



Welcoming the Stranger

Minnesota Council of Churches Refugee Services

OCTOBER 2010

SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST:

- **Meet the new VISTAs**
- **High Needs Medical Cases**
- **Taking Root Update**
- **Employment Success Story**
- **And more...**

DONATION NEEDS

- **Winter coats**
- **Hats**
- **Gloves**
- **Scarves**
- **Gently used pots and pans**
- **Contact Holly to find how to make a donation at: holly.larsen@mnchurches.org**

Preparing for Winter

The transition from summer to winter can be a challenging one, even for veteran Minnesotans. Making it through the first winter can feel even more difficult for refugees from more temperate climates. Winter poses greater challenges than just snow of course – making sure that every family member is well-clothed and warm, and finding the funds to pay expensive heating bills on limited income can feel insurmountable when a newly arrived family is already dealing with cultural change, job seeking, and learning a new language.

This is why Refugee Services is focusing on smoothing the transition from summer to winter with a number of October projects focused on winter-readiness. Minnesota Council of Churches is partnering with Community Action of Minneapolis



Volunteers and refugee gardeners with their hand-made scarecrow.

and Community Action Partnership of Ramsey and Washington Counties to host two Energy Assistance Clinics to help our refugee families pay their heating bills through the federally-funded Energy Assistance program. The Shoe Spree is entering its fourth

year with Centennial United Methodist donating funds and volunteer time to purchase shoes for 22 refugee children, while many congregations and individuals have donated winter coats, hats, mittens, and scarves for our annual Coat Give-Away.

Participants in the Rolling Hills apartment community garden celebrated the changing season with a Harvest Festival where they showcased their garden's bounty and traditional crafts, such as weaving.

This autumn is not about mourning the loss of summer – it's an opportunity to celebrate new possibilities in a new home, prepare for the winter months, and look forward to many more happy seasons.

Refugee Medical Cases on the Rise

Fatuma* and her seven children arrived in Maine in January of 2009. Because her son, Abdi, uses a wheelchair, Fadumo had a difficult search for affordable, handicap accessible housing that led her first to Massachusetts and then Minneapolis.

Fatuma and her family stayed with a friend for a few days and then moved into Mary's Place Shelter. Fatuma was referred into the Refugee

Supportive Housing Network Program (RSHN) (a program of the Minnesota Council of Churches). Fatuma was accepted immediately into the program and started to work intensively with case manager Said Mohamed and Housing Resource Developer Elizabeth Mason to locate housing. After a long search, affordable rental unit was found, but its 5 steps required that a wheelchair ramp be built.



Medical Cases continued on 2.

With the increase in families arriving with varying degrees of medical issues, much more support will be needed from churches and volunteers...

Preparing for High Needs Arrivals

Medical Cases continued from page 1

Hennepin County's Ageing and Disability Services worked closely with Refugee Services to build a ramp for Abdi, but it took three months before the ramp was built. By this time, Hennepin County Commissioner, Gail Dorfman, along with numerous case managers, school social workers and MCC staff had advocated for Abdi and his family.

Throughout the years many families have arrived with

varying levels of health concerns, but in recent months resettlement agencies around the country have noticed an increase in families with significant medical concerns. While the Minnesota Council of Churches – Refugee Services is working to put systems in place to better prepare for the arrival of these families, the lack of affordable handicap accessible rental units is a challenge, and it's difficult for low income families to make the necessary modifications to make apartments accessible.

With the increase in families

arriving with varying degrees of medical issues, much more support will be needed from churches and volunteers to make sure these families can get to medical appointments and have accessible homes to live in. This will help these families put down roots in their new homes right away and achieve self sufficiency.

Contact Naomi Thorson at naomi.thorson@mnchurches.org if you would be interested in donating time or resources for new refugee families.

