

Refugee Resettlement Interview

An interview with Mamadou Sy, COO of the Lutheran Social Services of the National Capital Area

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community engagement is one of the key things that we do because there is no resettlement without community engagement.

Often people see integration as a one-way street: refugees have to integrate. Well, that's not how it works. I think it has to be a dual path where refugees have to make progress toward integration, [and] all communities have to be open to that integration.

Another initiative that LSSNCA, our organization, is also launching is what we call Refugee Gives Back, and that is: let's go back to refugees that have been here for a few years and see how we can get them involved with the communities that helped them when they needed it the most. And that will be [able to] create a, what could be similar to a refugee corps, where, if there are needs in the community for volunteers, we can have refugees be part of it, so that people can see refugees not just as people that need help, but also people that are involved in the communities that resettled them. That is, I think, one way that we can make them active members of their new communities.

Because what we noticed in the refugee resettlement world is that every time we have [a] new family, we go to the community and say, we need volunteers. And people come out to help. Well, those same refugees have skills that the community can benefit from. Why don't we have them volunteer to teach someone Dari, Pashto, or Lingala? Why can't we have them, for those that are

in IT, why can't we have them at the libraries helping people with navigating the internet or helping them with homework?

ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITIES

One of the major hurdles to people being resettled in the United States is not the lack of opportunities, [it] is access to those opportunities. And what we do through all what we provide is really helping remove all of those hurdles, to resettlement, to self-sufficiency, as well as hurdles to long-term refugee integration. Because after all, that's the goal.

MAMADOU'S STORY

I was myself a former refugee. So I was resettled in the United States as a refugee from Mauritania in West Africa. In 1989, my family became refugees. So we went from having all to lacking all, and we landed at Senegal, where I lived in refugee camp for 11 years, and pursued my vocation there than I was resettled in the United States, and was given basically a second chance.

The way I put it is always that I have seen the worst of humanity and the best of humanity: the worst in humanity in being a refugee and being deported from your own country by authorities, and then the best of humanity by being welcomed in a completely foreign land by new communities, and be given the opportunity to rebuild that shattered life. So I felt the need to give back to the communities that welcomed me when I needed it the most.

RESETTLEMENT CENTERS

What that one-stop-shop did is create one roof under which refugees can access all the services that they need. It really helped address some of the hurdles to accessing services, and that is transportation. So now, the resettlement agencies, English as Second Language providers, the medical providers, the Department of Social Services, were under the same roof and providing a gamut of services that refugees needed to access.

EMPLOYMENT

A lot of people have been unemployed for many years when they are in those refugee camps. So it's really restored that hope, but also it's really that self-esteem that many of them have lost through not getting the opportunity to use their skills. Because when you are a refugee in another land, in many of these countries, you cannot work. Unemployment becomes basically your life. Imagine you are you have someone who had held a job, deported or fled their country, crossed international borders, went to another country to be just told, "well, welcome to this country, but guess what: you cannot work, so you have to try to live as you can." And when they arrive in the United States, and we help them find a job, what we've given them is something that many of them have not had for many, many years. So it's really reconnected them with humanity once again.

I see employment as a pipeline. If you clog the beginning of that pipeline, with both highly skilled and low-skilled, then you have less opportunity for the low-skilled, and then you also [are] preventing those that are highly skilled from moving up the ladder. And the ones that suffer ultimately [are] not just the families of those refugees or the refugees themselves, it's really the communities where they live.

TAILORING RESETTLEMENT

Now, with the Afghans, what we have seen is for many of these folks, their world collapsed in a matter of days.

Whereas in other refugee populations, it took years for the individual to experience war, to go through it, to flee their country, go to a first country of asylum, and stay there for years before they were settled. With the Afghans, [it] all happened in a matter of days. So many of these folks went to the office, and by midday are basically forced to leave their country. There was no time to plan for taking off all of those degrees that you have hanging on the wall, there was no time to reach out to your college and get your transcript, there was not even time to get your family to join you at the airport. It was a hasty exit. And because of that reason, many of them had some challenges, some trauma that also needs to be addressed.

I think the best approach to resettlement would be to acknowledge that all of them have gone through hardships, but also that the needs and the services have to be tailored to the individual for it to be a successful experience.

CONGREGATIONS

As you know, the history of resettlement in the United States cannot be understood without the contribution of congregations. Congregations have played—all denominations, all faiths—have played a major role.

[T]he Good Neighbor Program . . . is an initiative that we created a few years ago, and we said, "You know what, we need to get people from the community involved in the resettlement so that refugees are not seen as refugees of the agencies, but refugees of the communities." And for that to happen, let's go through the Good Neighbor Program, and recruit, vet and train congregations to be part of resettlement.

So, it really shows that the resettlement is really a tripod, where you need the federal government involvement through funding, you need resettlement agencies [for] their expertise. But also you need the community involvement. And congregations have always been

the backbone of resettlement, even when there [was] no great involvement from the federal government, congregations have always stood up to be the one to help. And we leverage those.

