face additional challenges regarding language acquisition, religious practice, transportation, credit and finances, laws and codes, law enforcement, government, housing, discrimination and civil rights, employment, the educational system and schools, and immigration.

How can a non-refugee help refugees in Colorado?

There are numerous opportunities to interface with refugees and/or refugee work in Colorado communities. Volunteers can be in-home ESL tutors, sponsor a family, arrange a donation drive, help in an after school program, or volunteer at a local resettlement office. The agencies working with refugees during the first year all work with volunteer assistance and can easily be researched and contacted through www.coloradorefugeenetwork.org. ◇

approximately 1 percent of the U.S. total and are number 21 in ranking of total refugees by state (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement). Though not all immigrants are refugees, the role immigration plays in Colorado's population change is 8.6 percent, or 65,380 immigrants, over the past 10 years. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004).

Our first-person account is a moving depiction from a Bosnian refugee, Slavica Olujic, of the events that precipitated her experiences in leaving Bosnia and making a new life for herself in Denver. Barbara Carr, from the Colorado Refugee Services Program in Denver, offers a frontline view of the Colorado refugee, the services available to these individuals and some of the challenges both the refugees and the state face in this process. Daniel Savin from the University of Colorado Health Science Center in Denver describes some of the health issues refugees deal with based on the trauma they have experienced and how they cope with these. Helen Cooney gives us a view of the history of refugees in Colorado and the current status of refugees in Colorado today. ♦

Understanding *continued from page 3*

easier time than those with multiple medical problems. A 23 year-old Ethiopian man who grew up in the capital city of Addis Abba in an upper middle-class home and graduated with an engineering degree from a university where many subjects were taught in English, will likely have an easier time adjusting compared to a 45-year-old cattle farmer from Sudan with no formal education, no knowledge of the English language and a bad back.

At the same time refugees are adjusting to a new culture, they must also deal with past loss and trauma. Obvious losses that many refugees have experienced include deaths and separations from family members and friends. Most refugees have also lost all their property, means of livelihood, and generally the ability to communicate with the majority culture in their own language. Their cultural practices are no longer mainstream and their employment roles (e.g., engineer, physician, farmer, etc.) may not be transferable. Important losses not usually recognized by American friends may include loss of climate,

hobbies and pastimes.

The amount of trauma experienced by refugees may vary widely. Some may have left their country of origin because of threatened harm, but before physical harm has actually occurred. Others may have experienced life-threatening trauma during refugee flight. On the more severe end of the spectrum, some refugees have spent years as combatants, civilians living in a war-torn area or as prisoners where they may have experienced torture on a daily basis. Many spent years living in refugee camps outside of their countries of origin before being admitted to the United States.

Most refugees experience some emotional distress as they adjust to their new homes and deal with the effects of their traumatic past. Commonly experienced symptoms include (but are not limited to) sleep disturbance, nightmares, loss of ability to concentrate, loneliness, irritability, repetitive painful memories, and unexplained fearfulness. Although the majority of refugees do not develop psychiatric disorders, the rates of psychiatric disorders among refugees are higher than the rates among the general population in the United States. Disorders most commonly seen are depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, and anxiety disorders.

Despite the experience of emotional distress, many refugees thrive and contribute greatly to their new country

“Perhaps the most important factor that can ease the emotional distress of refugees is a strong social support network.”

and to humanity. Living through hardship may promote development of positive qualities, such as perseverance, tenacity and empathy for others.

Perhaps the most important factor that can ease the emotional distress of refugees is a strong social support network. Social support may come from family members, members of their own refugee communities, religious institutions, or from colleagues at school or work. It is particularly helpful if support is available from both refugee communities and from the American community. Many Americans with considerable experience working with and befriending refugees, including this author, report that it has enriched their lives. ♦

side was the right one nor who was shooting and why. As there are all three religions in my family, neither side was the right one for me. During the day, I lived life somewhat normally, but as the shooting became louder and closer every night, I realized that it was no longer safe to remain in my house.

Each night for the next month, I, along with 20 others, stayed in my neighbor's basement without electricity or water. Always present was the fear of not knowing whether we would survive the night, and if we did, we wondered what we would see in the morning upon emerging from the basement. Each morning was the same - people had been killed during the night and places destroyed, but I didn't want to leave my town as so many were doing. Where could I go? This was where I wanted to be. This was the place where most of my family and friends were. It was home.

