



Building Professional Pathways for New Americans
National Conference on Refugee Professional Recertification
Kellogg Center of Michigan State University
June 22-23, 2009
East Lansing, Michigan

News Coverage

June 17, 2009

Michigan State University Press

MSU helps bring national refugee conference to East Lansing (MSU News, June 17, 2009)

Source: <http://news.msu.edu/story/6463/>

EAST LANSING, Mich. - As thousands of refugees flee war-torn nations around the world, the United States has served as a second home. Michigan and the Detroit area are especially affected by the surge of displaced people from the Iraq region.

That's a major reason a first-ever conference on retraining and recertifying refugees will be held at Michigan State University's Kellogg Hotel and Conference Center June 22-23.

Barry Stein, MSU professor of political science, helped bring the conference to East Lansing. Stein, who has taught a class on refugees since 1975, said the conference includes refugee resettlement agencies, job development agencies and mutual assistance associations that help ethnic groups adjust once they come to the United States.

"A large percentage of the refugees have been engineers, doctors, nurses, educators and other professionals, and you don't want brain-drain. You want to find a way to use them in the American economy," Stein said.

"It's a matter of getting them recertified. You can't just come and say, I'm a doctor, and start practicing. You have got all sorts of tests, and licenses and hoops to get through."

The conference is hosted by MSU and RefugeeWorks - the national center for refugee training, assistance and employment - and focuses on retraining and recertifying refugees with professional education and experience.

Michigan employers stand to benefit from the conference. Metro Detroit is home to the largest and oldest Arab-American and Chaldean communities in the nation.

Stein sees the influx of engineers, teachers and other professionals as a boon to the United States.

"Why waste their intelligence, their training, their experience, their professional qualifications?" he said. "Capture as much of that as possible because otherwise you've got the danger that they'll be on the dole, and they'll be non-productive members of society. As is often the case, it's an investment. If you make an effort upfront to enable them to recapture their professional status, we all win."

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Michigan State University has been advancing knowledge and transforming lives through innovative teaching, research and outreach for more than 150 years. MSU is known internationally as a major public university with global reach and extraordinary impact. Its 17 degree-granting colleges attract scholars worldwide who are interested in combining education with practical problem solving.

MSU News (Video)

<http://news.msu.edu/media/video/2009/06/b2208402-812f-48da-be56-c9a2ac9d73f1.wmv>

June 18, 2009

Detroit Today, Thursday, (WDET 101.9 FM, June 18, 2009)

Next week, Michigan State University will host a "Conference on Refugee Professional Recertification." To discuss the topics of the June 22nd and 23rd event are Belmin Pinjic, director of refugee services for the Lutheran Social Services of Michigan, and Nazar Salman, an Iraqi teacher and pharmacist.

Source: <http://www.wdetroit.org/detroittoday/>

You can download the show, at:

http://www.wdetroit.org/audio/detroittoday/712/DT_6-18.MP3

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June 21, 2009

Michigan Public Radio 91.7 FM

Source: http://www.publicbroadcasting.net/michigan/news.newsmain?action=section&SECTION_ID=1

June 21, 2009

FOX 28 (WSAJV South Bend)

Conference aims to ease refugee return to work

DETROIT (AP) - Michigan State University is hosting a conference designed to help refugees find jobs in the U.S. in their professions.

The 3-day gathering starts Monday. It will include federal and state government officials, resettlement agencies, professional training groups, higher education administrators and refugees themselves.

The summit will address issues of recertifying and training refugees - such as doctors, nurses, teachers, engineers and others.

Topics of discussion will include state-nonprofit partnerships, recertification regulations and "soft skills" training for refugees.

