



An International Look at Public Library Refugee Services

What Are We Doing?



General Practices

These come from a compilation of articles from the United States, Canada, Germany, Norway, and Denmark. These often overlap with other multicultural services.

Refugees can take advantage of some services that public libraries may already offer:

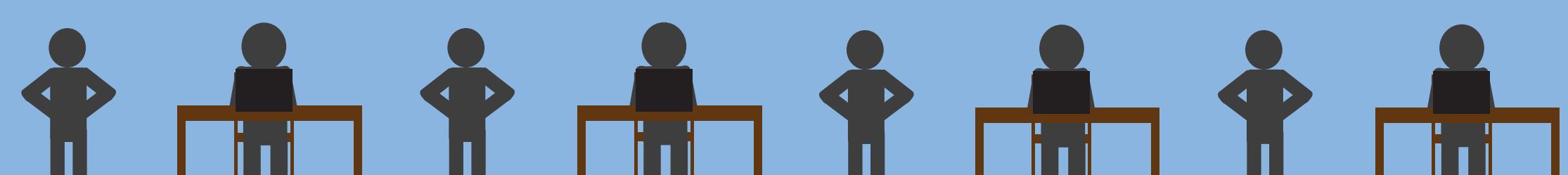
- **Financial literacy courses** (McDermott, 2016; Witteveen, 2016)
- **Book clubs that offer an opportunity to socialize and practice language skills** (Elturk, 2000; Varheim, 2014)

Some services are already offered to immigrant or multicultural populations, and can be adjusted for refugee language needs:

- **Lessons on the language of the receiving country** (McDermott, 2016; Lison, 2016; Witteveen, 2016)
- **Internet resources on citizenship, employment, and health** (McDermott, 2016; Kumaran 2010)
- **Guides on using the library and community resources** (McDermott, 2016; Mason, 1999; Lison, 2016)
- **Translating web pages and guides into multiple languages** (McDermott, 2016; Elturk 2000; Witteveen, 2016)
- **Books in the native languages of the refugees** (McDermott, 2016; Elturk, 2000; Mason 1999; Lison, 2016; Thorhauge, 2013)
- **Second-language conversation groups** (Lison 2016; Witteveen 2016)

Then there are certain services that can be added especially for refugees:

- **Work with local refugee centers to offer tours of the library** (Elturk, 2000; Witteveen, 2016; Lison, 2016)
- **Hire staff who speak the native languages of the refugees** (Witteveen, 2016; Thorhauge, 2003; Varheim, 2014)



What More Can We Do?



The King County Library System

Washington State, United States -

The King County Library System has a **mobile technology program** that has been serving refugee centers there since 2006 (Duvall, 2016). The library works with the English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers at the refugee center. They **teach basic computer skills** for patrons who are not familiar with the technology, and then move onto **email, resume building, and job searching**. Students are grouped by literacy level and 5 classes are taught every other week. The classes began in an **8-computer mobile computer lab**, and now included **iPad and apps** as well. The same library system has also adapted this style of service to serve the homeless population who live in mobile ‘tent cities’ in their area (Duvall, 2016).

Libraries without Borders

As amazing as refugee services can be in a resettlement country, refugee information needs do not begin when they step foot in a new country, especially given that **refugees spend an average of 17 years in a refugee camp** (Libraries without Borders). For libraries with more resources, or librarians looking for other opportunities to help refugees before they reach our shores, another option is cooperating with organizations like Libraries without Borders, as the New York Public Library has. Libraries without Borders has developed a library in a box called “**The Ideas Box**” that **can fit onto two shipping pallets** and be sent to refugee camps and centers where refugees struggle to access information.

These boxes contain:

- satellite Internet and a power supply
- 15 tablets and 5 laptops with access to MOOCs
- 50 e-readers, 5000 e-books, 250 paper books
- a TV set with 100 films
- board games and video games
- 5 HD cameras
- 3 GPS devices
- graphic design and video editing software
- arts and crafts materials



(The Ideas Box)

The content is **customized for the culture of the recipients**, it is weather-proofed, and it can be assembled in 20 minutes. This helps refugees **continue their educations, connects them with the outside world, and allows them to continue to grow in the refugee camps** (The Ideas Box). These boxes have been used in refugee centers and camps across Europe, Burundi, Ethiopia, and camps of Syrian refugees, as well in indigenous communities in Australia and inner cities in the U.S. (The Ideas Box).

