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Virginia Adult Learning
Resource Center

Voices from the Field: Serving Refugees and Immigrant Integration

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Hello and welcome to the Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center's podcast series, *Voices from the Field*. This podcast series highlights the stories of adult education educators and learners from around the state of Virginia. I'm Elizabeth Severson-Irby, the literacy specialist at the Resource Center. Today our episode is going to focus on serving refugees in adult education programs. We will hear from program administrators and instructors and they will share how they are connecting with refugee partners, partnering with other organizations, and utilizing professional development opportunities to best serve the refugee population in their local communities. Thank you to our guest speakers for joining us. Can you all introduce yourselves?

Cathy Cabrey: My name is Cathy Cabrey. I'm an ESL literacy teacher at the Rappahannock Area Regional Adult Education program. I also serve as a mentor for other literacy teachers in the program.

Jason Thornton: And I'm Jason Thornton. I am the Executive Director at Literacy for Life, which is a community-based literacy organization in Williamsburg, Virginia.

Mary O'Brien: Hi, my name is Mary O'Brien. I am the ESL Program Manager and one of the instructors at Literacy for Life, and I work with Jason.

Host: Great. Thank you all for joining us today. Our first set of questions is going to discuss creative and innovative ways that your program is reaching out and serving refugees. So our first question is, can you describe one or two ways your program is reaching out to refugees?

Jason Thornton: This is Jason. I can speak to that. A couple of things that we're doing to reach out to refugees. So one is that we have relationships with several of our local churches. Primarily because we have tutors who are engaged in those local churches and have had ongoing relationships with those churches. Several of those churches in our area are actually sponsoring refugees, Afghan refugees in particular. And so, that has been one way for us to make contact with the refugees in our

community. Something else that we're doing as part of a program with World Education that we'll be talking about a little bit later on, I'm sure, is that we are partnering with Commonwealth Catholic Charities, which is based in Newport News, which is in our region. And they are referring the individuals that they serve to us for services through our program.

Host: Great, Thank You. And it is really important that programs start thinking about what are some of the ways that they are already embedded in the community that they can reach out to refugee populations and refugee families. So thank you for that Jason. Our next question is, can you describe one or two ways that your program is currently serving refugees?

Jason Thornton: This is Jason again. I can go ahead and answer that as well. So there are a couple of things that we're already, there are some things that we're already doing that are just a natural fit for serving refugees, I think. And then, there's something new that we're going to be doing in the near future. So, our program is built around the one-to-one tutor model. We do have classroom instruction as well, but it is built around the one-to-one tutor model. That's what we've done since our inception about 47 years ago. And, both Mary and I have had experience in regional programs where we were teaching refugees in a classroom setting. One of the things that we found to be the case with the refugees we were serving was that even for those who fell into the same level, as far as their education functioning level was concerned, they had very different needs based upon a number of different factors. Maybe it was related to the level of education that they had received in their home country and maybe some issues with literacy in their native language or other circumstances. And it was very hard, in our experience, to address the needs of refugees in particular through the classroom model. And so I think the one-to-one tutor model actually lends itself very nicely to working with refugees because you're able to address their needs very, very specifically, and so the instruction can be very highly individualized. The other thing that we're doing to serve refugees actually has to do with a new project that we received funding for through World Education. So, we have been selected as one of three programs in the nation who participate in the transforming immigrant digital equity program, what's also called TIDE. TIDE is a project of World Education that really seeks to dramatically expand access to digital, digital access first of all, so Wi-Fi access and also access to devices. And then as part of that, also expanding access to ESL instruction for immigrants and for refugees. We're one of the pilot sites and the idea is that this would become a scalable, sustainable model. So they're using us as one of their pilot sites in hopes of establishing a model that can be presented to other programs in the nation and that really optimizes the use of technology.

Host: Great. It's so wonderful to hear about this innovative way of using digital technology and reaching refugees that way, and so we definitely look forward to hearing more about that as that progresses. And it's very exciting that we're having in our state. So our next question is, can you describe one or two ways that you connect with refugee learners in the learning environment?