My house and my neighbor's basement turned out to be the most dangerous places in the city. I realized that if I wanted to stay alive I had to get out of town. I decided to wait until the next day. That night was the most terrible night of my life. I was almost killed. I don't know how I survived. Around 6 p.m., I was watching the news and eating dinner with my neighbors and wondering whether or not I should go to the basement. And then it started. It was like in hell. People were screaming and running all over. I had the feeling that I would never hear again because the explosions were so loud. The scariest thing was that I still didn't know who was shooting at whom. I couldn't even make it to the basement, so several of us stayed in the house down on the floor all night. I was scared to death. My whole body was shaking. I couldn't control it. I must have been in shock - I was laughing and crying at the same time. Then we realized that the roof had been hit because pieces of it fell on our heads. And the next grenade landed in the bathroom. We were covered with dust, and I couldn't tell if anyone had been injured. We tried to go to the basement, but soldiers were in the backyard. So we stayed on the stairs in the hallway. After hours and hours of shooting and hearing the loudest sounds of my life, all was silent.

I was so afraid to go out and see what had happened, but I had to. I couldn't stay there forever. Finally venturing outside, I couldn't believe my eyes. The dead littered the streets and damage was everywhere, and seeing what had happened almost killed me. The absolute silence of that dead city is

something I'll always remember. I still didn't know who had been fighting or who had almost killed us. I didn't care - I just wanted to go as far away as possible; far away from death, far away from hate and from my divided city.

I wanted to get some personal items from my house. I went in and started packing when a bullet hit the wall at the place where my head had been just a second before. Seeing a sniper in our neighbor's window, I left everything and ran. I had a small bag containing one pair of pants and my documents. I took my bag, my memories, and the hope that the war would stop tomorrow, so that I could come back and find everything as it had been before the fighting began.

After spending 15 days in Zagreb, Croatia, I was on a bus headed for Germany where my refugee life began. From that moment on, everything was different. My whole life changed - my very being had been altered. After five years and after completely adjusting to the German way of life, I had to leave again. Once again, it wasn't my decision, but one forced upon me. Also, this time I didn't want to leave. I wanted to stay anywhere in Europe because Europe was home - my home. But Germany wanted refugees from Bosnia to leave the country. The only two places we could go were back to Bosnia or to the U.S.A. So I chose America.

My first contact with America was on St. Patrick's Day in 1997. Oh, how lost I felt on that rainy day at JFK Airport. While I was waiting for my flight to Denver, I wanted to have a cigarette so badly. But I remembered that someone told me that if you smoke outside on the streets, you could end up in jail. My first thought was, "That is a strange law!" But, this is America, and you never know.

"Well, all right," I thought, "I will survive without cigarettes." I needed to make a phone call just to let my parents know that I made it to American soil. But I didn't know how to make a simple phone call. What a strange world this was to me! Looking back, I wonder, "Why did I feel so stupid?" Now, I can answer, "Ah yes, I didn't speak English and I couldn't ask for instructions on how to use a phone or anything else." My frustration grew each moment, and I was happy that there was only a half an hour left before my flight.

On my way to bathroom I was thinking that

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everything would be much better once I arrived in Denver and left this airport behind me. But I was not done with the airport yet. My next question was "Why is there so much water in the toilet? Something is wrong here!" I was afraid if I used it there would be water all over the airport and it would be entirely my fault. How embarrassing! I remember thinking, "Welcome to America, welcome to my world of confusion. Where has all my intelligence gone?"

Once, I arrived in Denver, I felt a little bit better. However, this was not my final destination. I was on my way to San Jose, California. I guess I don't need to mention my fear of getting lost at DIA and not finding my airplane on time. On the same day, I finally arrived in San Jose thinking this was the end of my adventure. My cousin was there to pick me up and we were on the way to his place. "California get ready, I am coming!" I thought. But hey, what was this? An old, ugly apartment complex, bugs, I was so tired. On the next day, my friend took me to what seemed like 100 places to do paperwork. One of them was Emily Griffith Opportunity School where I took an English test and enrolled in an ESL class. What I remembered about that day was a wonderful lady who gave me a test and smiled at me all the time. She was also saying something, but I don't know what. I couldn't understand anything. Anyway, everyone was really nice and friendly and I felt welcomed, like at home.

On my first day to school I got lost everywhere, old cars in the front of the building ... this couldn't be true! California is supposed to be the state of famous movie stars and rock bands. They don't live here, do they? In my mind, I imagined that all of California was like Beverly Hills. "What a disappointment!" I thought. This life was not for me. So after 12 days in California, I was moving again.