Our mission is really to bring people from all walks of life and to help work with those refugees as they make progress toward rebuilding their lives. And through that family, what I saw is really the resilience of refugees and their determination to be part of the fabric of this nation for not just now, but for generations to come.

TRANSPORTATION

One of the hindrances to employment is not just the language, but also is the transportation. Because we know that when you are limited in transportation, you are limited in opportunities. By giving them access to a reliable means of transportation, we have just increased the sphere of opportunity for that family. So now they can take their kids to the park, they can use their car to go shopping, and that dictates how much food they can carry and bring home versus if they were riding on public transport.

EDUCATION

[H]ow can we make sure that these thousands of highly qualified folks are able to find a way back to their field of expertise? ... If you look at what we traditionally see, we have systems that were built for what I call non-immigrant populations, and now, rather than changing the frame, what we want to do is often force people into prebuilt frames that don't work. Well, if someone is [a] refugee, what it means is that they have fled their country for a reason. ... For instance, if you look at the most recent case of Afghans that left a couple—after the fall of Kabul in August of last year, how can we expect that those people can reach out to the Taliban and ask them to express mail or FedEx them their degrees? That does not make sense. So we need to find in the United States ways that we can that evaluate the credentials without requiring that those come from the same

countries or the same governments that forced them to flee the first place.

I think [education for refugees] has to be a public/private partnership, one that would require the involvement of academic institutions, the state, with the federal government, so that there [are] some pathways for these folks to get access to education. And this is not just for what I call the most recent wave of refugees, but also even those that have been here for much longer. ... [W]hen someone arrives in this country, the first few months, are not focused on education. It's really how can I get a place to call home? I need a first job so I can take care of my family. And then it is really, maybe after that first year, [when] you see now that they have settled, they are looking at expanding that sphere of opportunities.

“FROM HARM TO HOME”

I left home in 1989—so 30-some years ago—and I have not set foot [back in Mauritania] yet, and the likelihood of that happening soon is slim to none. Many of the people that experienced the same plight with me back then are still in the United States or somewhere else in Europe and cannot go back to their country. They have rebuilt their lives, they have moved on, and that's what I call, from harm to home, and home is where you're at.

We are many in terms of our stories, our cultures, and our experiences, but one in being refugees and the desire to be successful in the United States. What I see often through those stories is really not just the desire for the person to share their own experience, but also a desire to help decision makers and the rest of the world see how what they do can impact lives in a very sometimes traumatic way. Many refugees will tell you that their path to getting to the United States was not very easy, so many of them have lived in a refugee camp for ten years, twenty years before they are resettled in the United States. And once they are on this end and have gone from harm to home, and that home happened to be

traumatic way. Many refugees will tell you that their path to getting to the United States was not very easy, so many of them have lived in a refugee camp for ten years, twenty years before they are resettled in the United States. And once they are on this end and have gone from harm to home, and that home happened to be the United States, then they really want to share, want to advocate. We know that advocacy would help, both in terms of educating people that those refugees will be joining, but also in helping, hopefully, people to impact some of the policies that often have also led to people being forced to flee their own countries.

But my hope ... is that we will, as a nation, remember that people do not choose to become refugees. It's actions or inactions of other people that force them to flee their country, to uproot themselves from everything they have known, and then go for the unknown with the hope of being able to rebuild their lives. If we get to a point where we know from all faith that we were all refugees, all of us, it's just a matter of when and how we arrived in this country—if we fall to that position, we will see refugee resettlement as a continuation of what we've been doing, and that is to welcome the most vulnerable among us and give them an opportunity to rebuild their lives. Hold their hand, assist them as they struggle. Struggle with them. Support them. And when they are successful it is us, as a nation, that becomes successful.

The U.S. history is really a history of people fleeing harm and seeking to better their lives. It's just a matter of when and how people are arriving in this country, but we are all migrants. If we use that as our common denominator, then the question is, how can we make sure that the folks that are arriving now are welcomed just as the people that arrived before them. How can we make sure that the same opportunities that we have, we're extending those opportunities to the people that are arriving now—people that have not chosen to leave home, but that were forced into exile,

forced to become refugees, forced to go to a foreign land and to start anew. **How can we welcome them?**

ROLE OF POLITICS

I have seen a lot of refugees in my life, and I have yet to come across one that went to bed planning to become a refugee the next day. It is often the actions of other people or the lack thereof that force people to not pack anything and leave.

Refugee resettlement in the United States has historically been shielded from the political divide, and it has benefited from support from both ends—Republicans, as well as the Democrats. And that is the way it's supposed to be. I know that not everybody supports refugees [and] refugee resettlement, that's known; but on the Hill, what we have seen is really bipartisan support to the program.

Now, if you look at the folks that are crossing the southern border to the United States, in any other part of the world we would have called them refugees. Why? Because [firstly,] they have well-founded fear of persecution; second, they crossed an international border. That's what the Geneva Convention defined as refugees. We never call them refugees, we call them "migrants," we called them...whatever. I think it's definitely some different labels that being applied to people that are experiencing the same plight and the same sufferings, but applied differently based on who's applying that label.

Related Readings

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