



## **CONNECTING REFUGEE YOUTH TO OPPORTUNITIES: TRAINING & EDUCATION FOR YOUTH EMPLOYMENT AND CAREER BUILDING**

**October 29-30, 2018**

### **Conversation Participants**

CAMBA (NYC)  
Lutheran Family Services of Nebraska  
Refugee Services of Texas  
Lutheran Social Services National Capital Area  
Lutheran Services of Georgia  
Lutheran Social Services of the Southwest

### **Introduction**

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) hosted an integration conversation in October 2018 and brought together thought leaders in refugee integration in order to elevate the conversation on youth opportunities and to grapple with essential questions about connecting refugee youth to opportunities. As part of its initial research, LIRS found a dearth of information in terms of best practices and programming targeted at building education and career opportunities for refugee youth. Agencies have refugee youth programs and refugee employment programs and while there may be some cross-participation, there are limited programs that focus specifically on refugee youth employment. A lack of data on refugee youth and employment is in part because schools cannot disaggregate students based on immigration status. Anecdotally, LIRS knows that refugee youth have tremendous potential and assets to contribute to their communities, but may face unique barriers to achieving that potential. Consequently LIRS planned an integration conversation to determine how LIRS and its network partners can support refugee youth to access training and education for employment and career building.

Based on the limited data that exists, and conversations with expert refugee and youth development organizations across the US, LIRS identified assumptions and essential questions regarding opportunities for refugee youth to inform the integration conversation.

### **The conversation was based on the following assumptions:**

- Youth are defined as ages 16-24.
- A refugee is defined as an individual who has fled persecution in his or her home country and is temporarily residing in another country with hope of eventually either returning home or being resettled in a third country.
- An asylee is defined as an individual who has been granted asylum in the United States.
- Based on age alone, refugee youth may have more potential to advance in a career, because they have more time to spend working in the United States than adult resettled refugees.

- Age upon arrival impacts the educational attainment of resettled refugees.<sup>1</sup>
- Overall there is a desire amongst refugee youth to continue their education.
- Skills and knowledge gaps prevents refugee youth from pursuing their educational and career goals.
- Youth development funding tends to support “disconnected youth,” and while refugee youth may fit within this category, many refugee resettlement organizations are not connected to those funding streams and programs.

### The conversation examined the following essential questions:

- Understanding refugee youth: Who are refugee youth? Develop a consistent understanding of the needs of refugee youth.
- Engaging Refugee Youth: How do we connect with and engage refugee youth?
- Building Social Capital: What relationships do youth need to succeed?
- Envisioning Pathways with Refugee Youth: How can we assist youth in identifying and pursuing career pathways?
- Assessing the Labor Market: What are viable job and career options for youth? How can we leverage labor market information when providing career counseling to refugee youth?
- Building Skills: What skills do youth have and need to access opportunities? How do we help youth actually build the skills needed?
- Recommendations: What are creative solutions to support opportunities for youth? How can we leverage public and/or private partnerships?

These assumptions and questions informed the agenda of the integration conversation as LIRS sought to grapple with the understanding of refugee youth opportunities for employment and career building.

## Understanding Refugee Youth

Beyond ethnic diversity, refugee youth span a wide range of lived experiences, from being a high school student, to being a parent or primary wage earner. Each population of refugee and asylee youth also varies based on geographic location within the US. In NYC, the majority of CAMBA's clients are young men seeking asylum. LFS Nebraska is working with youth who are deciding whether or not to finish high school based on what they believe they can achieve before they “age-out” of high school, while LSG Atlanta and LSS-NCA Hyattsville are primarily serving high school youth.

Youth embody many roles within their families and communities; they serve as translators, navigators, and as the public face of their family. Family expectations weigh heavily on many refugee youth. Some feel obligated or compelled to send money home or contribute to supporting their family within the US. For refugee youth still in high school, while not primary wage earners, they carry the burden of fulfilling the “American Dream,” placed on them by their parents. Cultural gender expectations can also be a factor for refugee youth, especially for young women.