On the Net:

The National Conference on Refugee Professional Recertification: <http://www.refugeeworks.org/conference/>

Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates: <http://www.ecfm.org/index.html>

Source: <http://www.fox28.com/Global/story.asp?S=10568687>

June 21, 2009

The Chicago Tribune/The Associated Press

Conference aims to ease refugee return to work (By David Grant, Associated Press Writer)

When Salah Hashem slipped out of Iraq and into Turkey in 2006, he carried with him a host of papers, diplomas and official documents proving he had graduated from Baghdad University and had completed his medical residency.

When he arrived in the Worcester, Mass., area a year later, he put those papers to work, beginning a process of professional recertification in an attempt to resume his career in medicine.

But it was not to be.

The organization charged with validating foreign medical credentials told Hashem the name on his diploma wasn't his.

A stagnant economy, bureaucratic hurdles and difficulty adapting to a new professional scene are presenting refugees like Hashem and the organizations that serve them with a thorny problem: How to get highly skilled refugees in the U.S. back into their professional field.

Representatives from organizations across the spectrum of refugee issues -- federal and state government officials, resettlement agencies, professional training groups, higher education administrators and refugees themselves -- are gathering for three days at Michigan State University starting Monday. The conference is designed to build bridges that they hope will help refugees get back to their profession.

In Hashem's case, the Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates raised questions stemming from an Iraqi custom -- adding the names of several generations of one's forefathers on formal documents.

"They rejected my application at that time. They said, 'We need a paper from your medical school saying that you are a graduate,'" Hashem said. Iraqi universities "make it difficult to get you your papers if you are in a foreign country. They don't really want to help anybody that fled the country."

The commission's associate vice president of operations, Bill Kelly, said while the group is sensitive to cultural differences, the burden is on the candidate to prove the diploma is his or her own.

"We have a responsibility to ensure that the diploma that someone gives us belongs to them. We tell them, 'We need official legal documentation that both the names belong to you,'" said Kelly. "It may inconvenience them some but our feeling is that the integrity of our process must be protected."

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Kelly said he could not speak specifically to Hashem's case for confidentiality reasons.

After retrieving the papers, Hashem registered for the first of four licensing exams. He barely failed his first attempt. Now, his brother has fled Baghdad after threats on his life and is unable to get the documentation a second time.

"They put all the pressure on our shoulders, and we have only a few people there to help us," Hashem said.

Paths to recertification vary by field and state. Resources independent of nonprofit organizations are scarce, refugee aid groups say. This week's conference will serve as a venue for connecting these groups to each other and to governmental entities.

Jennifer Perez-Brennan of Upwardly Global, an immigrant employment assistant group, will share information at the conference about a partnership between her group and the state of Illinois.

The pairing produced a Web site, www.careersfornewamericans.org, which breaks down costs, procedures and potential careers relating to previous training for 12 types of professionals educated outside the U.S who want to practice in Illinois.

While the site will not be "all things to all people," Perez-Brennan said, it represents an initial foray into doing what these groups do well -- guiding those who come into their offices -- on a larger scale.

Another topic will be the "soft skills" refugee job seekers need.

Carol DaBruzzi, a conference attendee and medical career advancement coordinator at the International Institute of Minnesota in St. Paul, said everything from resume writing to interviewing skills need to be relearned for the American job market.

"I was with a nurse from Iran the other day, doing a mock interview with her. I said 'What are some of your strengths?' and she looked me in the eye like a deer in the headlights," DaBruzzi said. "And I said 'Is this hard for you?' and she said, 'If someone else were here, they would tell you what my strengths are. But I can't tell you that.'"

The conference will include a job fair for Michigan-area refugees. Refugees often lack the professional networks that job seekers rely on to find employment, Perez-Brennan said.

But once in these networks, skilled refugees can flourish.

Gheith Yousif, a Chaldean doctor from the Iraqi city of Mosul, escaped his home country for Jordan with his wife and then-6-week-old daughter five years ago. In August 2008, he arrived in the thriving Chaldean community of southeastern Michigan. While he initially obtained what is known as a "survival job" at a fast food restaurant, a local Chaldean organization helped connect him with a job in his field: as a technologist at a medical firm.