On my way back to Denver, I thought, "What an irony, I should have stayed there 12 days ago." However, I was excited about traveling on Amtrak through four states. The seats were comfortable, the food was good, and nature was beautiful. I had no reason to complain. That was a sign that I had made a good decision about moving. I didn't

feel this way for long. When the train was going through some parts of Nevada and Utah, I couldn't believe my eyes. There was so much "nothing" in between. I am a European child, and I didn't feel comfortable with the nothing in front of me. It was scary. What if something went wrong with the train? Were we all going to die in this wildness?

My friend was waiting for me at the station in Denver. I could hardly speak at all when I arrived. I had traveled 49 hours, and when I finally had enough courage and an English sentence ready, I asked one gentleman, "Where is **Melanie** Griffith Opportunity School?" He asked me, "You mean Emily?" I thought, "Don't ask me anything, and just show me!" Then he started confusing me by telling me to go west or east, I don't remember. And I was thinking, "Can't you just tell me to go right, left or straight, like the rest of the world does?" Somehow I made it to the school that day, but I don't even want to tell you how many times I got lost after that.

The next few months were all about learning English and adjusting to the American way of life. Some things were easy, some very difficult. I am trying to remember only the easy ones. However there was another difficult thing to do. I had to start driving. I had a driver's license already and a car. What I needed was courage. People were turning here on red whenever they wanted, or at least that is how it looked to me. It was scary. I was afraid as soon as I got into a car I would have a car accident. And I also remember asking one friend what to do if a traffic light didn't work. He scared me even more with his answer: "If you are coming to traffic light and it is turning green, keep your foot next to the brake. You never know how many people are going to go through red. If it is turning red, step on the gas, that is what everyone does. If a traffic light is not working, the only thing left to do is pray." It took me a while to start driving after this advice. But I had to do it. I have been living and driving here now for three years, and miraculously, I am still alive.

After three years Denver started feeling like a home. I am not that confused anymore. I have learned how to make a phone call, how to drive here, and even where west is. But there are still some moments when I just want to go back home. It is hard, especially around holidays. That is when I feel very lonely and want to be with my friends and family. Sometimes I can swear I am able to smell my grandparent's village and I can picture the forest in the fall so alive in my mind. I can hear the river Ukrina flowing through my town and taking all my confusion away. ◇

Where Do They Come From?

by Helen Zita Cooney, research assistant, Family and Youth Institute, College of Applied Human Sciences, Colorado State University

Though immigrants have been moving into Colorado since the early 1800's, recorded refugee resettlement in Colorado began in 1975 when refugees from Vietnam arrived after the Vietnam War. Since that time, Colorado has become home to 31,366 refugees from every part of the world (Colorado Refugee Services Program, 2004). Of those 31,366 refugees, 60 percent came from Southeast Asia, 27 percent came from the Soviet Union or Europe, 5 percent from Africa, 4 percent from the Middle East, and 4 percent came from other regions. Over the decades, the trends in refugee arrivals have shifted.

For the first five years of refugee resettlement in Colorado, the vast majority of refugees were from Southeast Asia. From 1975 to 1979, a total of 4,992 refugees from Southeast Asia resettled in Colorado accounting for 87 percent of the refugees resettled during that time. Refugees from Europe, including the Soviet Union, accounted for 1 percent and the remaining 12 percent came from other regions including South America. There were no refugees from Africa or the Middle East resettled in Colorado during that five year period.

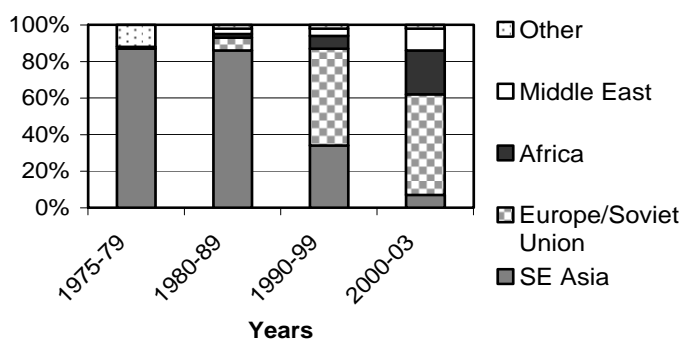
The number of refugees from Southeast Asia remained proportionately large through the 1980's, with 1980 having the highest number of refugees: 2,998 resettled in Colorado in a single year. From 1980 to 1989, there were a total of 11,157 refugee arrivals in the state. Of those, 86 percent were from Southeast Asia, 7 percent were from the Soviet Union or Europe, 2 percent from Africa, 3 percent from the Middle East, and less than 1 percent from other regions.

