

Providing Orientation to Refugee Seniors: Tips and Strategies

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Older refugees make up a significant percentage of new refugee arrivals, and the percentage appears to be growing. In 2009, 17% of refugee arrivals were 45 years old or older, up from 16.8% in 2008 and 15% in 2007 (Martin, 2010).

Older refugees are a diverse group, bringing with them a wide range of life experiences, languages, levels of education and literacy, English proficiency, employment status, and income levels. Despite these differences in background experiences and skills, refugee seniors share a common need to learn about their new communities and how to make their way in them. Seniors often face a special set of challenges:

- For refugee seniors, life in the United States may include a significant loss of status or role within the family group or community. One's status as family head might be threatened when younger members of the family, who more quickly learn the language and pick up new skills, are called on to translate, interpret, and even make family decisions.
- Refugee seniors may feel that their problems or needs are not as important as those of younger members of the family. It may be difficult for them to ask for help or seek programs that would provide for their needs.
- Older refugees may encounter age-related problems learning and communicating in English.
- Many refugees who would identify themselves as seniors are under the age of 65 and ineligible for age-related public assistance. As such, they may be faced with the need to work at an age when they expected to be resting at home, enjoying the care and respect of their children and grandchildren. Others may wish to work but find it difficult to find employment. During times of high unemployment, the elderly find it especially challenging to find work.
- While many refugees have experienced trauma, political upheaval, and economic distress, seniors may have lived with these issues longer than younger refugees. In addition to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and depression, some may also be suffering from medical ailments.

Despite these challenges, older refugees who make it to the United States are here because they are survivors. These newcomers often show an amazing ability to draw on external resources, such as family networks, in addition to their own strong inner resources, such as resilience in the face of enormous change.

How can orientation providers address the special needs of these refugees while utilizing their strengths? The following are tips and strategies to use when offering orientation to refugee seniors. While you may determine that some of these are feasible for your agency only with senior-specific funding, you may also find that you are able to implement many without additional resources.

Get seniors involved in their orientation from the beginning.

- *Find out who the refugees are and what their issues are.* Do not assume that all refugee seniors—even those from the same ethnic background—have the same levels of education, learning styles, previous life experiences, and hopes and aspirations. Do not assume that all elders have limited language skills and education because they do not have English skills. Find out from the seniors what their backgrounds are and what they want to learn. Conduct a needs assessment to discover their specific needs. One way of doing this is to show the seniors photographs that represent different orientation topics, briefly explain the content of each topic, and ask the seniors to select two or three of the most important topics for them. For more examples of needs assessments, see the Cultural Orientation Resource Center Web site at http://www.cal.org/co/domestic/toolkit/tools/needs_assessment.pdf
- *Acknowledge the life experiences of refugee seniors.* Adult learning theory highlights the importance of first acknowledging and then valuing the knowledge, experience, and skills of the adult learner (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005). Older refugee seniors have likely used multiple skills to survive years of political turmoil, emotional and physical trauma, and economic deprivation. They are not blank slates. View the previous experiences of the seniors as strengths upon which to build.
- *Acknowledge the seniors' concerns.* They may be worried that they have less proficiency in (and aptitude for) English than younger refugees and less familiarity with technology and other features of U.S. life. They may find themselves facing the need to look for a job long after they thought they would have to work. Or they may feel that they are not important because they are not working. Acknowledge these concerns and address them in their orientation.
- *Encourage family members to be involved in the senior's orientation and to spend time with him or her.* Seniors may feel isolated in their new communities. In their country of origin or exile, it is likely that they were surrounded by family members and friends. Here in the United States, many find themselves living alone, or perhaps just with the nuclear family, in the outer suburbs, without transportation or means to get out and see other people. The lack of familiarity with the language and culture of the new community only adds to this sense of isolation.
- *Encourage family members to take the time to help the seniors get to community events they wish to attend.* Let the seniors know that it is acceptable and appropriate for them to attend the events and to ask family members to help them do so. Some seniors may feel that their needs do not matter. With the support of family members, assure seniors that this is not true: Their needs do matter.

Be sensitive to age issues when grouping seniors and assigning instructors.