Refugee youth arrive to the United States with assets that they continue to develop and which can support their success in the US. Based on their migration experience, refugee youth are resilient and have survival skills, including being fast learners and entrepreneurial. They have energy and ambition to achieve their goals. Refugee youth who have arrived

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1 Bernstein, Hamutal, and Nicole DuBois. “Bringing evidence to the refugee integration debate.” Washington, DC: Urban Institute. [https://www.urban.org/research/publication/bringing-evidence-refugee-integration-debate/view/full\\_report](https://www.urban.org/research/publication/bringing-evidence-refugee-integration-debate/view/full_report) (2018).

with or into a community, tend to have strong community and faith connections and many are accustomed to having significant responsibilities.

In preparing and seeking educational and career opportunities, interrupted formal education, compounded by lack of English presents significant challenges. In some cases, the traditional academic path is not feasible for refugee youth and therefore they need support exploring alternatives. Refugee parents lack the experience of growing up in the U.S. and consequently they may need additional support from the resettlement organization or others in order to help their children to navigate a complex and new education and employment system. Community colleges and career centers can be strong partners in providing English, math, and computer literacy but the mainstream system at times struggles to connect to refugee and immigrant populations and vice versa.

## Engaging Refugee Youth

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### Aging-Out

Each state has a maximum age of student that schools are required to provide free public education to. For students, turning this age will end their access to public high school education, regardless of whether or not they have completed the necessary credits for a diploma or graduation. According to the integration conversation participants, some refugee youth will leave high school in anticipation of aging-out, once they realize they will not be able to achieve the credits needed before reaching the maximum age. This is particularly true for older students (ages 17-21) with limited English, interrupted formal education, or low literacy.

Sugarman, Julie. "Beyond Teaching English: Supporting High School Completion by Immigrant and Refugee Students." Migration Policy Institute (2017).

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During the integration conversation, practitioners identified best practices for connecting with refugee youth and supporting them as they pursue education and career goals. Agencies first must assess what is already being done in the community to meet the needs of youth and specialize in areas where the gaps exist. Building partnerships and relationships with existing organizations is the first step in recruiting and engaging youth. Ethnic community-based organizations (ECBOs) can be an avenue to access potential refugee youth participants. High schools are a potential

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### Conversation participants believed all refugee youth should be able to:

- Access education and career pathways to lead healthy, productive and fulfilling lives
  - Earn a high-school diploma or equivalent credential (as a baseline credential in the US economy)
  - Access entry level jobs that will provide them with foundational work experiences
  - Make empowered and informed decisions about their future
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partner in terms of proactive programming for in-school youth, but also could serve as a referral for students who decide to leave school before graduating or who will age out of high school. It is also possible to partner with employers of entry-level workers, particularly those that are known to employ refugees.

Agencies can draw upon the interests and motivations of refugee youth. For youth who want jobs, there needs to be a strategy as to how to incorporate them in more holistic programming. It is also important to consider points of contact that an agency already has with clients that are connected with youth, such as parents during cultural orientation or siblings that participate in children's programs. Once a youth employment program has proven successful, the refugee community will be drawn to the program through word of mouth. Attracting a diversity of refugee youth can further strengthen the program.

It is also necessary to distinguish the youth programs are reaching and the youth programs want to reach. Young adults with children may exclude themselves from participating because they do not have childcare and youth that are a primary source of income for themselves or their family may be hesitant to participate. While some challenges to refugee youth engaging in programming are unique to refugees, other challenges mirror those of all youth. Youth do not always see the connection between a dream job and the requirements to achieve that dream. Logistical barriers such as transportation, child or sibling care, time constraints, and financial needs also inhibit program engagement. Refugee youth may also feel pressured to meet expectations of their community or family. This may also lead to challenges expressing individual goals that contrast community-centric norms or visions. Furthermore, youth programming tends to focus on meeting youth where they are at and celebrate attendance, whereas adult employment programming is very focused on getting a job, so building refugee youth employment programming needs to meet somewhere in the middle.

