

Welcoming Immigrants and Refugees to Rhode Island

Kathleen Cloutier

DORCAS INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF RHODE ISLAND



Students from Dorcas International's programs give feedback on the direction of the public education system.

A 95-year-old nonprofit shifts the emphasis from struggle to triumph.

Immigration and refugee issues have seized the public's attention in recent months. In Rhode Island, which has a sizable immigrant and refugee population, Dorcas International Institute of Rhode Island has been helping newcomers to feel at home—and long-time residents to welcome them—through interaction and an emphasis on positive narratives.

Dorcas International Institute of Rhode Island, a 95-year-old nonprofit located in the heart of South Providence, offers a wide range of programs to help integrate the state's sizable immigrant and refugee population. It supports all individuals who are working to overcome cultural, educational, economic, and language barriers, empowering them to achieve self-sufficiency and to participate actively in their community. We envision all people, including immigrants and refugees, having the opportunity to reach their greatest potential, engage with their community, and fully contribute their talents—expanding prosperity and well-being for everyone.

Rhode Island's Immigrant Population

As of 2013, Rhode Island was home to 135,972 immigrants, who represent nearly 13 percent of the population.¹ This makes Rhode Island second only to Massachusetts among New England states as a host to newcomers and puts Rhode Island among the 15 states with the highest percentage of immigrants.² These immigrants contribute mightily to the economy, both as consumers and employers. As consumers, Latinos' 2014 purchasing power in Rhode Island totaled \$2.8 billion, while that of Asians totaled \$1.1 billion.³

There's something inherently entrepreneurial about starting a new life in another country, which may be why immigrants tend to start businesses at a disproportionately higher rate than native-born Americans. As employers, foreign-born entrepreneurs accounted for 12.9 percent of all Rhode Island business owners in 2010.⁴ In the Providence metro area in 2013, that percentage was even higher: 24.5 percent for "Main Street" business owners.⁵ From 2006 to 2010, revenues from Rhode Island's new immigrant business owners accounted for 13 percent of the state's net business income.⁶ And immigrant businesses are providing jobs: in 2007, the last year

photo Dorcas International Institute of Rhode Island

photo Courtesy the Rhode Island Historical Society



Activists at the International Institute of Rhode Island raise awareness of the plight of low-wage workers, circa 1929.

for which US census data is available, Rhode Island's Latino and Asian-owned businesses employed 5,726 people.⁷

While Rhode Island has not conducted a comprehensive economic development report specific to the state's refugee population, research in other states concludes that refugees also make a significant economic contribution to their communities. A 2014 study

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commissioned by the city of Columbus, Ohio, found that resettlement agencies spend about \$6 million a year, and from that investment, the surrounding region realizes an annual economic impact of \$1.6 billion, including nearly \$36 million in direct spending.⁸ In 2013 the Tennessee legislature's Fiscal Review Committee found that refugees had contributed almost twice as much in tax revenues as they had consumed in state-funded services over the past two decades.⁹

How Dorcas International Institute Helps

Immigrants and refugees make vital contributions to Rhode Island's economy and culture, but when they first arrive, they often need assistance. Dorcas International takes a two-pronged approach.

Wraparound Case Management

First, we provide a wide range of client-centered services and opportunities for newcomers based on our expertise in family literacy, adult education, workforce development, refugee resettlement, translation, US citizenship, and immigration legal services. We have integrated these services with wraparound case management (intensive, individualized service planning) to create a seamless continuum of support at each stage of our clients' integration. Our organization recognizes and respects the gifts and strengths of those we

serve: we see our work as an investment in a stronger and more connected community.

Here is an example of how wraparound services work: Marie U., originally from the Democratic Republic of Congo, arrived with her husband and twin sons in 2010. Her husband got a job with help from Dorcas International, while Marie learned English in our adult education center. We assisted with their children's school enrollment and health care access by providing translation services and a school liaison to facilitate the parents' full engagement in their sons' education. Volunteers mentored the family and helped orient them to American culture. Marie continued with her education, ultimately completed her high school equivalency exam, and enrolled in a training program we provide for careers in health care. We introduced Marie to the refugee community garden, where she eventually took on a leadership role. We later helped her prepare to become a US citizen, and using our immigration services, Marie was recently successful in petitioning to bring her mother and sister to Rhode Island.