Eventually, Yousif said, he will begin the long and expensive road back to his craft as a physician. Now, however, he has a more joyous afterwork engagement: caring for a new baby daughter.

"She's American. And I am so proud."

On the Net:

The National Conference on Refugee Professional Recertification: <http://www.refugeeworks.org/conference/>
Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates: <http://www.ecfm.org/index.html>

Source: <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/chi-ap-mi-refugees-lookingf,0,851057.story>

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June 22, 2009

WKAR News (East Lansing, NPR affiliate)

East Lansing conference addresses refugee recertification

Scott Pohl, WKAR News

EAST LANSING, MI (WKAR) - Refugees with professional backgrounds often have difficulty getting re-certified to work in the United States. A national conference in East Lansing this week is addressing that problem.

AUDIO: <http://tinyurl.com/m8yn3y>

Obstacles facing refugees include getting paperwork such as diplomas into the U. S. Conference organizer Linda Rabben says it's particularly tough for Iraqis.

While southeast Michigan has a large Arab-American population, Rabben says the U. S. Office of Refugee Resettlement is no longer sending Iraqis to Michigan. One reason is that it's hard for anyone, not just refugees, to find a job in this economy.

Rabben says there are other parts of the country with Iraqi communities where people may have relatives or friends, so refugees may be sent there instead.

Rabben says foreign professionals can help fill in gaps with skills that are otherwise in short supply in this country.

Source: <http://tinyurl.com/m8yn3y>

WLNS TV-6 Lansing

Refugees Gather for National Conference

They're here for the national refugee conference which aims to help men and women adjust to US culture and get on their own two feet. Michigan State University and Refugee Works are hosting the event. The men and women are refugees who come from all over the world.

Armondo Rositas, Employment Specialist: "Iran, Iraq, Bhoutan and Cubans will be coming in."

Many fled countries torn by war and poverty and are now in the US looking for a second chance.

Armondo: Rositas: "You're talking about people who are starting their whole life all over again."

Armando Rositas works with St. Vincent Catholic Charities. It's one of several organizations at the national refugee conference helping refugees adjust.

May Alkhafaji, Iraqi: "I came from a different environment, a different society."

May Alkhafaji is a success story. She moved to Michigan from Baghdad in march 2008.

May Alkhafaji: "There's a whole new system, it's a whole new world for people who have not been here before."

Of all the obstacles she's faced, she says finding a job was one of the hardest, but with a little help and perseverance, she's not only working, she's now helping other refugees.

May Alkhafaji: "I have got a job thanks to my agency that hired me as a refugee specialist at the Lutheran Social Services of Michigan.>

Alkhafaji encourages men and women like herself to hang in there, and says if you look hard enough, the help is available.

Armondo: Rositas: "It's a beautiful thing knowing that you're helping people start over with their life, and have their second chance."

Source: <http://www.wlns.com/global/story.asp?s=10575021>

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WLAJ ABC-3 News

Conference Helps Refugees Looking For Work

Michigan State University is hosting a conference meant to help refugees find jobs within their professions in the U.S. The three-day gathering starts today. It will include federal and state officials, resettlement agencies, professional training groups, higher education administrators and refugees themselves.

The summit will address issues of recertifying and training refugees including doctors, nurses, teachers and engineers. Topics of discussion will include state-nonprofit partnerships, recertification regulations and "soft skills" training for refugees.

Source: <http://www.wlaj.com/news/refugees-15955-state-training.html>

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The Arts Institute at Montgomery College

"Portraits of Life: Student Experiences" Exhibited at National Conference

"Portraits of Life: Student Experiences" is being exhibited at the National Refugee Professional Recertification Conference at Michigan State University June 22-23.

The exhibit is a tribute in words and photographs to resilience, transformation and inspiration featuring students from Montgomery College.