Cathy Cabrey: Okay, this is Cathy Cabrey. I can answer that question. I've been teaching, Afghan, students from Afghanistan for the past six years and what I've found is to be helpful is sharing some of the experiences that they have had in their own country. I try to visit an Afghan restaurant, go see art from their country, and learn a little bit about the history of their country so that we can have some common shared experiences, especially the food part. And when we get into lessons about food and

ingredients and cooking, I can show pictures of the Afghan food that I've eaten and the scenery from the Afghan restaurants that I've visited. So there's a common bond there. I also try to learn some words from their language when I teach them how to count to ten in English, I ask them to teach me to count in their language. And I often use the term "yad" for something they just have to memorize and not sound out. You know, put it in your "yad". And I think there's a relatable experience there. When I first start a semester, I will talk about my family, about my children and my grandchildren, and my home. And I ask them to share about their family, ask them to introduce their children if they're if they're online and they're in the room, ask them to give me a tour of their home using their cameras. And so, when we get into lessons about the home and vocabulary about furniture and about rooms that they can give me a tour of their home and show me that they understand what a kitchen is and understand what a bathroom is. And I try to build relationships with the students. If they had, I had a student ask me over Zoom how to fill out a form to order pictures from their school and we worked on that together. So it's beyond just the language learning. It's about building relationships with the students and helping them out in an individual way.

Host: Great. Thank you Cathy, and I do really like the emphasis there about building relationships and really, as an instructor or as a program, really taking the time ourselves to learn about the cultures and the languages of our students so that we come in with some knowledge and can kind of build on that. And like you said, creating those shared experiences. And that is one of the silver linings of Zoom, is that we do have that opportunity to get into the lives of learners more than being just in an educational space in-person. So, our next set of questions is going to talk about partnerships with local organizations that serve refugees. And our first question there is, what are some of the key partners that you connected with to help serve refugees? And what services do they provide and how did you connect with them?

Jason Thornton: So, this is Jason again. I've already mentioned that we work with Commonwealth Catholic Charities. And Commonwealth Catholic Charities has a number of supports that they provide for the refugees that they serve that include helping them get established with housing and food and even getting familiar with a basic level of English and with their children's school system. We also have partnered with churches, as I mentioned, but just as part of the way that we run our program overall, we try to address critical community needs. So for example, through our employee ed program, which the aim of our program is to help our learners get living wage employment, we're already partnering with postsecondary education partners to provide our IET programming. We're partnering with funding agencies like Virginia Careerworks, or we have some community foundations that we work with to get scholarships for workforce certification. And, we partner with businesses to help our learners find employment and so, our, the folks that we serve who are refugees, are going to be able to access those services as well. Under our Empowering Parents Program, we have partnered with local school systems to help our learners understand what knowledge they need to have to be able to effectively support their children in school. And so, we'll be making use of those partnerships and our services to refugees as well. And then, with our Health Literacy Program, which they'll have access to, we have partnered with local health care providers. So, we have special guest speakers come in from pharmacies or from, sometimes we take trips to the hospitals so they can get familiar with the healthcare system. So our program is structured in a way that we already have those partnerships in place and that will serve us well as we extend our services to serve more refugees.

Mary O'Brien: This is Mary. And two things that I'd like to add on to what Jason mentioned is, one thing that's not necessarily a partner per se, but social services. Something that we've realized is that many of our students aren't familiar with the types of benefits that they can receive through social services or that it even exists. And so, just making our students aware of those services and helping them apply for that if necessary. And another is as part of the TIDE project that Jason was mentioning in us trying to partner with some local programs or local Internet providers and device providers through the Affordable Connectivity Program to provide digital access for our students that will be coming through, through Catholic charities and that partnership.

Host: Thank you both for talking about the partnerships and services that you connect with, that it really provides a comprehensive view of all the different types of services that can be brought in to help refugees and different partners. So thank you both for that. So our next question is, have you encountered any challenges when trying to locate partners or when working with partners, and how have you addressed or overcome these challenges?

Jason Thornton: This is Jason again. I think our primary challenge has been two things, I would say. First of all, the system for refugee resettlement is kind of overloaded right now. They're receiving a lot of individuals from Afghanistan and Ukraine in particular. And so there's, that has made the pacing of moving forward with certain aspects of the partnership a little bit delayed just because of the capacity of the individuals that are working with our partners. So, I don't know that there's any real solution apart from our just being patient and being resilient. I think we're coming alongside them in a way that seeks to relieve some of the stress that they're feeling because of being overloaded and so I think they're anxious to work with us. But I do just think it takes a long time because they're trying to process so many individuals. And then I think the other challenge for us has just been getting familiar with some things that are new for us. So we've never had any real focus on digital equity or getting digital access for our learners. And so that's just the process that we're having to learn and invest staff time in to get familiar with. But of course, that's going to come naturally as we begin to enroll people in the program which we're expecting to do starting in September as far as the TIDE project is concerned. And I think that that will resolve itself as we just begin enrolling individuals and get more familiar with the process.

Host: Great. Thank you for mentioning that and I know that the whole system statewide and nationwide is definitely overloaded and so highlighting some of those challenges and the patience and just kind of being there as a support, I think is a really important aspect. Thank you. So our next question. Are there any services you would like to provide but have been unable to find a partnering agency. If so, can you describe those?