**Names have been changed.*

Meet the new VISTAs

Meet this year's AmeriCorps VISTAs at Refugee Services: Holly Larsen, Housing Resource Developer, recently graduated from the College of St. Catherine, Naomi Thorson, Outreach Specialist, a Bethel University alum and Karen Wiessner, Employment Services Developer, of Gustavus Adolphus College. These three new VISTAs joined Dan Huynh and Elizabeth Mason, the other two VISTAs still at Minnesota Council of Churches, Refugee Services for the 2010-2011 service year.

MCC Refugee Services is the lead agency for the Refugee Employment and Housing Network (REAH), which includes seven other partner sites in the Twin Cities.

Sarah Greving, the REAH network coordinator, said, "The VISTA program is mutually beneficial for VISTA volunteers and the organizations. Sites get new energy and excitement, and young professionals get

experience in a new field."

VISTAs—Volunteers In Service To America—apply to positions through the Corporation for National and Community Service website and then are interviewed and selected by local agencies to help build capacity to "strengthen systems, processes or infrastructures, and increase an organization's ability to function effectively and meet its mission." In other words, their service supports the direct service of their agency's staff through such activities as professional relationship building with landlords and employers or coordinating volunteers, rather than through direct service.

VISTAs are treated like full-time staff and work a regular 40 hour work week, but their income comes from the Corporation of National and Community Service—a living stipend set at 105% of the poverty level. Service is typically one year, but it is possible to reapply for a second service year—

Elizabeth Mason chose this route and is now serving her second year as the VISTA leader at MCC Refugee Services.

"VISTAs are really important to agencies like ours because we develop and enrich systems that increase the quality and types of services available to our clients that hopefully make their transition to Minnesota smoother. While staff is focused on using current systems and making sure our clients are receiving these services, we get to experiment with new ideas that may improve these services," said Dan Huynh, Refugee Housing Opportunity and Resource Developer.

In November, Minnesota Council of Churches Refugee Services will say goodbye to Dan as his VISTA service year has come to completion. When he's done, Dan hopes to continue working in the refugee resettlement field.



Dan, Holly, Naomi, Karen and Elizabeth

Taking Root and Changing Lives

Since Taking Root's launch in March of 2010, there have been nine groups formed to support families coming to Minnesota. Three support groups have completed their four month commitments to their families, and six are still actively involved with their families. Two more groups are formed and ready to be matched with families by the end of October.

Taking Root was designed with the goal of creating support groups that will work and interact with a refugee family and support them as they transition to Minnesota

during a four month period. What makes this program unique is that it brings together Muslim, Christian, and non-faith individuals with the shared purpose of supporting a family. The experience is great for the refugee family because they are being supported while adapting to their new lives.

In addition, the experience is valuable for the Taking Root members because it is an opportunity for them to learn about and break down negative stereotypes about each others' religion and culture.

Taking Root members are really enjoying the experiences in supporting the family and staying connecting with the families even after the formal commitment is over. One volunteer shares, "I spent a little time with all the family this morning and they are brimming over with excitement and happiness. While at the Church Center with Arfow this morning we bumped into two young Somali men and their sister who is a great friend of Arfow's. They come from the same refugee camp and they

live in Columbia Heights. They only arrived about 3 weeks ago."

If you would like information on how to become part of a Taking Root group, contact Gail Anderson at: gail.anderson@mnchurches.org

Navigating the Minnesota Job Search

For Maria Lopez Amando, things fell into place all at once. She was granted asylum status, enrolled in services with Minnesota Council of Churches Refugee Services, and was employed in no less than 40 days. While this whirlwind of monumental events is certainly something to be happy about, she faced many challenges. As a single mother of three children only recently having arrived in the United States from Mexico, it has not been an easy process.

Maria now works in the a local restaurant on Grand Avenue in St. Paul. For thirty hours each week she helps prepare food in the kitchen, relying primarily on her English skills to get by with a staff and customer base that speaks very little Spanish. She spends another ten hours per week on the bus going to and from work between Minneapolis and St. Paul. Then, after taking care of her children, she takes Adult Basic Education courses from 6 to 9 p.m. in her community four nights a week.