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### Best practices in engaging refugee youth in career pathways:

- Build a cohort
  - Connect youth to professional role models and mentors
  - Provide volunteer and paid internship opportunities
  - Celebrate skills refugee youth have to serve as cultural bridges
  - Articulate clear step by step instructions for all aspects of programming
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## Building Social Capital

Research highlights the use of social capital and contact zones as opportunities to ease the transition for refugee youth and to break the barriers to inclusion. For immigrant youth, their position determines their capacity and resources that facilitate their participation.<sup>2</sup> Suarez-Orozco, Pimentel & Martin sought sources of social capital that influence the success

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2 Abu El-Haj, T. R. "I was born here, but my home, it's not here": Educating for democratic citizenship in an era of transnational migration and global conflict." *Harvard Educational Review* 77(3), 285-316. (2007).

of immigrant students in the US.<sup>3</sup> They determined strong correlations between parental education, family structure, and supportive non-parent adult relationships as significant factors to success.<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that refugee youth do not possess other forms of social capital, but rather this is the social capital that carries significance in the American context.

Based on this understanding of the importance of social capital for refugee youth to access opportunities, the conversation participants emphasized the importance of:

1. Building a cohort of refugee youth to establish a community and connection.
2. Build relationships with their US-born peers to foster a sense of belonging; these interactions should be built on joint activities drawing on strengths from both groups and avoid the narrative of American youth serving refugee youth.
3. Create opportunities for supportive non-parent adult relationships. This through informal or formal mentorship. It is also important for refugee youth see and know people from similar backgrounds who overcome challenges and succeed in the US.

Mentors can have a positive impact on the lives of refugee youth, but not without significant support from a supervising agency. Mentoring requires a regular and continued commitment on both sides. This can be overwhelming for all involved and therefore it is possible to start with volunteers presenting and sharing their profession or career pathways which may allow for relationships to develop organically. It is also important for mentors and mentees to meet outside the home so the relationship between youth and mentor is sacred, and not unduly influenced by family. Communication technology can be leveraged to foster a relationships outside of in-person time. Mentors and volunteers need to be well trained to ensure that they are offering realistic and practical support and the relationship is empowering. Supervising agencies need to have infrastructure that trains, monitors, and then troubleshoots with mentor relationships.

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### Resources on Refugee Mentoring

[Mentoring Immigrant Youth: A Toolkit for Program Coordinators: A Toolkit for Program Coordinators](#)  
[Mentoring for First Generation and Refugee Youth](#)  
[Refugee Volunteer Resources](#)

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## Envisioning Pathways with Refugee Youth

In order for refugee youth to forge a career pathway they must first be able to envision their potential future. A key element to success is building self-efficacy and establishing belief in one's ability to succeed. Programs can help youth

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3 Suarez-Orozco, C., Pimentel, A., & Martin, M. "The Significance of Relationships: Academic Engagement and Achievement Among Newcomer Immigrant Youth." *Teachers College Record* Volume 111, 3, pp. 712-749 (2009).

4 Ibid

to see themselves as the hero in their own story and claim their own narrative. It is important to honor their uniqueness but also let them know how they might fit into the community and workplace. By valuing the opinions of refugee youth and empowering them to drive their own education or career pursuits, programs provide a place of support, safety, and accountability. Working with youth to set and complete short and mid-term goals builds confidence in their ability to achieve longer term dreams. Investing in refugee youth is a long term process and requires dedicated time and resources to see a young person through the process.

A variety of approaches can be employed in order to support refugee youth to envision their future and career pathway. Youth can develop their own voice through oral or written expression. Programs shared that informal exercises, often developed in-house, which allow youth to create a visual narrative or manifestation of a career path are particularly effective for youth with limited English proficiency. Assessment tools can be used to identify strengths, skills, and interests but must be linguistically and culturally sensitive and accessible. When conducting intakes or assessments with refugee youth questions should be properly framed in order to identify skills and interests. Specifically asking why they are interested in a career or path will help the agency and participant understand their motivation and decision-making.

Furthermore, the more refugee youth are exposed to different career opportunities, the less abstract the possibilities and pathways become. Programs can build activities, experiences, and workshops around career fields of interest such as career days, panels, and job shadowing. Authentic experiences in a variety of career fields can help youth gain invaluable perspective and think realistically about career choices. Volunteering and internships can also provide valuable experience and exposure. Refugee youth in particular can use working as a paid or volunteer interpreter as an opportunity to learn about a variety of social service careers. Unpaid internships and volunteer opportunities, while they offer valuable experiences, may be unfeasible for refugee youth in need of income to support themselves or their families.