Mary O'Brien: This is Mary. I can speak to part of that. So probably, and this is something that's similar that maybe others are experiencing as well, but services that we would like to provide. Our two big ones are childcare and transportation. So something that we've experienced is that the churches that we're partnering with that Jason mentioned earlier. They've actually been fantastic in the sense of with the families that they're sponsoring that we are serving as well. They are assisting with that. So they are assisting with childcare and transportation, making sure the children are being watched by their church volunteers, trusted volunteers, and providing transportation for them to get to classes or tutoring sessions. So that has been wonderful. But as far as all of our students or refugee students, or just in general, that is something that is lacking. That's, that's tricky, That's a challenge and I think something that at times makes it difficult for students to attend classes and tutoring sessions. And something else that we would like to provide or to have access to is a more permanent space closer perhaps to

Catholic Charities offices that are easily accessible. So, we are in Williamsburg and Newport News is next to Williamsburg, but it's still about 30 minutes, 35 minutes from where we are to Catholic Charities. So being able to be closer to those folks that we would be serving down there would be something that we would like to be able to provide and have access for them to come there.

Jason Thornton: This is Jason. I would just add to what Mary said that with, particularly with COVID and the flexibility that we've been able to establish during COVID with virtual services and the flexibility also of the one-to-one tutor model, where folks can access instruction at a time and a place that's convenient for them. There are workarounds, but I think we still found that in some sense there's a real advantage to be able to do an intake and enrollment and an assessment in person. I think it puts our students at ease and helps them get familiar with the program, helps us establish some rapport with them. And so that's why I think we still would like to partner with somebody who could provide childcare and transportation, even in the environment that we're in where so many things have gone virtual.

Mary O'Brien: This is Mary again. I'd like to add one more thing to that, and that is some of the refugee students that we are going to be serving or are serving currently, they have little digital literacy and not a lot of experience. So for them, being in-person is, is ideal. So even though we do have access to do intakes and testing via virtually, they have trouble accessing that and therefore it does become a hindrance to them. So just having a place where they can come in person would be nice.

Host: Absolutely. And thank you both for that. And childcare and transportation, I think are the two biggest challenges that we see consistently in adult education and so finding some workarounds and connecting with partners are things that can help alleviate those barriers is key. So I appreciate your thoughts on those. And our last section that we're going to move into, we're going to talk about ways in which your program where you have implemented strategies and information from the Refugee PLC that ran in the spring of 2022. And so our first question there is, can you describe one or two key takeaways from the Refugee PLC that you and/or your program has put into practice?

Cathy Cabrey: Hi. This is Cathy and I can speak to that. The two main things that stuck out to me are using an asset-based approach for working with emerging learners. And the importance of training instructors on low-literacy virtual, virtual instruction. So as far as the asset-based approach, I think that the term, the growth mindset, really spoke to me that language learning is a journey and everyone starts at a different point. And that point is determined by things that are out of their control. Like how much exposure to English they had when they were young, and how, how much literacy they have in their home language and as we all know that directly affects their literacy abilities in learning a second language. And the importance of training instructors in low-literacy virtual instruction. Like Mary and Jason said, it's really difficult to find to eliminate the transportation and childcare barriers that prevents so many students from attending class. And I think that and taking into account work, family, and learning combined in a new country, it can seem daunting. What I have found in teaching online since COVID and actually all the last year, even though most of the classes went back to in-person, is that virtual learning has its place. Even now going forward without a pandemic because there are students out there who by virtue of where they live or their childcare requirements that those two things can prevent them from learning English. So in the virtual environment, it's really important that they have some digital literacy and there are workarounds to that too. I use a lot of popsicle sticks and if we

know screenshots from Zoom to teach them on their phone. Because most of my students attended English class on their phone. And I use adult relevant materials when I'm teaching vocabulary and grammar that depict the ones that help them face the challenges in their lives like how to pay rent, how to pay bills, how American school systems work for their children, and how to get a job. But I think that also you have to take into account that students with limited or interrupted formal education process information differently and a slower pace of instruction using more repetition and recycling. And I have added two elements that were outside of the program that I'm using to teach, but video reinforcements of the lessons and the vocabulary that we're taught during the instruction period for those students who need repetition and then those for those students who might have missed class. And I think that it's really important that you teach them how to practice at home, that's not, homework is not necessarily a thing that everyone experiences in their formal education. And so I've added that to my teaching methodology.

