

Background and Scheduling

The “Cultural Orientation” program at Kentucky Refugee Ministries (KRM) fits compactly into the week’s schedule of classes, programs, appointments and activities for KRM clients.

The bulk of the clients’ time at KRM is spent in English classes, which run from 9:30-12:30 each day. Two afternoons per week are designated for special-focus meetings for different segments of the client population, one afternoon is wholly free for appointments, Cultural Orientation sessions are held each Wednesday, and no afternoon meetings are held on Friday.

On Wednesday afternoons, students have lunch together (provided by a local restaurant of international background for a nominal charge covered by KRM), then attend the CO presentations/discussions on important topics as they start their new lives in America. Clients sit according to their native languages, listening to – and taking part in – discussions through translators, which KRM provides. To newcomers the meeting sounds like “Babel,” but the system functions well. There may be as many as six languages used at one time, but usually there are four. The sessions last for about an hour, sometimes a little more.

Presentations

The attached list shows over thirty presentations given in the last few years (please note: employment and financial literacy issues are not included in this list, since these topics each have a separate series devoted to them). Those presentations marked with ** - over twenty of them - are sessions that KRM expects to do at least once each year. Some of these topics, especially those on medical issues, may be combined.

Clients receive intensive services from KRM for an average of three months, so they can be expected to participate in twelve presentations or more. This, of course, will vary according to the speakers’ availability and the need for special or seasonal topics/programs.

The twelve presentations that are most basic to the KRM schedule are:

6. Maintaining a Balanced and Happy Life (guidance for the “post-honeymoon” period)
7. Buying Car Insurance
8. Buying “Over-the-Counter Medicine”
10. Cultural Differences
12. Preventing Domestic Violence
14. “My Years in America”
15. Fire Prevention and “Words from an Immigrant Firefighter”
16. The Green Card and Citizenship
17. Buying or Building Your First Home
23. Marriage and Family Issues for New Americans
27. Police and the Community

PLUS: At least one topic devoted to the health-care issues, which always includes H.I.V. prevention (19), family planning (28) and some aspect(s) of other health-care topics.

Format of Sessions

Some sessions are general and deal with personal/emotional issues. Two professors from the University of Louisville Kent School of Social Work – one of whom is chairperson of the KRM

Board of Directors – speak on “Marriage and Family Issues” (23). This deals with changing gender roles, gender issues at work, gender roles in school and in sports, the inevitable “culture wars,” the rapid assimilation of children into American society, effective parenting (and disciplinary) methods, etc. The KRM staff social worker/psychological counselor describes issues she encounters in helping clients negotiate the emotional concerns they face in their first few months and years (6). A staff member of the city’s Office of International Affairs – herself an immigrant – presents an illustrated program on the “Cultural Differences” our clients will face, and their need to adapt to American life: everything from punctuality and handshakes to questions of personal hygiene (10).

Other presentations combine the practical and emotional. The local “Center for Women and Families” does a presentation on Domestic Violence (12). A member of the Metro police force tells how Americans (should) interact with police, and discusses issues clients may face, if not personally, perhaps in their neighborhoods (27). This has other benefits beyond the information covered in class. The clients meet a personable, honest policeman (one of our first bilingual officers) who tells them “police here will never take your money,” and “police cannot enter your home without your permission (unless they have a warrant).” Clients, accustomed to repressive, sometimes criminal police, breathe sighs of relief. An immigrant fire-fighter tells his story and speaks about fire prevention, a topic that is especially important to us since the vast majority of our clients have never experienced a winter and are likely to risk apartment fires in the cold months (15).

Some presentations are more purely informational. A KRM staff member tells clients about the requirements, process, and help KRM offers in obtaining the Green Card and Citizenship (16). A presentation on “Buying Automobile Insurance” explains a task clients soon face. Representatives from Habitat for Humanity and The Housing Partnership describe their respective programs – both of which KRM former clients have used in the past – that enable people to buy their first homes, a goal that clients can see is able to be realized. To help before that stage of life, KRM has a presentation on “Renting an Apartment: Rights and Responsibilities.”

A presentation by a local pharmacist on “Buying Over-the-Counter Medicine” is one of those in the general group of health-care topics (3, 11, 18, 19, 26, 28), while other topics are seasonal (20, 22, 29, 30, 31). In addition, there is at least one “success story” told by a former refugee or immigrant who can console, give advice, and, most importantly, encourage KRM clients (14).

Presenters

All presenters are volunteers (while interpreters are paid contractors). Wherever possible the program utilizes successful refugees and immigrants. A non-native-born American, for example, can generally speak more effectively than a native-born American about cultural differences. Both current presenters on “Buying Automobile Insurance” are from abroad, and one is a former KRM client. The presentation on “apartment rental” is given by a refugee from Cuba, a former apartment complex manager and now a real estate agent. One presenter on Domestic Violence speaks in Spanish, as does a former Cuban doctor who speaks about A.I.D.S. and STD prevention. Smaller language-based discussion groups are helpful in addressing several topics, though this has been effective only in groups of sufficient size, and for which qualified speakers

have been available. This means this presentation has been done with Spanish-speaking (Cuban) clients only. Over the years, however, speakers of several nationalities have given their testimonies – and advice – to the KRM’s large group of clients, speaking in English through translators.

Discussions

The size of the group at Cultural Orientation affects the amount of discussion. The larger the group, the fewer, proportionately, are the questions and comments. Discussion is also provided both before and after the presentations in class, at the discretion of the ESL teachers. As the great majority of our clients have only beginning or basic English skills, discussion is limited. The advanced class can do much more, however.

Findings

Within the framework of activities here the program seems quite successful. The speakers are interesting and are experts in their fields. The program’s constraints are with time and finances (given the cost of interpreters, and the part-time position of Cultural Orientation Coordinator). Yet the program seems to be very well-received by the students and appears to be quite successful.