**Guide for Volunteering with Newly Arrived Refugees in Omaha**

**What can we do together?**

These are a few suggestions of ways to spend quality time with the family or individual you are sponsoring. Most of them are free and focus on giving new refugees the skills and knowledge they need to live in the U.S. Some are just aimed at having fun!

No matter what the activity, remember to focus on *empowering* the refugees to do it themselves. The ultimate goal is to help them thrive in American society and be comfortable in their new country. Any time together is an opportunity for learning.

•Visit a farmer’s market

• Walk to the park, library, thrift store, etc. After a couple of times, let them take the lead.

• Ask them to teach you how to cook a traditional dish from their culture

• Help introduce the family to their neighbors

• Practice writing checks/paying their bills

• Teach basic home maintenance and cleaning tips; refugees often come from backgrounds without appliances, plumbing, electricity, vacuuming, proper food storage, etc. and may not know how to clean their American apartment or report maintenance issues to the landlord. Show them how to adjust the thermostat, winterize, change light bulbs, batteries in smoke detectors, etc.

• Check out www.familyfuninomaha.com for local, free family events

• Take the family for a walk around the Old Market and/or the Bob Kerry pedestrian bridge

• Visit famous Omaha landmarks

• Help teach the major streets in the city

• Practice using the bus to visit friends and family

• Ask them to teach you a few words or phrases in their language

• Go fishing

• Help them plant vegetables or herbs if they have a balcony or yard space

• Practice naming and counting money

• Teach the rules of the road (and if you’re brave and have proper insurance, practice driving once they have a learner’s permit)

• Help read the mail

• Attend the family’s church one week (do not pressure them to attend your own church if it is of a different faith; many refugees fled religious persecution and may feel they are being pressured to convert)

• Take them to a local sporting event (especially soccer or volleyball)

• Play sports together

• Take pictures and give them framed copies

• Help buy phone cards from ethnic grocery stores to call home

• Help them review their ESL lessons

• Help kids with homework

• Take parents to special events at their children’s school

• Go to the children’s museum, zoo, Joslyn...

• Practice naming objects in English

• Practice writing names, addresses, and phone numbers

• Make snacks (pudding, mac & cheese, cookies, etc); go shopping together for the ingredients

• Help them celebrate American holidays (trick or treating, firework shows, Christmas lightings)

• Introduce them to your friends that may be interested in co-volunteering

• Practice using the washer and dryer

Some sponsors have made cards similar to the one below and given refugees a laminated copy to carry with them. They also make extras to hang right inside their apartment door.

My name is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

I am a recently arrived refugee from\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

My native language is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

If you can’t understand me, or if this is an emergency, please call

my sponsor: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

or interpreter: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

It is important to teach people how to do things for themselves; to "walk" them through it several times. But it is equally important to refuse to do things people can begin to do for themselves, even if they struggle the first few times. An empowerment approach affirms the ability of people to take charge of their own lives. Refugees have withstood the trials of fleeing from their own country, have gone through all the steps needed for resettlement in the U.S., and have faced the uncertainty of leaving all they know behind and coming to another country. They are capable survivors!

**Suggestions for Communicating with English Language Learners**

Refugees arrive in the U.S. with various levels of English ability. Some may be fluent and able to hold conversations about complex topics, while others have no exposure to English prior to arrival.

When communicating with a refugee who speaks limited English, remember to keep your sense of humor. They are likely feeling just as awkward as you are. They may feel frustrated because they realize that it will take many years to learn the language. Do not worry if you fail to communicate an idea. If it is important, a bilingual caseworker can help relay the message over the phone or next time he/she visits the family. In the meantime, try the following suggestions:

• Make a poster with pictures and names of the volunteers. This will help the family learn which people are safe to allow into their home.

• Buy a picture dictionary for the family to help them communicate what they need. A good choice is *The New Oxford Picture Dictionary*.

• Use simple English. Think carefully about your words and use as few as necessary (however, make sure you still model proper sentence structure). Emphasize the important words in the sentence and state them clearly to make yourself understood (not louder, but slower). You may feel awkward speaking this way initially, but it can help (side bonus of volunteering: your charades skills will improve dramatically!).

• Phrase questions in terms of choices, since many refugees will just answer “yes” or say nothing if they do not understand. For example, instead of saying “What would you like to drink?” try saying “Do you want tea?” You may have to rephrase a question 2 or 3 times before it is understood.

• Buy or make a calendar for the family and use it to show them the next time you will visit.

• Children will learn English very quickly once they are in school. Although it is convenient for them to interpret, avoid using them to talk about important or sensitive topics. Refugee parents often feel that they are losing power over their children and frequently using the children to interpret can intensify these feelings.

**Culture:**

Culture is the way of life of a people, the sum of their learned behavior patterns, attitudes, and values. It is a way of organizing life, of thinking, of conceiving the underlying assumptions about the family, the state, the economic system, and even life itself. Culture is more than mere customs that can be shed or changed like a suit of clothes.

Unfortunately, many Americans either do not understand there is such a thing as an American culture, or they take it for granted – we consider it “human nature” and assume all people feel the same. Americans who are part of the Euro-American majority and have not been overseas for any length of time seldom think of culture as something they have themselves. Culture, for them, is what they experience when they pay for expensive tickets, dress up, and go out to a cultural event, or they think culture is what other people have – usually something quaint or exotic and not quite in tune with the twentieth century.

This failure to understand that Americans, too, have a culture which controls almost everything they do, leads them to assume that their way of doing things is simply "the norm" or the right way. If they believe they are doing things the right way, it will be easy for them to assume that they, as volunteers, have a responsibility to teach the refugees what is right. A judgmental attitude towards the refugee’s culture can be harmful. The capacity to overcome predispositions that have been learned from American culture, to withhold judgment of the refugees' actions when they are different, and to accept other cultural views as valid is possible only when there is an understanding of American culture.