In the 1990's, there was an increase in the number of refugees from Europe and the former Soviet Union. From 1990 to 1999 there were a total of 11,559 refugees resettled in Colorado. Of that number, 34 percent were from Southeast Asia, 53 percent were from the Soviet Union or Europe, 7 percent from Africa, 4 percent from the Middle East, and 2 percent from other regions.

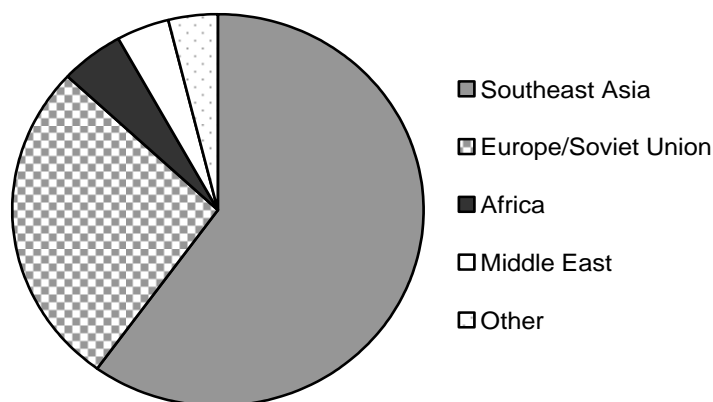
The trends of decreasing proportions of Southeast Asian refugees and increasing proportions of European/Soviet Union refugees have continued into the present decade. However, this decade has already seen a dramatic increase in the proportion of refugees from Africa. From 2000 to 2003, there were a total of 2,919 refugees resettled in Colorado. Of those, 7 percent were from Southeast Asia, 55 percent from Europe or the former Soviet Union, 24 percent from Africa, 12 percent from the Middle East, and 2 percent from other regions.

Even though resettled refugees are free to move around, most of the resettled refugees stay in the state of their resettlement. Of the more than 30,000 refugees that have been resettled in Colorado, 90 percent reside in the Denver metro area. ♦

Colorado Refugee Trends by Nationality



Colorado Refugee Resettlement 1975 to present



Resources for Colorado Refugees

African Community Center (www.africancommunitycenter.net) helps refugees and asylees from all countries integrate into the Denver community.

Collaborative Refugee & Immigrant Information Center (www.du.edu/gsis/cord/criic/index.htm) provides regional database intended to assist people working with refugees and immigrants in the Rocky Mountain region.

Colorado Refugee ESL Volunteer Programs (www.refugee-esl.org) serves adult refugees who have recently resettled in the Denver metro area and Colorado Springs.

Colorado Refugee Network (www.coloradorefugeenetwork.org) is composed of persons from public and private agencies devoted to the mission of refugee resettlement in Colorado.

Colorado Refugee Services Program (www.cdhs.state.co.us/crsp) is an effort of the Colorado Department of Human Services attempting to ensure effective resettlement and promote refugee self-sufficiency.

Ecumenical Refugee Services (ERS) (www.ersden.org) provides assistance with educational needs, family and social services, medical attention, employment, and cultural orientation.

Jewish Family Services (www.jewishfamilyservice.org) offers multiple services and programs to refugees including the Elder New American Project, Russian Mental Health Services, New American School-based Program, Citizenship Training, English as a Second Language (ESL), and Bicultural Marital and Adoption Counseling (serving Russian-American couples, parents adopting Russian-speaking children).

Lutheran Refugee Services (www.lfsc.org/Programs/Refugee%20Services/ref.htm) aims to provide a caring response to the needs of the world's uprooted people, and to empower refugees to achieve self-sufficiency by equipping them with skills, tools and opportunities.

Mercy Housing (www.refugeehouse.org) provides training for refugees on housing issues.

Rocky Mountain Survivors Center (www.rmssdenver.org) is a nonprofit organization that assists survivors of torture and war trauma, and their families, to heal and rebuild their lives.

Spring Institute for Intercultural Learning (www.spring-institute.org) is a nonprofit corporation dedicated to demonstrating that national, cultural, linguistic and ethnic differences are assets that foster understanding and cooperation.

U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (www.refugees.org) addresses the needs and rights of persons in forced or voluntary migration worldwide by advancing fair and humane public policy, facilitating and providing direct professional services, and promoting the full participation of migrants in community life.