

On Their Turf

Serving Refugees as an Off-Site Outreach Program

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Prince George's County (PGC), Maryland, has been a place of resettlement for more than two thousand refugees, asylees, and those with special immigrant visas (SIVs) since 2012. The PGC Memorial Library System was recently awarded a \$3,000 ALSC Light the Way Grant to expand its programming to the refugees in the community.

Developing robust library programming with a refugee community can be challenging—even beyond the obvious challenge presented by language barriers. Cultural differences can be huge barriers. For example, for many Afghani refugees, it is culturally unacceptable for women to leave the apartment complex unless accompanied by a male relative. These male relatives are frequently at work or engaged in work readiness programs, so they are not available to serve as escorts to the library. This means the library must go into the

refugee communities rather than expecting them to come to the library.

In December 2015, the New Carrollton Branch Library closed for a multiyear major renovation. We realized that the closure could be a catalyst for engaging with underserved or previously unidentified potential customers when we found out there was a large refugee, SIV, and asylee population at an apartment complex in the branch's catchment area.

Parkview Gardens Apartments in Riverdale, Maryland, has been the place of resettlement for a huge number of refugees placed in Prince George's County. The complex has 592 units, most of which are leased to refugee families from Afghanistan, Syria, Nepal, Iraq, and Ethiopia, resettled there by the International Rescue Committee (IRC). The pop-up programming we began there has grown into something



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more rewarding and more essential to this community than we initially envisioned.

Two days a week, we offer two programs at the complex. The first is a mother-and-child storytime and language learning program. When the families arrive, the children can choose to play with Duplo blocks or do crafts that are designed to build fine motor skills, to teach the ability to follow directions, and to reinforce key language concepts, such as color and number identification.

The children develop school readiness since they acquire many of the skills (language, using writing implements, predictable routines, group work, and numeracy) they would learn in formal preschool. While the children are playing and working on crafts, the mothers participate in an English Language Learning (ELL) and technology program using Rosetta Stone, a program that our library system offers for free to library card holders. The women gain proficiency on laptops and tablets as they engage in staff-supported language learning activities.

Child care has proven to be a huge barrier to participation in services for women in this community, so adult programs that provide concurrent child care or programming are essential. After an hour of play or study, everyone joins in as we sing a clean-up song, clean up the room, and gather for storytime.

To encourage the mothers to participate and not just observe, we had our Ready 2 Read storytime guidelines translated into Dari, the most widely spoken language among the women. At the beginning of each storytime, we read one guideline in English and have a participant read the written translation in Dari. This dramatically improves participation in the storytime, allowing the women to relax and engage in the activities.

We design ELL storytimes, which also help the mothers acquire key language elements for their everyday life. Themes include colors, numbers, greetings, letters, transportation, food—critical vocabulary to being able to function in daily activities, such as going to a grocery store or riding a bus.

Since these are new words for both child and adult, we repeat many of the same rhymes, fingerplays, and songs each week. Staff also get creative about ways to communicate with the participants due to language barriers. Graphic representations of words, photos, physical objects, pantomime, and exaggerated facial expression are useful tools. We try to communicate using pictures or props whenever possible.

Recently, we have added some guidelines in graphic format for the children. They seem to enjoy mimicking the graphic “criss-cross applesauce” rules, which will serve them when they begin preschool. This is also helpful for the adults and mimics the teaching model they will find in both adult new reader materials and online language learning platforms.

The books usually have limited or repetitive text, use easy to see pictures or photos, and focus on reinforcing the vocabulary themes. Whenever possible, we follow up with an activity to reinforce the vocabulary we just practiced. This could be a matching game identifying colors or animals or a create-a-story game using felt animals to retell the story and reproduce language learned from the book.

Sung books, or book versions of children’s songs such as “Old MacDonald” or “Brown Bear, Brown Bear,” are probably the favorite books of both the children and parents. The children love to sing and mimic whatever actions match the lyrics. The rhythm and meter of songs also helps the adults become more accustomed to the prosody of English language, which can differ significantly from their native languages.

Books on the topic of diversity are also engaging for these families. We use books that explore different cultures, holidays, languages, and disabilities, seeking out books that represent multicultural characters in their illustrations or photographs. Refugee and asylee families are generally an eager audience; they want to integrate into their new community, and libraries are a natural fit for partners to help them develop the language and literacy skills they need to truly feel included, engaged, and productive.

Most of the families we serve have received their very first library card while attending the mother and child storytime at Parkview Gardens, and they have developed a sense of agency and self-sufficiency by being able to borrow items. The card has been empowering in a way we never anticipated. Library staff bring books each week for them to select. Unfortunately, we don’t have books in their native language, but when we show them why they might like particular books, or how they might enhance their learning, they usually check them out. Recently, we added adult new reader titles, which have been popular with the mothers.

Getting Siblings Involved

Our second program focuses on the older children and siblings of the storytime attendees. Kids Achieve Club provides homework assistance for students in grades K–6. We connect students with community mentors and library staff members to improve the students’ reading level and math skills.

For each weekly meeting, we bring a small collection of books, many of which are hi-lo books with lots of scaffolding in the form of graphics and illustrations, as well as worksheets and games. When students arrive, we divide them into groups by grade level to work with mentors on their homework. We keep the mentor to student ratio of one-to-three since class sizes can be very large, and due to language barriers, these students cannot get the “kitchen table” homework help that many of us got from our parents.

The small groups allow for more intensive help with the homework, but it also helps develop a relationship between the mentor and the student. The bonding and trust between mentor and student is also important, as many of the children in the refugee community spent their early years in places in which everywhere outside of the home (including school) was a potential danger zone.

The program regularly draws more than twenty children on a regular basis. We attribute the success of this program to mentors who are enthusiastic, loving, and patient; the time of the program (held in the morning); and the word-of-mouth community support of the program by attendees.

Programming for refugees can present serious issues in terms of logistics and a space to present programs or establish library services. We were lucky to be able to arrange for the donation of a model unit from the apartment complex as space for the programs, though we are at capacity with both programs now. This room is shared by many groups who work with refugees in the complex.

Due to its small size and the fact that it is used by multiple groups, it's not feasible or safe to keep library materials and equipment there. This presents logistical headaches for staff since everything must be packed and unpacked each of the days we are on site.

Developing procedures and designating people to be in charge of equipment, books, and supplies has been necessary to function efficiently. Costs were limited to the craft supplies so far, though we recently were able to purchase more materials in Nepali and Pashto via the ALSC Light the Way Grant. The grant is also allowing us to purchase additional tablets and materials for the mothers to continue working on their English language and basic literacy skills.

Programming must also be given time to grow organically. Establishing trust in these communities is a process, and finding partners already working in the refugee community can be helpful in speeding the process along. It is also critical to develop cultural competence with the families you work with by learning about their culture, respecting their values and practices, and being sensitive.

Refugee programming is a space that libraries can and should enter to truly be inclusive and provide needed service to underserved communities. While these programs are unlikely to be possible on site in a library, they must be more than one-off outreach events to be successful. The trust and relationships built and the quality library services provided via pop-up programming in refugee communities foster what we believe will be a lifelong love of literacy and libraries in the children we are working with and will contribute to their future success. &

Thank you!

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