David Phillips, director of the College's Arts Institute and associate dean for the arts will accompany the exhibit to Michigan and facilitate a session during the conference. Artistic production of the exhibit was done by Bill Tata and Jane Knaus.

The conference is organized by RefugeeWorks, an organization that helps refugees attain certification that will allow them to work in their professions in the United States. You can visit their site at

<http://www.refugeeworks.org>.

Source: <http://artsinstitute.montgomerycollege.edu/>

June 23, 2009

The East Lansing State News

Refugees strive for work in U.S.

Wilhelmina Holder said she still has trouble finding her place in the U.S. work force since fleeing Liberia in 1985, five years after her father, who also was the president, was assassinated.

Now working as a public health physician and executive director of the Women's Initiative for Self-Empowerment in St. Paul, Minn., Holder said there still are institutional biases about whether immigrants and refugees in the U.S. should be provided quality job opportunities.

"Here, it was very difficult getting a job in the health system," she said. "I've never been able to get a leadership position in the department of health where I should be with my leadership capabilities and my background as a public health physician."

Holder was present Monday at the first National Conference on Refugee Professional Recertification, a two-day event co-hosted by MSU and Baltimore-based RefugeeWorks, a nonprofit project that consults with refugees and various refugee-help organizations, said Linda Rabben, a staff consultant for RefugeeWorks and the event's organizer.

"Many of the refugees that come here are very seriously traumatized," she said. "They've seen horrible things and it's very difficult for them to get the help that they need to integrate into American society."

Retraining and recertifying refugees who once held professional positions in their country of origin for domestic employment is beneficial because, in the long run, they will be able to diversify and make important contributions to the U.S. job market, she said.

"These very highly trained and experienced professionals have a lot to contribute to U.S. society," she said. "They're eager to work and (they) face all these obstacles that keep them from working in their field."

Rosina Hassoun, an MSU assistant professor of anthropology who was scheduled to speak today at the conference, said she was concerned for the future of refugee employment in the U.S. because of several factors, including discrimination and the economic recession.

"What we have is a downturn in the economy," she said. "What we have is large numbers of people who are searching for jobs. It's very easy to scapegoat and to also discriminate against our refugees."

Hassoun, whose family came to the U.S. as refugees from Pakistan, said this can be offset by raising awareness of the plight being experienced by refugees. MSU is a prime place for this, she said, because of the university's history of outreach.

"I think we sit at an interesting place," she said. "Being a land grant university (and) having a history of reaching out to communities, I think that it is very crucial that (MSU) hosts this at this time."

The conference attracted participants from across the U.S. and world. May Al-Khafaji, who works as a refugee specialist for the Lutheran Social Services of Michigan, or LSS, a nonprofit organization, said she's able to share her personal experiences with other refugees.

Originally from Iraq, she fled to Jordan in March 2006, launching a two-year journey of uncertainty. After living in Jordan for a year, she applied in 2007 for refugee status with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which granted her request in November 2007. Almost five months later, she arrived in the U.S. and was resettled with the help of LSS.

"My job now is to help refugees and guide them and try to ease the obstacles that any one of them can feel or can have, especially with my knowledge from my own personal experiences, what I've been through, and how I was able to overcome them," she said.

Source: http://www.stateneews.com/index.php/article/2009/06/refugees_strive_for_work_in_us

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June 27, 2009

The Minneapolis Star Tribune

Gail Rosenblum: Doctors kept from doctoring. For most foreign-trained doctors in Minnesota, returning to their profession remains a dream.

Mimi Oo pushes her cart of color-coded test tubes down the fourth-floor hall of St. Joseph's Hospital in St. Paul. It's 10 a.m. on a recent Saturday, and Oo, a phlebotomist wearing a white lab coat and her teenage daughter's white tennies, has been on duty for four hours.

"Sorry," Oo says, as she gently guides a needle into the arm of a 65-year-old man suffering from chest pains. "You're a tough cookie."