Mary O'Brien: This is Mary again. We did have a few takeaways from the training and there were three and they were more like knowledge, eye-opening type takeaways. One was the different types of statuses that refugees have, for example, humanitarian parolees. That was very new to me. I didn't realize that the stipulations put on those types of, that type of status. So that was new. The humanitarian visas, just the knowledge that was presented during that particular workshop was very eye-opening and informative. And because of that, and because of our partnership with Catholic Charities, we actually have added that as a question onto our internal intake because now that we are partnering with Catholic Charities, we want to make sure that we're aware of our students who are coming in on those, with those statuses so that we can connect them to additional services that they might not be receiving or that they might not be or that they might not know about. So we've added that to the intake. Another thing that I found really important and got value from was the culturally responsive practices that were discussed and being aware of cultural preferences, for example, and cultural differences, I should say, and using that information when matching students with a tutor. So for example, perhaps matching a female learner with a female tutor for comfort level and that type of thing. And so that was a key takeaway that we took into consideration with our matching. And a big one was the impact that trauma has on learning in general. And there was a really great part of that workshop that dealt with that. And I thought that was really important in thinking about what our students have experienced and though we can't understand what they've gone through, just being aware and sensitive to the fact that that will affect their learning and what's going to happen in the classroom.

Host: Thank you both Cathy and Mary. That was such a great synopsis of the refugee PLC from instructional tips and I really did appreciate Cathy, you talking about that video reinforcement for learners who happened this class are learners who are trying to practice at home. But like you said, teaching learners how to do that at home because while some of us may hold that as something that we expect our learners may already know, actually teaching them the skills and how to do that at home effectively can go a really long way. And then Mary, it's great to hear all the ways that you've kind of changed your intake and your matching process, and you brought up some of the culturally responsive and trauma-informed stuff. And I know that at VALRC we're planning to continue offering some more around those very high need topics this year. So stay tuned. That was a small plug. So our next question is, are there any strategies that you are planning to implement that you have not already?

Cathy Cabrey: This is Cathy again. I think one of the biggest lessons learned about placement as far as, quote unquote, levels of English and where we place a new student is assessing them, but starting at a basic level of letter and vowel sounds instead of, you know, can you read this passage? Are they familiar with the phonics that underlie reading in English? And I've discovered a great assessment tool through the ABC English program that I've been using to teach. But I hadn't figured out how to implement it in the virtual classroom until this year. And so I'm hoping to be able to take that assessment tool that starts with the "mmmm" sound for M and the "llllll" sound for L and assessing from that level up. So although a student may be able to speak and listen to English at a higher level if they aren't able to read and write at a close level than their, their education is not going to be consistent throughout the class that they're placed in. So as soon as you can assess a student's literacy needs, you can find and identify the gaps and make a plan for filling them, even if it's a multilevel class. So I think reading and reading and writing at the basic levels is an important assessment, assessment tool that I'd like to implement.

Mary O'Brien: Mary here. I would like to add a strategy that we're thinking of implementing that Cathy had actually mentioned earlier. In session three of the workshops, we learned about information on training ESL instructors on beginning literacy. And as we are continuing and moving forward with our partnership with Commonwealth Catholic Charities, we anticipate that we're going to be serving students that are at that beginning literacy, more students at that beginning literacy, perhaps than we're used to serving. And if that's going to be something really important, we, like Jason mentioned, use the one-on-one tutor models. So our tutors are volunteers. So some of them have an educational background, some of them do not. But either way, beginning literacy is tricky when you're trying to work with students at that, at that level. So implementing some of that information in trainings for our tutors as they are going to begin work with students at beginning literacy.

Host: Thank you for sharing those nuggets where you are trying to implement and what you're planning for the future because it sounds like the beginning literacy, both assessment and training tutors, is key. And that seems to be a very high need. And I think like you said, Mary, that that's going to be a very prevalent need as more refugees continue to come in. So that also helps us know and then leads into our next question about professional development. So what additional professional development would be helpful to further serve this population of learners?

Mary O'Brien: Mary again. I can actually speak to that in regards to what I just mentioned. And so something that would be wonderful for us would be additional professional development at that ESL beginning literacy level. So perhaps, in the workshop there was a sample lesson provided which was really great. And so just thinking about perhaps curriculum or other lesson plans that might be usable for tutors who are untrained, possibly untrained educators who are gonna be working with learners at that level. Also new instructors who are maybe just beginning or even veteran instructors who just aren't as familiar with teaching students at that level. So that would be a wonderful opportunity and I think if we can profession development geared towards that, or if that goes into more depth. And also perhaps a professional development on low-level digital literacy for those beginning literacy, ESL learners.

Host: Thank you all for your thoughts about the Refugee PLC, the partnerships that you have, the ways that you're reaching out to learners and serving refugees. This has been a very informative discussion and we really appreciate your time. And we would just like to say thank you again.

Mary O'Brien: Thank you.

Jason Thornton: Thank you for having us.

Cathy Cabrey: Thank you.