The following are examples of elements that can make up American culture:

* Belief in rugged individualism; belief people are independent and autonomous rather than integrally related to a family unit or an ethnic group;
* Positions and material resources are given as rewards for personal achievement, not based upon need;
* Concern for efficiency and for solving problems in a pragmatic way regardless of personal feelings;
* A preference for the separation of the elderly from the rest of society, rather than reverence for the elderly;
* Equality of people regardless of their status, unless there is a great discrepancy, particularly in wealth;
* Acceptance of displays of affection in public;
* Expectation that families may be separated by long distances, due to mobility and demands of jobs;
* Lack of acceptance of the world as it is and strong efforts to change it;
* A rational world view where events can be explained and reasons for particular occurrences can be determined, rather than a belief in fate;
* Confidence that people with opposing viewpoints can be faced directly and confronted;

This is a general description of American culture, but American culture is not monolithic. Regional and racial/ethnic variances do occur.

**Learnings from Other Volunteers:**

Previous volunteers have offered suggestions to help other volunteers communicate and grow in their cultural understanding:

* Volunteering is not adoption. Become friends rather than advisors; emphasize learning together rather than teaching; become concerned "family" members rather than professional advisors.
* Accept other cultural views as valid. Be non-judgmental.
* Ask them for help. While you will spend a great deal of time and effort in helping the refugee, you will also have to rely on the refugee to help you understand what it means to be a part of another culture.
* Be sensitive to communication skills. Pay attention to behavior and try to understand what that behavior means in the refugee's culture.
* Empathize by putting yourselves in the refugee's shoes. Don't just agree, but try to understand the refugee's feelings and comprehend the cultural context within which the refugee is acting.
* Develop a sense of responsibility *to* the refugee, not *for* the refugee. "Responsibility for" connotes a sense of dominance and paternalism; "responsibility to", however, represents partnership.

**Mental Health Considerations:**

Bear in mind newly arrived refugees are going through a period of major transition. They are dealing with loss, depression, and often times trauma. This is expected to a certain degree, but if you feel the person you are working with is struggling with mental (or physical) health issues, please reach out to professional support options.

**Community Outreach Ideas:**

• Helpful information can be found in multiple languages on [www.omaharefugees.com](http://www.omaharefugees.com)

Organize a drive for household goods/clothes at your school, church, or office.

• Organize a series of small fundraisers over the course of one year to collect money to help a refugee family pay off their travel loan (airfare to the United States from the refugee camp is paid for with a loan from the International Organization for Migration. Refugees must start paying this loan back 6 months after arrival; it is often a large debt).

• Visit an ethnic grocery store or restaurants in Omaha. Strike up conversations with the employees or customers.

• Tutor K-12 refugee students in the OPS Migrant Program.

Contact: Suzanne Hult (402) 215-3167, [suzanne.hult@ops.org](mailto:suzanne.hult@ops.org)

Basic Skills Refugees Should Know

• How to say and write:

- Name, address, birth date, and social security number

- Their spouse and children’s names and birthdates

• How to ask for an interpreter and how to always spell the name of their native language (especially important to prevent a mix-up between Karen and Korean)

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• The name, daytime phone number, and emergency phone number of their landlord

• How to write and mail or deliver checks for rent and utilities

• How to balance a checkbook and/or use an ATM

• The phone number to call in sick at work/school and how to do so

• The name, phone number, and address of their children’s school

• Basic maintenance of their:

Apartment - vacuuming, thermostat, using a plunger, basic cleaning, food storage, how to buy and change light bulbs, how to change the smoke detector battery, etc.

House – all above tasks plus changing furnace filters, days of trash pickup, mowing, shoveling snow

• How to use a washer and dryer

• How to walk or take the bus to the grocery store, thrift store, dollar store…

• How to keep paperwork organized by topic in folders

\* This is a great task with which volunteers can assist. Help the family get large envelopes or folders and label each one such as “OPPD”, “MUD”, “Apartment”, “HHS (Food Stamps and Medicaid”), “Bank”. Help them sort their papers. If they have trouble reading, copy the logos from envelopes so they can match it to the correct folder.

SURVIVAL ENGLISH TO PRACTICE TOGETHER

Suggested Goals / Ideas

* Say and write first and last name
* Say and write address
* Say and write social security number
* Say and write birth date
* Recognize letters of the alphabet and their sounds
* Write the letters of the alphabet
* Tell the basic relations in a family (mother, father, brother, sister, etc.)
* Tell the names of his/her family
* Tell the ages of immediate family members
* Recognize names of colors
* Name and recognize days of the week
* Name and recognize months of the year
* Comprehend spoken dates
* Understand and name numbers from 1-100
* Tell time of day
* Introduce him/herself
* Say names of American money
* Understand worth of various coins and bills
* Comprehend spoken money amounts
* Give basic directions (left, right, go, stop, walk, etc.)
* Understand basic directions
* Make plural forms of nouns
* Understand common street signs (stop, yield, hospital, school)
* Use and understand common prepositions (next to, across from, near, between, behind, on the corner of)
* Identify important places in the neighborhood (school, post office, grocery store, hospital, etc.)
* Phone: express if someone is not at home or not available
* Take a simple phone message
* Leave a simple phone message
* Use the simple present tense (he runs, they walk, she sings, you go)
* Use common verbs: like, want, need, love
* Employment and occupational vocabulary (as appropriate, perhaps names of professions or specific vocab and phrases related to their occupation)
* Know how to use 911