Why are typical Multicultural Services not enough?

Refugees and asylum seekers do have many needs that are similar to other immigrant groups but there are some features that make refugee populations distinct.

Refugees often have been through extremely traumatic experiences including:

“The **loss of loved ones**...the destruction of property, **insecure living conditions**, war, **torture**, imprisonment, **terrorist attacks**, abuse and **sexual violence**....experiences of **defenselessness and disorientation**...hunger and thirst, lack of medical care, robbery, sexual violation, assault and discrimination...residence in mass accommodation facilities...the lack of a work permit, dependence on social security (**subsistence-level poverty**), the **lack of future educational and occupational opportunities**, uncertain residence status...and **the threat of deportation**” (Schouler-Ocak, 2016).

Refugees have a **high risk for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts** in both adults and children. However, for children in particular, some of these effects can be eased by “stable settlement and social support in the host country” (Schouler-Ocak, 2016).

“We fear being rejected, because coming from countries with less education we feel embarrassed, do not know how to communicate, why should they be interested in you?” (Varheim, 2014).

For Muslim refugees, the ability to feel comfortable in their host country is hindered by the fact that **Muslims are a target of discrimination** and alienation in the wake of the “War on Terror” (Pateman 2008).

Refugees have been **completely severed from their former information landscape** (the social and informational ties that help people make sense of the world) (Lloyd, 2015). They have to rebuild their understanding of cultural, social, and institutional systems. Public libraries are “safe and non-judgmental place(s) where assistance is offered to enable the developing information literacy practices,” which can aid this process (Lloyd, 2015).

A Norwegian Library

Note: Refugees in Norway are required to participate in a two-year program that includes language, cultural, and civics studies about Norway. These classes are arranged by the municipalities that have agreed to take in refugees, and the refugees are financially supported while they complete their studies. Every refugee is supplied with employment counseling and a personalized plan is made for them to get to their employment goals (Integrerings- og mangfoldsdirektoratet).

Northern Norway-

The first contact that the refugees in this town have with the public library is with an immigrant **specialist librarian who is also one of their teachers** in their Introduction Act program. This way, **the refugees know one of the librarians** and therefore feel more comfortable seeking help, and **the librarian knows the refugee population and their needs** on a very personal basis, and can adjust library services and collections accordingly (Varheim, 2014). This librarian organizes services at the library for refugees and other immigrant patrons, like a **women’s reading group** and a **homework service**. **The library has become a hub of the refugee community**. Some of the refugee students end up helping out at the library as interpreters, and even being hired to work in library, and even those who didn’t do so formally find **the library is a more comfortable place to practice their Norwegian**. The refugees see the library as a safe place, and the library patrons as safer people than those outside (Varheim, 2014). One refugee even described the library as “**the safest of all places**.” This setup has led to the refugees **to be incredibly frequent, sometimes daily, users of the public library**, and has led to an increase in trust of Norwegian society by the refugees (Varheim, 2014).

German Public Libraries

German public libraries typically try to make contact with newly arrived asylum seekers and refugees and make them aware of the services that are available there. They recognize that “public libraries are safe and welcoming low-threshold places that empower people and support the community in all its different forms” (Lison 2016). The services that they supply for the public are of great use to newly arrived refugees, from **free access to Wifi and computers, to directions to other community help, to conversation groups**. Another service offered by German libraries is “**special programs for the children of refugees**” who have been through traumatic experiences and need a place where they can feel safe, and enjoy themselves (Lison, 2016).

- In Berlin, they offer **library cards to all refugees and asylum seekers**, even if they have no documentation.
- Hamburg funds **80 weekly discussion groups for refugees** to socialize and develop language skills by selling “Refugees Welcome” t-shirts.
- Leipzig’s public library works with an association to **pair refugees with German ‘godparents’** who can help them navigate German society and practice their language skills.
- Munich’s public library has held **workshops to encourage dialogue between Germans and refugees through cartooning (for youths) and crafts (for women)**.
- Bremen has put together **book and media packages and granted them as a permanent loan to refugee transitional living** (Lison, 2016).