- *If at all possible, place older adults in classes with other older adults.* Seniors have their own adjustment issues and may learn in ways and at a pace that is different from those of younger refugees. Refugee seniors may be uncomfortable in mixed-generational classes where the needs and pace of other learners do not match their own. Placing seniors together can lessen their social isolation, allowing them to spend time with peers with similar needs and experiences and to make new friends.
- *Consider assigning an older instructor to the seniors' class.* Older teachers might be more sensitive to the needs and learning styles of older learners, and refugee seniors may be more apt to heed the advice and information provided by an older teacher.

Use instructional methods that are known to be effective, particularly with older learners with lower levels of formal education.

- *Choose the right language for the right topic and audience.* Essential information (e.g., when and how to call 911) is most effectively presented in a language in which the participant is proficient. For older refugees, particularly those with less formal education, that is usually the native language. Orientation sessions that are more social in nature, however, are often best presented in English, allowing participants who speak different languages to interact with one another and improve their English language skills at the same time.
- *Move from the familiar to the unfamiliar.* Learning theory (for all learners) indicates that in order for new learning to be possible, new information must be scaffolded or placed on top of and connected to what the learner already knows and understands (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005). This is especially true of learners with minimal previous education, as may be the case with older refugees. A unit on health might start with discussing the types of health care the senior accessed in the native country or in the country of asylum, rather than jumping immediately into a discussion of the U.S. healthcare system. Also, supply key vocabulary before asking participants to learn new concepts or written material. Recycle concepts, structures, and vocabulary in the course of instruction. Build redundancy into the orientation curriculum to help clients practice using concepts, skills, or learned vocabulary in new situations or for different purposes.
- *Present the same information in multiple formats.* People learn in different ways—some like to listen and repeat or rephrase what they hear, some like to read printed material or have it read to them, some like to look at photographs and discuss what they see, and some like to act out (role play) what they are learning. Many need to learn by doing. Whatever the preferred learning style and educational background of the senior, presenting information in various ways throughout a session and spiraling back to earlier learning helps learners understand and retain what they have learned. For more information on different teaching methods, see *Methods in Training* at http://www.cal.org/co/domestic/toolkit/tools/methods_in_training.pdf.
- *Use visuals.* A picture is worth a thousand words; using visuals, especially photographs, to present information is useful, particularly with less literate learners. But be aware that seniors may be unfamiliar with the way information in charts, graphs, diagrams, and drawings is commonly represented. Adults from preliterate societies often perceive and interpret drawings, pictures, and symbols differently from individuals in literate societies (Hvitfeldt, 1986). If cartoon-like drawings are used, take time to explain the conventions being used, such as bubbles for speech, dotted line bubbles for thoughts, and stick figures for people.
- *Make written information as easy to understand as possible.* If translators are available, present the information in the native language. But know that seniors may have limited literacy in their own language. Whatever language the information is presented in, use large type and make certain there is plenty of white space on all documents—seniors might have difficulties with their vision. If possible, work one-on-one with the seniors to ensure that they understand and are understood.
- *Use a slower pace when providing orientation to seniors.* If the seniors still do not seem to understand your message, consider rephrasing the information using different words. For specific information that must be transmitted, such as public transportation schedules or U.S. citizenship requirements, present the data in smaller bits, over time. Revisit and spiral back to what has been learned and build on it, rather than bombard the senior with many facts all at once. Seniors who find it difficult to retain new information will especially benefit from these techniques.
- *Consider speaking louder.* Many seniors have difficulty hearing, and with these seniors you will need to increase your volume. When seniors are having difficulty understanding an orientation session conducted in English, determine whether the cause is a hearing problem or a lack of English. Remember: It does not help to speak louder in English to a refugee who does not understand the language. Be aware of the connection between hearing and language learning: To understand and speak a language, you first need to hear it. For seniors, it is frequently the difficulty to hear English that impedes their ability to understand and speak it.
- *Check often for understanding.* Do not assume that because the participants are smiling and nodding that they agree with you, understand, or even remember what you have tried to convey. Many groups are reluctant to admit that they do not understand or recall material, particularly to a person of authority, such as an instructor. To find out if seniors really understand and remember the content, ask them to repeat back what you have told them or ask specific questions about the material presented. For further suggestions, see <http://www.cal.org/co/domestic/toolkit/tools/index.html>.