"You're doing fine," he tells her. "You're the first one to get it in the first time."

Oo smiles, but resists the urge to share the truth behind her skillful touch and easy bedside manner. Although Oo works weekends drawing blood and weekdays as a medical interpreter, she is a fully trained doctor.

After completing medical school in her home country of Myanmar (formerly Burma), Oo ran a thriving private practice for seven years. Later, she worked as a United Nations Development Program volunteer and World Health Organization consultant in Uganda, trained in tropical medicine.

"I don't mind drawing blood," said Oo, the oldest of five siblings born to college-educated parents who fled to the United States during political unrest in the 1980s. "I try to do my job well. But if I were able to do more, I would like to do more."

Oo and about 100 foreign-trained doctors in Minnesota, most of them refugees with permanent U.S. residency status, cannot practice medicine in Minnesota. Some lack understanding of licensing protocols, or they fulfilled course work only to find residency doors shut. Others face language or financial barriers. Some, like Oo, admit age is not on their side.

"One option is returning to [an American] medical school for four more years and another three years of residency," Oo, 55, said with a laugh. "By the time I'm done, I'd retire."

Wilhelmina Holder takes a more serious tone. "It's unjust," said Holder, a doctor in Liberia who now directs the St. Paul-based Women's Initiative for Self-Empowerment (WISE). Holder came to Minnesota more than 20 years ago "to save my life" after her father was killed.

"We have to find a way out. Some physicians have become depressed," she said, recalling one dentist who killed himself after being unable to secure a license to practice. "They lose all their dreams. They can't go back home because it is not safe."

But helping these doctors regain their dignity and status is not the most compelling reason to act. A record number of immigrants are arriving in Minnesota, most from Africa and Asia, placing the state in the top 20 for immigrant population growth. In 2005, more immigrants arrived in Minnesota than in any of the previous 25 years, according to the state demographer's office.

These doctors could be on the front lines of new arrivals' health care, speaking their languages, understanding their cultures, skilled in treating diseases not typically seen here.

"These doctors are here to stay, to be part of the community," said Stephen Nguyagwa, program coordinator of the African and American Friendship Association for Cooperation and Development. His organization collaborates with WISE to run the Foreign Trained Health Professionals program. "Their clinical skills are good," he said. "They are just like any physician elsewhere."

The doctor is (almost) in

Nguyagwa was in East Lansing, Mich., recently for a conference sponsored by the Washington, D.C.-based Office of Refugee Resettlement. The two-day conference discussed ways to re-certify doctors new to America. More than 170 people attended from 30 states, with Minnesota "very well-represented," he said.

Nguyagwa was buoyed by news that four foreign medical students living in the Twin Cities have been accepted into residency programs; two at the University of Minnesota and two outside the state.

Nearer the geriatricians

Oo accepts that her future looks different. "All these young, fresh graduates aspire to be neurosurgeons, cardiologists," she said wistfully. "But there is a lack of doctors in family medicine, rural health, geriatrics. They should look at this pool of doctors who are not being used. We're nearer the age of the geriatrician population."

After medical school, Oo did her residency at Rangoon General Hospital, then worked for five years in Uganda in general medicine. Many of her patients had malaria or AIDS.

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Today, Oo splits her time between drawing blood, translating for patients speaking Burmese and Hindi, and serving as a personal care attendant for her 18-year-old son, who has autism. She met her husband of 20 years, Zaw Lin, a hearing aid technician, when sewing up his finger in her clinic.

Oo checks her BlackBerry-like device and heads to another hospital room. It's the dozenth time she'll draw blood this particular morning, but she remains grateful for the chance to serve "in any capacity." She is considering moving into autism research, or maybe she'll just stay put.

"It's a job, and I like helping others," Oo said. "You're a president one day, and the next day you're not. This is life."

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Source: <http://tinyurl.com/lyf7dl>

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