

Refugee Services in Public Libraries

Our country is currently facing a tidal wave of refugees from other countries, Afghanistan in particular. What we do to help them resettle and integrate into our society has been brought under the national spotlight. Limited attention has been devoted to refugee services in public libraries in the past (Lloyd, 2016). This project seeks to investigate the current status and conditions of refugee services in public libraries across the country and propose a prototype for a refugee service program based on the data and findings. The project addresses the IMLS program Goal #1, Objective 1.3, *Create and/or facilitate opportunities for continuous learning for families, groups, and individuals of diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds and needs*, and Goal #2, Objective 2.1, *Develop or enhance replicable library programming, models, and tools that engage communities and individuals of diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds*.

The project team consists of three researchers from the University of Oklahoma. We plan to conduct a two-year planning project with the goals of determining: 1) the existence and extent of refugee services in public libraries, 2) the accessibility of services for refugees, 3) the needs of refugees, including parents and children, and 4) the challenges of providing services targeting the needs of refugees. Our last goal (Goal #5) involves the development of a prototype of a refugee service program that is accessible and culturally responsive, which could lead to a future research project. We are requesting \$149,800 to fund this project, which will be conducted from August 1, 2022 to July 31, 2024. Regarding the intended impact of the project, project results will generate valuable new knowledge and insight that can be used to assist public libraries in their development and delivery of much needed services targeting the unique needs of refugees and to effectively facilitate refugee resettlement and integration into their communities and their new home country.

Project Justification: In 2020, 82.4 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide, mostly because of persecution, conflict, violence, and human rights violations (<https://www.unhcr.org/60b638e37/unhcr-global-trends-2020>). The Biden administration significantly raised the number of refugee admissions in 2021 from the historically low number of 1,500 set by the Trump administration to 62,500, aiming to reach the goal of 125,000 in the coming year (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/05/03/statement-by-president-joe-biden-on-refugee-admissions/>). In addition, about 5 million displaced Afghans have had to leave their home country since May, 2021 due to the abrupt ending of the 20-year US war in Afghanistan (<https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/>), and some of them will come to our country and resettle.

Unlike voluntary immigrants, refugees are forced to leave their countries not of their own will and, thus, the route to take and a country to resettle in cannot be decided by them. This means that ad hoc decisions and the collection of information, for survival purposes, regarding the transit process and resettlement is more pronounced than with voluntary immigrants. In the process of refugee resettlement, including time spent by those refugees in transit and host countries, information is considered a lifeline to survive in a constantly changing environment (Kosciejew, 2019). To be able to not only have access to, but also understand and use the information of communities in which they resettle as newcomers is paramount. This is important, not only for the refugees themselves, but also for both transnational and domestic Non-Governmental Agencies active in the transit and host countries who support refugees and their human rights.

Refugees suffer from disconnected information landscapes in their countries of origin, as well as disconnected information as newcomers in unfamiliar environments (Kosciejew, 2019). Thus, information communication, especially in a resettlement community in a host country, empowers refugees to rebuild their world with human dignity through the creation of information resilience, helping them become accustomed to new and unfamiliar information landscapes, adjusting old knowledge to new situations, and transitioning to their new environment. Public libraries have been perceived as safe and trusted spaces by refugees in which they can expand social capital by gaining access to information and services and sharing available meeting spaces (Vårheim, 2014). After experiencing constantly shifting information landscapes, refugees need space to obtain valid and accurate information for their survival in a new linguistic and cultural environment. Public libraries can play two significant roles: As agents for creation of social trust; and, as information providers to connect refugees to the mainstream community. In Vårheim's study, findings show the significant role of public libraries as facilitators and enhancers of the trust-creating process of refugees in the new community. Public libraries can provide refugees with information and services including "government documentation, legal and policy compliance, housing, health care, and employment opportunities" (Kosciejew, 2019, p. 13)" as well as connect them to additional resources within the host community, for example, educational, vocational, non-government organizations (NGOs), religious organizations, and cultural organizations).