Maria is enrolled in a federally funded program



Chhimi Wangchuck and Maria Lopez Amando

called Match Grant. The ultimate goal is to help asylees and refugees reach self-sufficiency by finding them sustainable employment within 120 to 180 days of either their arrival to the US, or in the case of asylees, receiving asylum status. It curtails the need to access public cash assistance because MCC matches cash and in-kind contributions. Because of Match Grant, other county services and

intensive job counseling by the MCC Employment Services team, many people have been successful in reaching the goal. This year 100 % of our Church World Service clients found employment within their first six months in MN! The Employment Counselors work with the refugee clients on writing

resumes, searching for jobs, taking them to interviews, and offering encouragement and support. Maria's counselor is Chhimi Wangchuck (pictured at left) and has been working with Maria since she was enrolled in the program.

It only took 19 days for Maria to find work after entering our program. She found the job independently in the classifieds of an online newspaper.

Her determination, initiative and resilience are an inspiration to many refugees that are also looking for work amidst general hiring freezes and an economic recession. Although finding employment is often a difficult process for refugees with high expectations of their new life in Minnesota, it is stories like Maria's that encourage all of us to never give up.



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Minnesota Council of Churches

manifests the unity of the body of Christ and builds the common good in the world in partnership with 24 member Protestant, Historic Black, and Orthodox judicatories representing more than 2000 congregations and their one million members.

Refugee Services

Our Mission Statement:

Refugee Services is an ecumenical ministry welcoming persecuted people from around the world into new lives of freedom, hope, and opportunity in Minnesota.

Our Vision:

Refugees are abundantly supported as they move from addressing basic needs to achieving their dreams. *And* faith communities are transformed by partnering in this ministry of hospitality.

Recipe Corner: Iraqi Pomegranate Soup



Shorbat Rumman: Iraqi Pomegranate Soup

Ingredients

- 8 cups vegetable broth
- 1 tbsp yeast extract (such as Marmite)
- 1/2 cup yellow split peas
- 1 cup chopped onion
- 3 medium beets, peeled and diced small (Note: if the beet greens are intact, clean and chop them and use them instead of half the spinach)
- 1/2 cup long grain rice, such as basmati
- *Optional:* 2 cups dry textured soy protein chunks, reconstituted in vegetable broth and cut into shreds

(e.g., SoySoya Slices) or 2 packages Yves or Lightlife vegetarian “beef” substitute strips, slivered

- 1 bunch green onions, chopped
- 1/2 cup chopped parsley
- 2 tbsp lemon juice or 3 T. lime juice
- 2 tbsp pomegranate molasses or 1 c. fresh pomegranate juice [to extract juice, roll an uncut pomegranate hard on the floor with your foot, then make an incision on one side and squeeze into a strainer—or try using an electric citrus juicer]
- 2 tbsp sugar
- *Optional:* 1/4 cup minced fresh cilantro
- 1-10 oz package frozen spinach, thawed, squeezed and sliced finely or 1 lb fresh spinach, cleaned, trimmed, and chopped

Garnish:

- 1 tbsp dried mint
- 1/4 tsp cinnamon
- 1/4 tsp freshly-ground black pepper

Instructions

1. Bring the broth, yeast extract, split

peas and onions to a boil in a large pot. Skim off foam. Reduce heat, cover and simmer for 1 hour.

2. Add the beets and rice and cook 30 minutes more (add the soy protein , too, if you are using it.)
3. Add the green onions, sugar, lemon or lime juice, parsley and pomegranate molasses or juice. Simmer for 10 minutes.
4. Bring soup to a boil, and add spinach or spinach and beet greens, stirring as it wilts. Stir in cilantro, if using. Add more broth if it seems too thick to you, and taste for salt
5. Serve hot, topping each bowl with some of the garnish, and plenty of Arabic-style flatbread, or crusty bread alongside.

**Photo and recipe courtesy of wikihow.com*