

Topic: Community Services
(International Organization for Migration, Overseas Processing Entity, Nairobi)

Activity: Overview, Discussion and Role Play

Objectives

In this unit, trainers identify and explain the different community services available in the US, while emphasizing that financial assistance is a temporary means of helping people to attain self-sufficiency. Participants are expected to work to support themselves, but will have access to assistance, although this assistance varies from state to state.

For many participants, the concept of community services such as food stamps, cash assistance and energy assistance is quite new. Furthermore, because participants often have little faith in the services provided by the government in their country of origin, they may feel that it is socially acceptable to abuse community services in the United States. Friends and relatives in the US may have reinforced this attitude. Trainers emphasize that family and friends should be the first support system to turn to.

In the US, all able-bodied people are expected to work. All employees pay taxes to the state in which they live and to the federal government. These taxes are used to improve the community, state and nation and to assist people who do not have basic necessities. The forms of community assistance are determined by voters and elected officials. Living in the United States means being part of a democratic society that has the best interest of the people at heart. Community services have been established because they represent the interests and the needs of the people.

Introduction

Diversity of Services:

Individual states have a fair amount of autonomy from the government and can create laws and decide on how state tax dollars and federal money is used. Financial assistance and other forms of community assistance will vary from state to state, depending on how that state has decided to allocate funds and depending on what kind of community services programs have been established. Every state, and even some counties within states, provides slightly varied forms of assistance.

Independence:

Participants should not view the assistance received as an entitlement, but rather as a gift from all people who work and pay taxes. The vast majority of Americans pride themselves on being self-sufficient. Participants should focus on working as soon as possible, which will contribute to their own independence and to society as a whole. Financial independence and personal independence are both highly valued in the US. The individual is often more important than the community in the American belief system. This may run quite contrary to a participant's culture, in which the individual's needs are subsumed by family or community needs.

Discussion Questions

- What kind of support does your community provide for people in need?
- Are community services available in your country? If so, what kind of services?
- Do you think you'll receive the same kind of community support in the U.S.?

Materials

- Video: Welcome to America: Community Services segment
- Video: 911

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Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Medicaid card • Food stamps • Social Security Card <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Discuss the teaching points with participants. 2. Participants role-play various situations in which emergency numbers or community services are used.
Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kind of community services, either formal or informal, exist within class participants' communities?

Teaching Points

General Presentation

In addition to resettlement agencies, there are other federal and community agencies that help people to help themselves. Most community service programs are available to all Americans, but some services may be provided exclusively to newly arrived refugees. These services are usually administered on a local level and can vary greatly according to location. Refugees will receive more specific information on community services from their resettlement agency. The social security card is a prerequisite for receiving most forms of assistance. The resettlement agency assists refugees in applying for the social security card immediately upon, or very soon after arrival.

Food Stamps

Food stamps are a federally funded program to provide adequate nutrition to people with low incomes. Refugees may apply for food stamps at a designated local government office. Resettlement agencies can assist in this application process. The amount of food assistance received is based on family size and income. Food stamps can be used to purchase food items only.

Cash Assistance Programs

All states have some form of cash assistance program, designed to assist people who cannot secure employment. Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA) is the main cash assistance program for single refugees or people with grown children. Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF) is a federally funded program for parents with children. These programs are administered on a local level and thus differ between communities. Program names may vary from state to state. Cash assistance programs are limited to a number of months, and many have additional requirements, such as active participation in a job search or regular attendance at a skills training program. Trainers should keep in mind that all refugees will have a different experience with cash assistance programs and thus trainers should only answer questions relating to cash assistance in a general way. In the US, it is not considered proper to receive cash assistance if you are a healthy person capable of work.

Supplemental Security Income

SSI is a federal program for people 65 and over or who are blind or disabled. Refugees who meet SSI eligibility requirements may apply at the local social security office. This assistance is limited to seven years for non-citizens, an important reminder for refugees to become citizens as soon as possible.

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Medicaid

Newly arrived refugees are eligible for government-sponsored medical assistance called Medicaid, or sometimes called Refugee Medical Assistance (RMA). This medical coverage will last for a maximum of eight months, after which refugees will be responsible for covering their own medical costs.

Medicare

Refugees aged 65 or older are eligible to receive medical assistance under Medicare, a government-sponsored program that can benefit the elderly for many years.

Energy Assistance

There are federal programs that help low-income earners to pay for heating expenses. As with food stamps, applicants must complete forms at a designated local government office.

Social Service Agencies

Social service agencies provide a variety of services to the community as a whole, including refugees. These agencies generally assist people with special needs such as low-income families and people with disabilities.

Police

The police are responsible for enforcing the law and ensuring public safety. Any negative experiences refugees may have had with police in their native country or country of asylum should not influence behavior towards police in the US. Trainers must explain that police are there to assist the public. Refugees should never offer bribes to police, as it is illegal for police to accept bribes. The salaries of police are paid through taxes.

Fire Department and Emergency Medical Services

These exist in all communities. In an emergency, telephone 911 and tell the operator the nature of the emergency ("police," "fire," or "ambulance") and the location of the emergency. If a refugee cannot explain the problem in English, he or she should say the word "help" or "emergency," and leave the phone off the hook. The open line will indicate the location.

Religious Institutions

Religious institutions often provide services to the needy, including clothing distributions, food distributions and other types of assistance. There are a wide range of churches, mosques, temples and other institutions, which often play an important role in serving the community.

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Libraries and Other Community Services

Most communities will have a public library from where people can take out books for a certain length of time free of charge. Other community-oriented services may exist as well, such as recreation areas, tennis and basketball courts, sports facilities, fields and parks, and playgrounds for children. Refugees should feel free to take advantage of all these public facilities.

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