- *Let seniors know that they can learn.* Seniors may feel that they are too old to learn new things, including English. The U.S. practice of continuing education, based on the notion that an individual is never too old to learn, may be an unfamiliar (and even alien) idea to seniors. Discuss the topic of continuing education with the seniors and address the issue of how older learners learn. Emphasize that while older adults may have a harder time than a younger person remembering specific information, such as dates, statistics, and regulations, they are often better able to tie learning to what they already know and are likely to have a deeper understanding of what they have learned.

Encourage seniors to attend English as a second language (ESL) or English Language/Civics classes.

- *Tell seniors about English language learning opportunities in their community.* Most communities in the United States provide free or very low-cost ESL classes to refugees and immigrants. These classes can provide a place for seniors to learn more about U.S. culture as they learn the language. The information seniors learn during the months of the ESL class will reinforce what they learned during the few hours of orientation allotted most refugees. In addition, learning English will help seniors be more independent and allow them to meet some of their own needs.

Many programs, especially those funded by the U.S. Department of Education, focus on preparing learners for success in the workplace and community. As a result, the classes provide the information and practice with the language needed to get and keep jobs and to access health care, educational opportunities, transportation, and other essential services. For guidance in selecting a good ESL program, see <http://www.seniorserviceamerica.org/pdf/CALGuide-ESL.pdf>

- *Exercise caution in selecting ESL classes for seniors, especially those who are truly elderly.* Regular classes may be largely made up of younger students whose needs and learning abilities are different from those of seniors. Seniors need to focus on basic listening comprehension and speaking skills, using everyday language. See <http://www.cleese.org/brightideas.htm> for information about an ESL program developed for older learners and based on a curriculum that takes their needs and ability to learn into consideration.
- *Help seniors understand that they do not need to be in a culturally homogenous class taught by a teacher who speaks their language.* In fact, it can be equally valuable for seniors to be placed in a class of learners from other countries; learners in these classes will have the opportunity to speak English and learn from one another. And teachers who are trained in teaching ESL do not need to speak the languages of their learners to teach effectively.
- *Let them know about English Language/Civics classes in their community.* These federally funded classes, designed to prepare refugees and immigrants for the U.S. Citizenship test, provide practice with language as learners study the history, laws, rights, and responsibilities of Americans. Becoming a citizen is an important goal for seniors, enabling them to access benefits available only to U.S. citizens, such as Medicare.

Encourage seniors to learn about the community by getting out into it.

- *As much as possible, facilitate opportunities to explore the area, whether to help seniors learn more about the community and U.S. culture, or simply to enjoy themselves.* As seniors get involved in activities outside the home, they will become more familiar with their new community, and this familiarity, in turn, will speed the adjustment process. Programs offered in the refugees' native language are helpful, allowing seniors to explore their new environment through the familiar perspective of their native language and culture. In the early stages of resettlement, refugee seniors may shy away from programs that use English as the basis of communication.
- *Encourage seniors to engage in activities to help their community, however they define that community.* Organized volunteering may be an unfamiliar concept to refugee seniors; however, helping one's family, extended family, and greater community may not be. Service providers working with older immigrants have found that many react favorably to requests to "give back to the community" (Yoshida, Gordon, & Henkins, 2008). Many refugee seniors discover that by helping others they can help themselves.
- *Establish mentor relationships between members of the receiving community and refugee seniors.* Such relationships can give seniors a stronger connection to the outside world, as well as more information and more confidence to navigate their surroundings.
- *Be aware of other community services available to seniors and how they can access or learn more about them.* Some refugee service providers have developed partnerships with mainstream service providers, increasing refugee seniors' access to these services.
- *Consider logistical barriers to participation.* When developing a program for seniors, be mindful of transportation and mobility issues. Service providers may need to secure additional support for transportation from their agencies, volunteers, mainstream seniors' organizations, and local government agencies. If feasible, locate a class or a program in an area where the elderly refugees live or congregate.

Older refugees arrive in the United States with resettlement needs that in some ways are different from those of younger refugees. But senior refugees also bring a wealth of life experience and knowledge, along with extraordinary resilience. With the right support, they may find ways to not only help themselves but to contribute to the resettlement of others in their community. Orientation for elders is most effective when it tailors training to their specific needs at the same time that it builds on their strengths and resources, giving them reassurance that their experiences and needs are important.

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Additional Resources

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