

Refugee Services Program, Colorado Department of Human Services; Denver, CO

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The Colorado Refugee Services Program (CRSP) in the Colorado Department of Human Services has created an innovative program that **tailors refugees' workforce training to their English Language proficiency level**. It is part of their appropriation from the state legislature and funded from the Colorado Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant. The State TANF program, Colorado Works, has collaborated with CRSP to train front-line staff on working effectively with refugees in support of strong employment outcomes.

Background

The State Refugee Coordinator, the State Department of Human Services, county leadership, and refugee advocates have a very strong collaboration in Colorado to ensure that refugees are served in culturally sensitive, language appropriate ways. This encourages long-term economic self-sufficiency among refugees. Most refugees are resettled in just five counties in Colorado, and 96% of TANF cases are in the greater Denver (including Aurora) metropolitan area. Colorado Refugee Services Program (CRSP) is funded to provide case management to refugees, and it does so by supervising Voluntary Agencies (VOLAGs), which provide the direct services. Each of the five counties that resettle refugees has developed expertise; cross trained with the state refugee services team; and developed very strong personal relationships with the VOLAGs.

Innovations

Workforce Programming Tied to English Language Proficiency. In order to better serve refugees, CRSP has created an innovative workforce program for refugees that uses its appropriation from the state legislature through the Colorado TANF block grant, and additional Refugee Social Service funds. CRSP has joined with Colorado VOLAGs to create job training programs in five counties for recipients of Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA) and TANF funds, which tie directly to the participant's ESL level. All refugees in these counties are pre-tested for English literacy and then placed in the appropriate job readiness and employment training program based on their determined ESL level. This is an innovative approach, because most workforce training programs just assume that all participants are at an English language competency level sufficient for employment. However, CRSP and its VOLAG partners use evidence-based assessments to measure English language competency on a continuum of five levels. Only at levels three and above, is an individual considered to be job ready, and equipped to be placed in a job readiness or job training program. Furthermore, CRSP and its partners have developed a wide array of programs for different levels of English competency for levels above level three, which progressively move refugees into more challenging and higher level work



opportunities. As a result, the VOLAGS that do job development and job placement are able to approach a much more diverse range of employers for a greater range of job categories, which has contributed to CRSP's steadily increasing entered employment percentages (which currently are at 72% of the annual caseload) and 90-day job retention (which is currently at 88% of those placed in employment). CRSP is now providing incentives for refugees to do a whole family status update, including ongoing employment at 180 days after initial job placement.

Training for TANF Program Staff on Working with Refugees. Recognizing that cultural competence is vital to helping refugees succeed, CRSP, along with Colorado Works, have trained county-based TANF Program staff on how to work most effectively with refugees when they walk in to receive services. Areas of focus include:

- Distinguishing between refugees and other immigration categories for eligibility, and to understand unique needs and opportunities presented by refugees.
- Addressing language and cultural barriers.
- Understanding cultural differences regarding family and gender roles and their relation to American expectations and norms around work.

Impact

Colorado's innovative workforce development programs that are directly tied to participants' ESL levels have led to successful outcomes for TANF recipients. More recipients are moving off of public benefits, and getting better, sustainable jobs that are more tailored to their aspirations and English language level.