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# 300 African refugees now call Dillon home

by Tonya Brown

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### Tonya Brown

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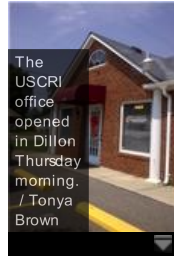
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DILLON – Thursday morning, the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) held a grand opening ceremony for its office on Lockemy Highway in the city of Dillon.



Since 2007, refugees from the African country of Burundi have been migrating to Dillon. There are about 300 refugees who now live there. According to its website, the USCRI "protect the rights and address the needs of persons in forced or voluntary migration worldwide by advancing fair and humane public policy, facilitating and providing direct professional services, and promoting the full participation of migrants in community life."

The refugees fled their home country due to civil war that started in 1993. Some reports estimate that has many as 300,000 people have been killed.

Samuel Ndikumana is a native of Burundi and has lived in the United States for many years now. He says he's been a legal citizen in this country since 2008. He works at the USCRI office in Dillon as a caseworker and translator.

"This office really means a lot for these refugees. Like I said, it's their second migration program. They came to America from other states, then South Carolina," said Ndikumana.

He says the refugees came to Dillon County because of jobs. Ndikumana says the county has several plants, including Perdue and Harbor Freight Tools that employ many of the refugees. They also work at fast food restaurants and other businesses in the area.

Nidikumana said, "When they have difficulty of employment they look for jobs anywhere they have anything open." The refugees primarily live in apartments on the east side of Dillon and officials say they're very dependent on the USCRI for many resources.

"This office means a place of contact where they know they can come and get the services that they so desperately need," said Gwen McArthur, " USCRI Social Worker. The office helps them find housing, schools and jobs and acts as a support system. The USCRI expects refugees to become self-sufficient within the first year of their arrival in the United States.

Ndikumana says the most important service in the beginning is teaching them the English language. "Everything they do, they would need ..someone to translate. If anything happens then at night, they call me. Anything goes wrong, they call, so the language is going to be a permanent thing for them to do and it's really a big barrier for them," said Ndikumana.

He and several retired educators in Dillon are working to teach English to the refugees. Two 20-year-old refugee women, who want to go by the names of Mliana and Janet, say they came to Dillon in 2008 and have already mastered the language. They say they really enjoy living and working in the community.

Officials say, this year, an 18-year-old girl became the first of the refugees to graduate from high school in Dillon. USCRI officials once the refugees learn the language, they have to then learn the culture.

"I think the cultural differences is on the strong points because a lot of things that

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we've been used to doing, that's not something that was a part of their culture and that's one of the things that we try to help get an understanding for and help them. Not get rid of what they know, but help to integrate some of the things that will make life better for them," said Susan McEachern, USCRI Social Worker.

The USCRI office will be open five days a week from Monday through Friday. You can find out more about the program by calling (843) 627-3663.

What's your opinion of the refugees settling in Dillon County? Leave us comment.

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