Barriers to client success must be addressed as they arise. For example, if a client is not able to meet their basic needs, those needs must be met first before advancing along a career pathway. In addition, it is important to acknowledge that unexpected and life events will occur along the path that may pause or distract the participant. There are multiple on and off ramps along the way. Family and community members may inform or impede refugee youth's vision of their future and therefore engaging family in the process often results in better outcomes. Resettlement agencies may promote greater family and community support for youth participation in programs by clearly articulating how the career pathways for their youth can benefit the family and by offering additional programming for parents such as tax preparation.

## Education Opportunities

Educational opportunities for refugee youth vary based on age upon arrival, educational background, and local supports available. Schools and communities with the Refugee School Impact Grant from the Department of Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) have more supports and services for refugee youth still in school. Attending high school can also provide peer support, adult role models, extracurricular activities, and access to higher education scholarships. Through high schools, some refugee youth have access to vocational training or guidance to additional career and technical education programs.

Even with these supports, refugee youth enrolled in high school still face challenges in developing an educational

and career pathway. Schools may lack capacity to meet individual needs of refugee youth. This, along with limited engagement from parents, may constrain youth from pursuing opportunities. Other barriers to success, including mental health needs, may go undetected or unaddressed due to the lack of capacity within the schools. Some refugee youth become over-extended and over-committed to extracurricular activities, while others graduate with insufficient skills, especially in reading and writing. The mainstream focus on attending college may leave refugee youth unaware of alternatives that would connect them to promising career pathways.

Community colleges in many cities and counties across the US offer promising educational opportunities for refugee youth, including certificate programs, vocational training and English classes. Other refugee youth may struggle to enroll because an institution will not accept a foreign diploma or there are no free advanced English classes available. When students are underqualified they may need to take remedial classes which still cost money, resulting in exhausting federal grants on non-credit bearing classes. Refugee youth are also susceptible to being preyed on by for-profit institutions for irrelevant, overpriced, or illegitimate certifications.

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### Refugee youth currently being served by LIRS are interested in:

- Healthcare
  - Information Technology
  - Human Services
  - Law Enforcement
  - Fire-fighting
  - Education
  - Engineering
  - Hotel Management
  - Automotive mechanic
  - Music, Sports, & Entertainment
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## Assessing the Labor Market

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### Resources for Accessing Labor Market Information (LMI):

- [LIRS/Higher's A Guide to Labor Market Information for Refugee Employment Programs](#)
  - [NYC Labor Market Information Service](#)
  - Department of Labor Resources:
    - [Get My Future- Self-guided Education and Career Resources for Youth](#)
    - [Career and Occupation Exploration Tools](#)
    - [Training, Skills, Jobs, Wages, Industries, and State and Local Profiles](#)
    - [Occupational Outlook Handbook](#)
    - [Metro Area Economic Summaries](#)
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As agencies guide refugee youth in building pathways and look to build employer relationships, labor market data can be used to inform those decisions and investments. Labor Market Information varies by city and region and indicates trends and growth industries. Agencies have had success exploring health care, manufacturing, IT and the utilities sector based on youth interests and labor market demands in their communities.

### Building Skills

Based on an understanding of job skills needed for common career interests and knowledge of refugee youth the following assets and deficits were identified:

	Refugee Youth POSESS	Refugee Youth NEED
Soft Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Motivation</li> <li>• Energy</li> <li>• Resilience</li> <li>• Empathy/Caring</li> <li>• Building Connections</li> <li>• Team-oriented Approach</li> <li>• Adaptive Learning Skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge of U.S. Workplace Culture</li> <li>• Punctuality</li> <li>• Time Management Skills</li> <li>• Conflict Management Strategies</li> <li>• Critical Thinking Skills</li> <li>• Communication Skills</li> <li>• Customer Service Skills</li> </ul>
Hard Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multilingual</li> <li>• Basic English Ability</li> <li>• Basic Math Ability</li> <li>• Agricultural knowledge (dependent on background)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advanced English (reading &amp; writing)</li> <li>• Driver's Training/Test Preparation</li> <li>• Computer Skills</li> <li>• Science &amp; Nursing Skills</li> </ul>

