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Refugee Homelessness in Hennepin County, Minnesota

Research

Addressing the unique barriers that face homeless refugees is an important action step for Heading Home Hennepin, the 10-year plan to end homelessness in Hennepin County and Minneapolis. Over the past several years, roughly 3,000 refugees have re-settled in Hennepin County per year. They often arrive with a limited support network and enter the country with limited English speaking and comprehension ability, unrecognized credentials, and few marketable skills.

Through a partnership between the Minneapolis/Hennepin County Office to End Homelessness and the University of Minnesota School of Social Work, refugee families were surveyed in order to research and develop data about their housing stability, as well as the strategies they employed to retain housing after re-locating to Minnesota. Key findings reported by Hyojin Im, MA and David Hollister, Ph.D. were:

- There are significant ethnic differences in the ways refugee groups respond to housing instability. Culture matters.
- Refugees who first moved in with a relative had less housing stability than those placed in their own apartment upon arrival.
- Those whose first housing was less stable received more forms of public assistance, and those services did help stabilize their housing long-term.
- Those whose current housing is less stable tend to have more mental health issues, less social capital or social networks, and use less public assistance.
- Larger families have more housing instability.
- A housing crisis pushes refugees to seek more formal help both within their ethnic group and with non-ethnic social service and government agencies.

Program Model

The Minnesota Council of Churches received funding from Hennepin County and the McKnight Foundation to work with refugees who were homeless or at risk of losing their housing. The two-year program provided rent subsidies and case management to refugee families to stabilize housing, increase income, and keep families engaged in school. This program ended in December 2008 but was refunded with federal stimulus money (Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-housing Program) in October 2009. Results from the original two-year pilot were:

- From 2007-2008 143 families totaling 638 people were served, including 17 different nationalities. 98 percent remained in housing during the program.
- Within the first six months, 83 percent of families increased their income at an average of 63 percent. This was due to an increase in employment.
- Those who completed the pilot received a rental subsidy for 6.3 months, on average.
- 97 percent of families surveyed with school age children showed positive engagements in their children's school.

Lessons for public policy and social service agencies:

- When housing is stabilized, most families in crisis increase their income and further stabilize their living situation.
- Remove language and cultural barriers when working with refugees.
- Do education outreach to communities. A housing crisis is too big to solve informally. Formal services can and do help.
- Focus on ensuring that the first housing upon arrival is appropriate. Longevity in first housing bodes well for future housing stability. If the first housing destabilizes, take immediate action so housing instability does not continue.