

Cultural Orientation Resource Center, Center for Applied Linguistics
Overseas CO Program Highlight – FY2008

West Africa

Overview

The Overseas Processing Entity in West Africa (OPE Accra), administered by Church World Service, has been providing Cultural Orientation instruction to U.S.-bound refugees since February 2002. In total, OPE Accra has delivered CO trainings for over 13,000 students. While the bulk of OPE applicants have historically been refugees from Liberia and Sierra Leone, smaller caseloads of Sudanese, Rwandans, Burundians, Somali, Mauritanian, and Congolese have consistently been represented. From October 2007 to March 2008, CO sessions were held in five countries (Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Togo, and Ivory Coast) for 713 individuals of twelve nationalities (Liberia, Sierra Leone, Mauritania, Chad, Ivory Coast, Togo, Rwanda, Nigeria, DRC, Sudan, Gambia, and Burundi).

Refugee caseloads: Languages

While many Liberians, Sierra Leoneans, and Nigerians speak some form of English, they also speak other indigenous languages, such as Mandingo, Krahn, and Yoruba. Refugees from other West African countries often speak French along with their indigenous languages, while those from Mauritania, Sudan, Somalia, or elsewhere may speak Arabic. OPE Accra has trainers capable of delivering CO entirely in English or French, while local, trained interpreters are used as needed for Arabic and various indigenous languages.

Refugee caseloads: Education/Social Experience

CO students represent a wide range of educational and social experiences. Some have never had any formal education, while a number have completed junior or secondary school. There are growing numbers of educated individuals from Central Africa who have university degrees but limited English proficiency. Single parent households, including single mothers with young children, are common, as are unmarried young adults. Refugees in Ghana have had a fairly modern, urbanized experience. Many refugees in the West Africa region reside in out-lying camps, however.

Training Sites

Training sites vary with the refugee populations being served. Initially, CO classes were held primarily in Ghana (at the OPE Annex), Ivory Coast, and Guinea. Progressively, CO Trainers started seeing students in other West Africa locations such as Gambia, Senegal, Nigeria, Benin, Togo, and Mali. In recent years, the West Africa program has expanded into the Central African countries of Cameroon, Gabon, and The Central African Republic. As instruction in the capital city is not always feasible, CO trainers often work at or near the camps. Some examples include camps in Ghana (The Krisan Refugee Camp), Guinea (N'zerekore), Gabon (Tchibanga, Franceville, and Moanda), and Sierra Leone (Bo and Kenema).

Curriculum:

Course Particulars

CO training consists of a 3-day, 18-hour course; the average class size is 20. Most classes are conducted in English. Classes may be taught in French when all students share the same level of understanding. Course content is based on the *Welcome to the U.S.* guide and video, as well as the *West Africa CO Exercise Workbook*, developed by OPE Accra's CO department. Course content is regularly reviewed and revised to provide the most accurate and up-to-date information possible. Training methodology is varied, but there is heavy emphasis on experiential group activities and discussion. Posters are produced by the CO team, and PowerPoint presentations were recently created to coincide with the curriculum.

As the program's caseload shifts towards the inclusion of more Francophone/Arabic-speaking participants, the CO team is adjusting its curriculum to meet participant needs. Activities, lessons, posters, and pamphlets are being translated into French where applicable and/or practical, while program staff continue to continuously develop other lesson plans, activities, and curriculum ideas for non-English proficient individuals. In addition, the West Africa CO Exercise Workbook for students has been modified so that activities may be carried out interactively if students are illiterate or non-English speaking.

A "Parenting" unit was introduced into the curriculum after the program's experience with the "Women at Risk" caseload in the Ivory Coast (2002), and in response to queries on the CAL Listserv about the parenting practices of some West African refugees in the U.S. The Cultural Adjustment, U.S. Law, and Housing, Safety, and Sanitation units have most recently been updated. OPE Accra is currently developing a new unit for Technology in America.

The West Africa program targets approved refugees age 15 and over. With a noticeable rise in the number of children in qualifying refugee families (some of these having been raised in exile and in camps), a Youth Curriculum was developed by CO West Africa to address youth-specific resettlement challenges. Refugees aged 15-17 participate in their own three-day program, where they are free to ask questions and participate in a group of their peers. For many refugee youth, these specialized CO Youth classes present the first opportunity to experience what an "American" classroom will be like. The Youth curriculum is very interactive, and students are noticeably more at ease discussing subjects with peers who share the same experiences and anticipate similar social challenges than previous participants grouped in the adult classes. The Youth curriculum, which stresses Education, Social Topics, Special Interests, and Family Changes, was finalized in 2007 and has been implemented in Accra (Ghana), Conakry (Guinea), and Abidjan (Ivory Coast).

Student Characteristics and Considerations for Domestic Resettlement

CO West Africa delivers instruction in over ten countries for individuals of more than fifteen nationalities. As such, generalizing the populations is problematic. However, one may assume that much of the refugee's life has been spent in transit and/or residing in refugee camps, that they tend to have a basic grasp of the English language, and that they have an optimistic image of what lies ahead in the United States.

The Liberian and Sierra Leonian populations are primarily urban refugees who, while they speak various levels of English, need be encouraged to attend ESOL courses and improve upon written skills. They often have close ties with the U.S. through friends or family members and have developed a perception of the United States based on videos and word of mouth. Employment needs to be encouraged from the outset. As they generally have a strong work ethic and desire to continue their education, it may be necessary to remind them that becoming self-sufficient is paramount and then educational advancement is an opportunity. Women in this region are typically much more willing to work and should be empowered from the beginning. Sending money home is actively discussed in CO trainings, and the trainers reiterate that students need to pay all bills, make their monthly travel loan payment, and develop a small amount of savings before sending money home. Lastly, time and time-management are of constant concern. It is made exceptionally clear that America does not run on "African Time," yet it is the recommendation of OPE Accra that this be of ongoing emphasis stateside.

The mixed Francophone groups seemingly present a more complicated problem in that they are generally well educated and may hold various certifications and/or degrees. Yet these credentials are not necessarily valid in the United States and, more often than not, the refugees are not fluent in English. Finding acceptable employment and learning English are two fears commonly expressed by members of this group.