Community Support

Secondly, we draw on the community to assist us with newcomer integration. In order to break down barriers, people must have meaningful opportunities for interaction with each other. At Dorcas International, we create these opportunities through our Welcoming Rhode Island initiative, whose objective is to bridge the divide between foreign-born and native-born Rhode Islanders in order to foster a more inclusive and welcoming environment. The initiative is staffed by volunteers.

Our Outreach Strategies

Dorcas International Institute has been extremely successful in developing community support through the use of outreach and education strategies that bring immigrants and community members together to increase their understanding and connection across differences in race, class, culture, language, national origin,

and more. We do that by providing information, education, and meaningful storytelling to those who do not always see the benefits of having immigrants and refugees in their community. We use these tools to reframe the local conversation about newcomers and attempt to shift people's perception of refugees and immigrants by defining them less by their struggles and more by their triumphs. We illustrate in very practical ways how welcoming our immigrant neighbors can be a force for economic growth.

Almost 100 immigrants and refugees have participated in My Story, Our Community.

We continuously collect and compile both qualitative and quantitative data regarding the benefits of immigration. This information goes into an annual report we issue to inform the Rhode Island public about the impact of our foreign-born population. In addition, we develop complementary publications as informative outreach tools for use at our agency-sponsored events and meetings. We also create "one-pagers" targeted to specific audiences, such as elected or appointed officials, business leaders, and employers. The research and data are also useful for social-media postings designed to stimulate further public discourse.

Faith groups and educators often ask for cultural competency training and/or information on the refugee resettlement process. We are currently transforming our agency website into a portal for information, resources, tool kits, and directories. Local educators, students, tourists, nonprofits, government agencies, and the community at large will soon have a single place at which they can find information on our foreign-born population, immigrant-owned businesses, cross-cultural competencies, and more.

The Importance of Stories

Although Dorcas International makes sure to have the most pertinent facts available to share, facts rarely change how people think and feel. In fact, the opposite is true: people tend to process facts differently based on their previously held understanding of a sub-



Participants map their educational goals and objectives.

ject, especially when the topic is emotionally or politically charged. We have found that presenting facts to people who do not already agree with us does not change what they think. People have to be ready to hear our information and be primed to believe it in order to actually process it. We use personal stories to prepare a more fertile foundation for our information. Through stories, we get people to process, remember, and share our information.¹⁰

Dorcas International's annual My Story, Our Community project, conducted in partnership with Providence College's Global Studies Department, has proven a successful model for effective community storytelling. Through it, we have been able to put a human face on our compiled data. Each fall, Providence College students interview local immigrants and refugees, documenting their success stories and introducing these stories at the annual My Story, Our Community public event. Almost 100 immigrants and refugees have participated in the project to date, and we now plan to use a rotating selection of their stories and photos as a traveling exhibit to be publicly showcased in each of Rhode Island's 39 cities and towns, creating greater statewide understanding of and support for our new neighbors.

These efforts give a sense of Dorcas International's strategic approach to ensuring that immigrants and refugees can fully integrate, with equitable access to services, economic opportunity, education, civic engagement, and safe and connected communities.

Kathleen Cloutier is the executive director of Dorcas International Institute of Rhode Island. Contact her at KCloutier@diiri.org.

Endnotes

- ¹ "New Americans in Rhode Island," American Immigration Council, 2015, <http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/just-facts/new-americans-rhode-island>.
- ² Jens Manuel Krogstad and Michael Keegan, "15 States with the Highest Share of Immigrants in Their Population," Pew Research Center, 2015, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/05/14/15-states-with-the-highest-share-of-immigrants-in-their-population/>.
- ³ "New Americans in Rhode Island," American Immigration Council, 2015, <http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/just-facts/new-americans-rhode-island>.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Encarnacion Pyle, "Refugees Bring Economic Boost to Ohio, Supporters Say," *Columbus Dispatch*, September 18, 2015, <http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/local/2015/09/17/refugees-impact-on-community.html>.
- ⁹ "Study: Refugees in TN Contribute More Than They Consume," *Tennessean*, via WBIR.com, November 13, 2013, <http://www.wbir.com/story/news/nation/2013/11/13/study-refugees-in-tn-contribute-more-than-they-consume/3514031/>.
- ¹⁰ Welcoming America's Reframing Refugees Messaging Toolkit; <http://www.welcomingrefugees.org/>.

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