

Best Practices for all Volunteers

1. Encourage Self-Sufficiency

In any service, interaction, or appointment, always encourage self-sufficiency. It might feel helpful or be faster to do tasks *for* the refugee, but it is always better to do things *with* the refugee. Your efforts should educate and empower the refugee, not create dependency. It is alright and encouraged to draw healthy boundaries. She should learn how to do things independently so she can take control of her life, because volunteers will not be able to provide support indefinitely. Help establish a lifestyle for the refugee that can be maintained without your assistance after your volunteer service ends.

2. Understand Strengths

Even though the refugee may have gone through many hardships, they are still the best person to make decisions that affect their lives. Be careful not to interpret a lack of English skill as a lack of experience or capability; these two characteristics are often unrelated. Always try to think about refugees through a strength-based lens, instead of focusing on roadblocks or challenges. Create tangible goals with the refugee that tap into their strengths, and work towards their short-term goals and long-term dreams.

3. Ensure Comprehension

As you interact with the refugees or witness other service providers interacting with refugees, pause and check for comprehension. Did they understand my question? Is the doctor using the right interpreter? Are they able to read this school registration packet? Did the insurance agent speak too quickly? Whenever possible and necessary, utilize trained interpreters who speak a language that the refugee is comfortable with. In certain situations, an interpreter is legally required to assist with interactions, such as medical settings, legal environments (with police) and with government-funded organizations (public schools). Comprehension can be verified by asking the refugee what they've understood from the conversation, offering an interpreter to assist, or asking follow-up questions.

4. Be Aware: Trauma-Informed Care

Refugees come from a range of backgrounds and experiences. Not all refugees have experienced violent trauma as a product of war or violence, but all refugees have experienced some degree of trauma due to their displacement as refugees. It's important to be aware and sensitive to this, without being overly reactionary or presumptuous. Stress and anxiety due to trauma can manifest itself in many different ways. Perhaps the refugee is reluctant to trust you, after years of living in a volatile environment where she always had to be on guard. Maybe he is reluctant to become independent and exhibits low confidence, after being marginalized for so long. And sometimes, trauma can lead to depression, thoughts of suicide, or abuse. If you are concerned about a particular individual, speak to staff at the Resettlement Agency. Read an overview of trauma-informed care here: [SAMHSA](#) and about the "Bag of Rocks" Metaphor here: [Refugee Health TA](#).

5. Advocate for the Refugee When Appropriate

As you support the refugees in their everyday lives, speak up when you think they need an extra person on their team. For example, if you go to the doctor's office for an appointment, and the Arabic interpreter that was promised over the phone is not present, politely approach someone about the issue. They cannot start the appointment without an interpreter and the refugee has a right to timely, comprehensive care. If you think someone has treated the refugee unfairly, take note of the issue and

Speak with a staff at the Resettlement Agency about your concerns. It may be necessary to document the concern or make a complaint.

6. Find Balance Between Cultural Environments

Refugees come from a variety of cultures, traditions, legal systems, family structures, and living conditions that may conflict with their new environment in the United States. Sometimes families need to make considerable modifications to their ways of life in new and unexpected ways. It is important to respect their culture and tradition, while still ensuring that they understand their new environment and the set of standards that they must adhere to: laws, leases, contracts, bill payments, child protections, and safety.

7. Manage Expectations

Both you and the refugee will approach the next year of resettlement with a set of expectations. The refugee family has been trying to resettle in new country for years, and has come to view America as the answer to displacement. During this time, family members have heard about America from a variety of sources with varying degrees of reliability, and formed a set of hopes, expectations, and opinions about America before arriving. Likewise, you have also formed a set of opinions about refugees and the resettlement process, shaped by a similarly wide array of sources. Remember to meet the refugee where they are, and not expect a certain type of relationship with the family. Be patient with the family and approach your relationship with humility, openness, and understanding.

8. Be Aware of Power Dynamics

Although the refugees should always be viewed as capable and independent, you are ultimately the guide and volunteer, and can accidentally fall into an unhealthy power dynamic with the refugee. Avoid situations where the refugee may feel compelled to do something outside of their comfort zone due to a need to please you or the other volunteers. For example, try not to put the refugee on the spot by asking her to speak about her country. Do not imply that he should attend certain social events if he is not genuinely interested. If the goal of the activity is to directly create further self-sufficiency and independence for the refugee, then it is important; if not, then approach the situation sensitively.

9. Start Learning the Refugee's Language

As the refugees start to develop their English skills, you can also simultaneously start learning their language. There are many resources online that can teach how to say basic phrases in a variety of languages, from Swahili to Hakha Chin. Be sure to identify the dialect that the refugee speaks: for example, Arabic spoken in Syria is quite different from Arabic spoken in Morocco, and sometimes unintelligible. A few key phrases in a refugee's native language can go a long way in building trust and mutual respect.

****Recording your Volunteer Time and Donations***

Throughout your time as a volunteer, it is important to keep records of everything you are donating, including hours, material goods, and driving mileage. The Resettlement Agency may request this information, particularly for some programs (such as the Matching Grant employment program) that require the Resettlement Agency to "match" the state's financial contribution with donated time or goods. You also may be able to receive personal tax deductions on some contributions.