This brief overview of the skills of refugee youth is not exhaustive but it does provide a basic outline of opportunities and needs based on the observations of conversation participants. There are a number of assets that refugee youth possess that are attractive to employers. The needed soft skills can be built into trainings and workshops as essential job readiness skills. An internship or volunteer position is also an opportunity to learn and practice these skills. Improving reading and writing in English is an essential hard skill that many refugee youth need to refine. Contextualized vocational English may be particularly effective with this population. A base level of English is often required for refugee youth to

enroll in training programs that will allow them to learn technical skills. Efforts need to be directed towards filling skill gaps based on an understanding of the jobs available and skills of refugee youth.

## Conclusion & Recommendations

Overall the conversation illuminated a variety of perspectives and approaches to building refugee youth career pathways. To some extent this is based on local relationships, job markets, refugee arrivals and existing partnerships. One of the most glaring differences is how to engage and provide support for refugee youth in school in comparison to those out of school. There is value to proactive engagement with refugee youth currently in school, but there is also significant need and vulnerability for refugee youth that are out of school. Targeted programming should be designed for each population, in-school and out of school youth. Programs can continue to build on their experience in youth development, refugee resettlement and workforce development to develop and implement holistic support for refugee youth to build career pathways.

Based on the integration conversation with multiple stakeholders in refugee youth educational and career opportunities, LIRS makes the following recommendations:

### For programs:

- Be sure that the program is designed to lead to a career pathway, not just a job
- Draw upon volunteers and networks to build social capital and professional networks
- Build partnerships with existing youth-serving or employment- focused programs
- Differentiate between “in-school” and “out-of-school” youth and tailor programming accordingly
- Create opportunities for refugee youth to be exposed to a variety of career paths

### For policy:

- Include refugee and immigrant youth in the definition of “disconnected youth” so programs for refugee youth can have easier access to federal funding or systems for disconnected youth can accommodate the unique needs of refugee youth

### For future research:

- Understand drop-out and age-out rates for refugee youth initially enrolled in high school
- Comprehensive study of what refugee youth are interested in and how that can be matched to labor market demands
- Assessment of refugee youth skills as related to employment

### For employers & funders:

- Invest in providing skills training and resources for all youth, including refugee and immigrant youth
- Provide internship, apprenticeship or job-shadowing opportunities for refugee youth
- Provide benefits that meet unique challenges of refugees (Child care, transportation, ESL, etc)
- Ensure that programs and work environments that promote cultural sensitivity and sense of belonging
- Invest in mentorship and building opportunities for growth

## Additional Resources

### The Basics:

- [What Now? Post-High School, College & Career Readiness for Refugee Youth](#) (BRYCS blog post summary of [webinar](#) by same name, 2018)
- [How Can We Better Connect Youth to Work and School? Five Lessons for Youth Employment Programs](#) (2014) Urban Institute Blog Post
- [Aspirations for Higher Education among Newcomer Refugee Youth in Toronto: Expectations, Challenges, and Strategies](#) (2010) Refuge

### Models of Creating Opportunities for Youth

- [Job Training Starts Now: Why High School students Need Youth Employment Opportunities](#) (2018) Urban Alliance
- [Promising Practices in Work-based Learning for Youth](#) (2016) National Skills Coalition
- [Career Pathways Issue Brief](#) (2016) MDRC
- International Youth Foundation [Library](#) – has a wealth of resources related to youth employment, consider starting with [Getting Youth in the Door Soft Skills Report](#)

### Background and Landscape of Disconnected Youth & Employment

- [Youth Summer Job Programs](#) (2016) Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program
- [Career and Technical Education: Past, Present and Future](#) (podcast) or [Career and Technical Education Current Policy, Prominent Programs, and Evidence](#) (2018) MDRC
- [Employer Engagement by Community-Based Organizations](#) (2018) Urban Institute
- [Employment and disconnection among teens and young adults: The role of place, race, and education](#) (2016) Brookings Institute
- [Upskilling the New American Workforce](#) (2016) National Skills Coalition