



Promising Practice

Moving refugees towards self-sufficiency pathways in Erie County, New York: Communication, collaboration, and a focus on cultural knowledge

Erie County, New York

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Erie County Social Services ensures a coordinated and integrated social service delivery approach between the County's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program and refugee partner organizations. Services provided to refugees in the greater Buffalo area focus on cultural strengths and are rooted in consistent and ongoing communication among collaborative partners. This cultural knowledge approach provides refugees with numerous paths to gain English language skills, education and training, and work experience.

Background

Erie County Department of Social Services program for refugees focuses on close and collaborative partnerships with four resettlement agencies/partners that provide coordinated services to refugees in the area. **Catholic Charities, Jewish Services, International Institute, and Journey's End** provide English as a Second Language training, GED, and work participation activities for all refugees. Depending on the particular cultural, language, and needs of the arriving refugees, they are assigned to work with caseworkers directly at these agencies where they also are co-located with the TANF program.

The four agencies' programs are fully integrated to meet the 1,500-1,600 refugees receiving services at any time – approximately 10 percent of the TANF caseload. Coordinating this effort with all four partners is one full-time staff person with Erie County Department of Social Services. Language Line and the International Institute provide additional language interpretation support to the department and its partners. The agency and its partners developed systems to handle large populations with staff and interpreters so that they are prepared to deliver appropriate services to the refugees and understand what referrals or additional services may be needed.

This integrated case management system focuses on understanding the cultural background of each population. This assessment includes taking into account experiences and barriers refugees bring as a result of living in refugee camps and other transient situations while en route to the United States. This knowledge is achieved through e-learning, in-person trainings, Webinars, videos, and background information on the home countries of refugees' culture, language, demographics, and education system in order to improve service delivery and recognition of the strengths and barriers to self-sufficiency that may be expected from each refugee population. Consistency across providers in serving refugee populations is a key asset to the program.

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Challenges

Erie County Social Services initial challenge was determining how to deliver case management services seamlessly and meeting refugees' specific needs that differ from the typical TANF participant. Developing a knowledge-based approach to the various refugee needs and experiences allows Erie County's program to consistently address this challenge in a coordinated way to address the language, education, and workforce needs of the population.

The Department and its partners have seen increased domestic violence instances that are more prevalent in certain cultures. Ensuring that refugees share correct documentation and addressing the need for viable transportation options to work sites are also ongoing challenges. Additional focus and enhancement on integrating services and job placement is a future focus of the program.

Innovation

Focus on individualized cultural and linguistic needs of refugees by working with appropriate cultural partners. Erie County Department of Social Services works to identify the specific refugee populations that will be resettled in the greater Buffalo area and seeks to ensure that staff and partners are prepared and well versed in their culture, language, and potential barriers to self-sufficiency. This is accomplished through the cultural training that all staff receive on the populations they are and will serve as well as a working guide on how to tackle issues from TANF, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, and navigating the American workforce. A number of other agencies across New York State are utilizing this guide.

Collaboration and communication with partners on all aspects of service delivery. The coordination and integration of services to refugees in Erie County is underscored by its consistency in communication. All service providers share a communication coordinator who tracks and identifies common areas of need. In addition, quarterly meetings allow the Department and the service providers to meet in-person to discuss commonalities and experiences of refugee needs, staff training, and upcoming resettlement demographics. These meetings also allow partners to develop a common knowledge base on what is occurring across a large service delivery area with all refugee populations. The Department also works with Hope Refugee Services, which works with refugees who have migrated to the Erie County area and may not be eligible for Social Service benefits.