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Unsettling: Syrian Refugees and the Struggle to Resettle
By Marguerite Ward

The Muslim Community Center in the Detroit suburb of Sylvan Lake is home to ten Syrian refugee families. Imam Mohamed Almasmari oversees the religious direction of the center’s mosque and plays an active role in working with these families—often picking up where the formal resettlement agencies end.

“As [the families] come in, we of course we can do to help them out to get them on their feet, but that’s not our main focus. Our main focus is not to provide them with fish, it’s to teach them to fish,” he said.

The process is working well, according Almasmari. The Community Center provides the refugee families with English classes, helping them get transportation, guiding them through the process of getting things like health care or a license.

The community center appears to be doing a lot of work to help the refugees independent of any large nonprofit, addressing both logistic and social issues.

“There’s so much that goes beyond the financial or language barrier,” Almasmari said.

The biggest challenge is the cultural change.
“For us easy it’s to say yeah they are in America now. But it’s a trauma in itself coming to a new country - it’s a completely different atmosphere,” said Imam Almasmari, a religious leader at The Muslim Community Center in the Detroit suburb of Sylvan Lake that has helped about ten Syrian refugee families in the area. “A Syrian may have been used to walking into their neighbor's house down the block or walk to work. Now they can’t do that, so it’s completely different and a shock.”

Children face an especially tough time.

“The cultural change in the schools is another big thing— the language, the struggling to have that acceptance,” he said.

The community is encouraged to read befriend the refugee families and children.

“We do provide a program, called the Brotherhood, Sisterhood program. We encourage our youth to befriend the Syrian refugee youth. Whether it’s walking to school together, spending time with them or if they like soccer, playing soccer with them,” he said.

The center is working to organize a mental health training session for all local actors to help professionals address the trauma that many refugees have.
“In our mosque, we have ten Syrian refugee families. As they come in, we of course we can do
to help them out to get them on their feet, but that’s not our main focus. Our main focus is not to
provide them with fish, it’s to teach them to fish.

We provide them with ESL classes, helping them get a car, how to apply for a a license, how to
apply for health care.
It’s a complete service that goes beyond paying for the rent, of providing them with food.

How has the resettlement process been going so far?
We are looking at how can these refugees in a few years be independent. And it’s been working
very good so far, a lot of Syrian people come with valuable skills —they are chefs or other types
of professionals. A lot of them come with a professional background. Everyone is good at
something - cooking, experience in management , or a traveling agency.

[mentioned something about working with “the Lutherans” said everything has been working fine
so far]

We are working on the orphans issues, to prepare for when we get them, but so far we haven’t
experienced dealing with orphans. Right now we’re dealing with families.

Biggest challenges
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youth to befriend the Syrian refugee youth. Whether it’s walking to school together, spending
time with them or if they like soccer, playing soccer with them.

We do this to break the walls of hesitation and fear.
One local resident, Iman Abdulrazzak, decided to take a hiatus from her work to help coordinate
the relief efforts for Syrian refugees in Michigan. The Muslim law clerk former Americorps
member heads a refugee taskforce at the Michigan Muslim Community Council, a group created
in part to fill in the gaps of standard refugee resettlement aid.
“I’ve heard that refugees sometimes don’t get the best housing available and there are so many issues, it takes a whole team to help these individuals. There are language barriers, cultural barriers, they are already disadvantaged. It’s not an immigration story, it’s a disadvantaged immigrant story. So I imagine there would be gaps, and areas where things need improvement. That’s why we are working now, to make sure that doesn’t happen,” she said.

But her work recently got a lot more complicated.

Governor Snyder’s recent announcements that he does NOT support receiving more Syrian refugees puts the work of nonprofits—and their funding—in jeopardy, according to Iman. She is hoping to meet with the governor soon to talk about this.

“[The governor’s statement] puts a question mark for even the nonprofits or resettlement agencies that are helping or the municipalities that were expecting refugees to come in their area. It just puts a question mark over their work and their funding. It hasn’t happened before, and the ambiguity sets us back,” Abdularazzak said.

Now, nonprofits like the one Abdulrazzak works for are unsure how to proceed.

“We are in the middle of this bizarre experiment and it's an experiment with the lives, unfortunately...of people who have suffered immensely,” Abdularazzak said.

Working with the resettlement agencies so far has been going well, she said. Her community center at resettlement agencies [find out which ones] is going well.

“The resettlement agencies have been very receptive, they want to work with us. They are also extremely busy, they have a lot of work and that’s why our hopes were by providing other resources and sharing in the work, we would help them,”

However, she noticed that there was one area where traditional aid from resettlement agencies was falling short--trauma care.

“One need that we saw that kind of wasn’t picked up at all was trauma training for individuals who deal with refugees. Right now we are in the process of creating a program in collaboration with Michigan State University- we’re still talking out the details, haven’t finalized it- but our goal is to provide training to the Imams, the priests and other religious leaders, the volunteers, and individuals who work at the local nonprofits and most likely teachers and school officials who might have direct contact with refugees because sometimes without knowing or without intending to do so, sometimes then can do more harm than good,” she said.

One particular incident highlights the need for greater training for all community members.
“There was an incident where a student who's a Syrian refugee student was in class. And even though the school seemed to be very accommodating and attentive to the child's needs, there was a fire drill and the kid absolutely panicked and it was a very, very bad situation,” she said.

“For him, sirens and bells are a trigger for the trauma that he's experienced. So when the fire alarm went off, it was terrifying for him and some school officials didn't know what to do. We're working with mental health officials so that people know how to deal with those situations.”

Most aid from resettlement agencies extends only for 90 days, sometimes 180 days in special circumstances. Aldulazzark is working on identifying what gaps in refugee aid exist.

“Right now we're doing a needs assessment need--from the moment that the resettlement agency finishes their work - the 90 days of assistance-- to the rest of their pathway to independence. At some point a refugee has to be more independent and might not get as much support as they might need. So we are now trying to figure what those needs are at that 90 or 180 day mark, we're identifying those gaps,” she said

The US Government Accounting Office found last year that the State Department did a poor job of tracking money that went to private organizations, including the non-profits that resettle refugees in the United States.

The GAO, which works as an independent investigative agency under Congress, found grants that were “at risk” of misspending money, and that many times the State Department had done little to identify troubled spending. Even when it identified troubled grant recipients, it did little to monitor them, and ensure they use funds appropriately.

Because of poor documentation and monitoring, the GAO found that the “State [Department] cannot be certain that its oversight is adequate or that it is using its limited oversight resources effectively.”

The State Department spends roughly $1.6 billion a year in grants. The GAO focused on private organizations in the United States, including those that work on resettlement.

This was not the first time government investigators raised concerns about the State Department’s abilities to track spending and ensure programs like resettlement grants with non-profits are working well.

Earlier in 2014, the State Department’s own Inspector General found “significant vulnerabilities” in contracting. That including missing fraud and other problems that would mean money not going to intended purposes like helping resettle refugees.

While the State Department said it would try to fix these problems, more than a year later, those measures are not yet in place. The agency hopes they are done next year.
Elsewhere, government auditors found other problems with State Department programs.

In 2013, the GAO found that refugee non-profits -- despite promises to the contrary -- do little to coordinate with other community groups to help refugees. That means there are wasted opportunities to have other charities help out in resettlement.

In 2011, the investigators found the State Department also does little to even measure how well refugees integrate in their new hometowns, and what could be done to better ensure that they adapt to their new home countries.