Existing research projects conducted have been limited in both quantity and scope. They tend to focus on how refugee populations use and share information via technology or social media during the process of shifting information landscapes, starting from the time they fled their countries of origin to the time they resettled in their new country (Lloyd, 2016). Another big problem with the existing research is that the researchers tend to mix immigrants and refugees in the

same research group, which could lead to skewed results or even serious misinformation because refugees usually are people who have gone through tragic and terrifying experiences. They are among the most vulnerable and disadvantaged group of people, and they have very distinct needs compared with voluntary immigrants (<https://www.unhcr.org/4ca34be29.pdf>). In recent decades, public libraries have devoted much effort to improve services for immigrants, broadly defined. However, considering the paucity of knowledge regarding if and how public libraries design and provide services that specifically target the unique needs and challenges of refugees, there is a need for an in-depth investigation of the types of services or lack of them for the refugees in public libraries (Lloyd, 2016).

Project Work Plan: This two-year planning project will be led by Drs. June Abbas (an expert in library services to youth with disabilities and to marginalized populations), Chie Noyori-Corbett (an expert in community participatory research with refugee populations, with practice experiences at refugee resettlements through NGOs), and Jiening Ruan (literacy and reading education, culturally responsive teaching, and teacher education). The project will seek to find answers to the following questions: 1) What kinds of refugee services are available in public libraries across the country? 2) How accessible are these services to refugees? 3) What are the needs of refugees (including adults and children) that can be met by public libraries? 4) What are the challenges of providing services targeting the needs of refugees? and 5) How can libraries develop and deliver refugee services that are both accessible and culturally responsive?

Year 1: The first year will be devoted to assessing the existence and availability of refugee services and programs. A national survey will be developed and distributed through ALA/PLA listservs and through other professional social media channels. We will analyze the survey data for preliminary findings and identify potential library sites where we will choose librarian participants for follow-up focus groups. We will conduct 5 focus groups with 25 librarians who develop or manage service provision for immigrants/refugees in areas where there is a significant refugee population. The focus groups will be conducted during the ALA conference. If some participants are not attending ALA, we will also conduct at least 1 or 2 focus groups using video conference technology (e.g. Zoom). **Year 2:** The second year of the project will focus on data analysis, community building, and prototype development. We will analyze both survey and focus group data. We will also convene forums with project participants to review our findings but also to elicit additional information about their needs for serving members of refugee communities. Forums will also focus on learning about community resources and integration efforts within the community, the role public libraries have played, and challenges they have encountered. The findings from the survey, focus groups, and forums will **achieve Project Goals #1-4 and Project Questions 1-4**. Based on the findings of each data collection activity, we will develop a prototype of an accessible and culturally responsive refugee service program to achieve **Project Goal #5 and Question 5**. We will also develop a proposal for a follow-up project, in addition to publishing scholarly and practice-oriented publications and disseminating our findings through the project website, conferences, and webinars.

Diversity Plan: In Year 1, we will invite survey participation of all public libraries in the U.S., which represents a large degree of diversity. In Year 2, focus group participants will be selected from libraries based on the following criteria: 1) the presence of refugee services, and 2) geographic and demographic diversity of the locations where a large number of refugees are received. Every effort will be made to choose libraries that meet the two criteria but that are also located in urban, suburban, and rural highly diverse communities, which include a diverse range of ethnic and country origins. All products of the project will be inclusive in coverage of the diversity among the refugee groups.

Project Results: The project will yield important insights about the current status and needs of refugee services in public libraries, establish partnerships with libraries in refugee communities, and develop a prototype of a refugee library services program. These efforts will help refugees adapt to and integrate into their host communities with greater success.

Budget: Funds are requested for: 1) salary and fringe benefits for the three PIs for one month each year during the summer (\$74,831); 2) support for a graduate student, including tuition, salary, and fringe (\$42,005); 3) travel support for PIs (\$3,300); 4) stipend for focus group participants (\$1,250); and 5) hotel room rental fee for focus groups (\$500). In total, the cost will be \$149,800 for the project, inclusive of indirect cost of \$27,914. There will be no cost sharing or sub-awards.

References

- Kosciejew, M. (2019). Information's importance for refugees: Information technologies, public libraries, and the current refugee crisis. *Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy*, 89(2), 79-98.
- Lloyd, A. (2016). Implications for library and information science researchers undertaking research with refugees and forced migration studies. *Journal of Documentation*, 73(1), 35-47.
- Vårheim, Andreas. (2014) Trust in libraries and trust in most people: Social capital creation in the public library. *Library Quarterly* 84 (3): 258-77.