

# Serving and Communicating with Refugee Participants: Practical Tips for Extension Professionals

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Although refugees have arrived in the United States under the United Nations resettlement program for decades, the focus of Extension programming to reach diverse audiences has prompted a new look at serving refugees. Extension has the potential to reach people outside of the academy and impact communities that reflect the true diversity of the state of Tennessee.

Refugees are among those populations that provide agents and paraprofessionals the opportunity to tailor their recruitment strategies and education goals with specific consideration and enhanced intercultural awareness.

Refugees are people with a legal status that typically arrive as part of a formal resettlement program and are assisted by resettlement agencies with nonprofits and community groups assisting. According to the 1951 Refugee Convention, people who qualify for refugee status are those who have been forced to flee their home country due to persecution based on their race, religion, gender and/or membership in a particular political or social group ([unhcr.org](http://unhcr.org)). They have been forced to flee and cross an international border into another country to which they avail themselves of protection. Resettlement occurs in a third country, and the United States has been a participant in formal resettlement since the Refugee Act was passed in 1980 ([acf.hhs.gov](http://acf.hhs.gov)). The key to understanding the nature of refugee status lies in the likely history of trauma, the experience of persecution and loss, and the lack of choice in movement. In addition, it is important to understand that refugees have demonstrated immense resilience to get to the U.S. and have utilized whatever resources were available to achieve their survival.

In Tennessee, refugees typically resettle in the metropolitan centers of Knoxville, Chattanooga, Nashville and Memphis. Upon arrival however, refugees are free to move and are found in many counties across the state. According to the Tennessee Office of Refugees (2021) approximately 348 individuals have arrived in the state in the federal fiscal year 2021. The proportion of refugees from various countries varies across time. In the past ten years, most refugees in Tennessee are originally from places like Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Syria, Iraq, Burma, Cuba and more. In addition, recent events have necessitated the preparation for the need to welcome refugees from Afghanistan.

Refugees arrive with various educational, social and linguistic backgrounds. Therefore serving refugees requires flexible strategies and the avoidance of stereotypes and deficit thinking. Extension is perfectly poised to serve refugee populations with offices across the state engaged in community-based programming and offering evidence-based curricula that improve families' lives. Often the information refugees need upon arrival includes content included in Extension curricula. For instance, nutrition education programming provided through Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed) and Expanded Food and Nutrition Program (EFNEP) teaches families how to manage limited food budgets. Refugees generally arrive as categorically eligible for SNAP benefits and are therefore eligible for nutrition classes and could benefit from traditional nutrition programming. The best way to serve refugees within these programs would be to present information tailored to their experience as people coming from places with their own unique food systems and cultures.

Engaging refugee participants in Extension programming requires cultural and linguistic adaptation beyond the scope of this publication. However, one can begin reaching communities by adapting through cultural learning and positive intercultural communication.

### Cultural Learning Tips

- Read about refugee experiences and acquaint yourself with the sociopolitical events that necessitated their immigration.
  - Seek understanding and empathy. Why do people move? Refugees move because they must.
- Seek cultural liaisons and experts by talking to community groups that regularly serve refugees and ask about best practices and the needs they perceive in the communities within which they live and serve.
  - Cultural liaisons are people who can speak to the culture you are serving and often come from the same place. They have perspective people from the outside will not have no matter how long they've been working with a certain population.
- Seek resources on engaging participants with a trauma sensitive lens. Assure your programming addresses a need for refugee families to live well.
- Schedule events with sensitivity to cultural practices and events. For instance, a community group may observe a religious sabbath on a different day than what you may expect. Similarly, a holiday that involves fasting may mean that people are unwilling or unable to participate in events during a certain season or time of day.
- Recognize your power and privilege. If you are native to the U.S. and speak English you occupy a social space with privilege relative to many refugee participants.
  - Use social cues such as dress and positive mannerisms to convey respect.
  - Avoid holding classes in spaces that might be intimidating to newcomers.

### Communication Tips

- Avoid idioms or complex forms of English as they often don't translate literally.
- Work with local experts or state program administrators to translate materials into the languages of refugees.
  - Remember the difference between translating and interpreting. Translating happens to the written word while interpretation is typically done in-person and orally.
- Speak to the whole family. Remember the cultural value that extended family members often have and their influence on the behaviors and beliefs of your target participant(s).
- Do not speak extra slowly or loudly. Engage interpreters when needed.
- Take breaks and check for understanding with questions. Often people will not ask questions to avoid seeming impolite.
- Do not engage children as interpreters. They often do not have the vocabulary to discuss certain topics and their role as an interpreter will impede the transmission of sensitive information. For instance, a mother may not discuss her diabetes in front of her young child.
- Groups with many languages present can benefit from interpreters who sit close to participants and translate more closely rather than in the front of the room.

Extension is powerful in its ability to reach across the state with high quality information and interventions. The benefit of these programs ought not be limited to only those who occupy dominant social status. Engaging participants that reflect the diversity of Tennessee will increase impact and enhance the health and well-being of all communities.

### References

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