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Refugees present a chance to serve

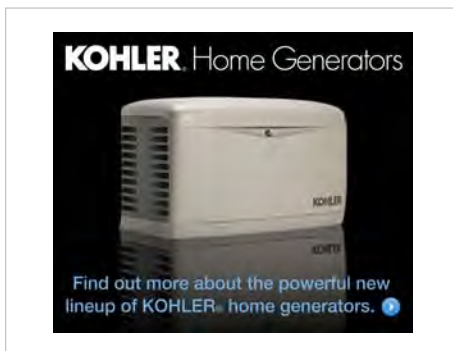
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BY CHRISTOPHER GERGEN AND STEPHEN MARTIN

When President Barack Obama singled out Forsyth Technical Community College's efforts to retrain unemployed furniture workers for biotechnology jobs during last month's State of the Union address, the whole nation got a glimpse of North Carolina's commitment to better harnessing its talent.

More quietly, state residents are also stepping up in support of another rapidly growing but often overlooked group: our international refugee community.

Last year, North Carolina welcomed nearly 2,800 refugees from 31 countries, ranking us 10th in the nation for the number of refugees received, according to state officials. These new arrivals hail most often from Burma, Bhutan, Iraq and Vietnam and are dispersed pretty evenly among the Triangle, Charlotte and Greensboro.



Refugees arrive with widely divergent backgrounds, cultures and languages but also some core traits in common. They have often endured lives of hardship brought on by wars and political persecution. Most of the refugees who arrive in our state also have no existing family support system, making acclimation even more challenging for them and their new communities.

At the same time, their presence offers some under-appreciated opportunities.

Perhaps most significantly, refugees provide a fresh injection of talent to our state. Some arrive with advanced degrees and professional training. Regardless of education level, they contribute to our cultural diversity in a global age and are often highly motivated to engage in civic life. Omer Omer, for example, fled upheaval in Sudan and began working with the African Services Coalition in the late 1990s. A decade later, he runs the Greensboro-based organization, which has evolved from providing support for the city's African community to certification as a full-fledged refugee resettlement agency with a half-dozen employees.

That brings us to a second crucial point: unlocking the potential of leaders like Omer calls for innovative community responses. A number of faith-based, secular and educational institutions across the state, working closely with the N.C. Refugee Assistance Program, are pioneering ways to deliver the job training, English

lessons, medical care and other necessities refugees need for a strong start.

Law school steps in

For instance, when a longtime provider of services for refugees in the Piedmont discontinued its work last year, Elon University School of Law decided to help fill the void. Under a plan announced two months ago, students will team with law professors to offer refugees help with an array of legal services, such as applying for political asylum, citizenship and employment authorization. Work for low-income refugees will be free, and students will also focus on reuniting families separated by conflicts around the globe. Refugees receive crucial support, and students interested in immigration law and public policy get a great learning experience.

In recent years, as our population of refugees has grown, there's been an accompanying upsurge in nonprofit agencies dedicated to serving them. Founded in the Triangle in 2007, USCRI Raleigh last year received the N.C. Peace Corps Association's annual Peace Prize for its comprehensive efforts to settle refugees. The nonprofit outfits new arrivals with furniture and clothing, offers English lessons, help using the transportation system and provides much-needed friendship. Refugee Support Services of the Carolinas, started in 2006, is among the groups filling a similar role in Charlotte.

Their impact is considerable: Even with today's tight job market, refugees are still typically placed in jobs within six to nine months of arriving in North Carolina. Nearly 100 percent of them are still working in those jobs several months later.

At the grass roots

Together, these agencies remind us of another principle of public-private partnerships. Something as grand as innovation and transformed lives often starts at the grass-roots level - with community volunteers contributing even just a few hours a month. USCRI Raleigh, for instance, is an award-winning organization in part because it utilizes the talents of more than 100 volunteers, who have collectively given 600 hours of service over the past two years.

In these columns we frequently chronicle individuals and organizations that devote their entire lives to social service and innovation. Many of us are not in the position to do precisely the same. But, as the work being done every day across our state to serve refugees proves, smaller contributions of time and resources can make a major difference as well. In fact, they are essential to unleashing the talent of all our fellow residents.

For 20 years, Marlene Myers has led the N.C. Refugee Assistance Program, which steers about \$1.5 million in federal funds annually to nonprofit agencies around the state. There's never enough money to cover every need - and that's where private citizen involvement becomes more crucial every year.

"We like to say this is a public-private partnership - and that is so true," Myers says. "People have always been so generous to help with furniture, tutoring, orientation and just being a friend. We need that community support to succeed."

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