



WELCOMING REFUGEES IN RURAL COMMUNITIES



PROMISING EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD



WELCOMING
REFUGEES



INTRODUCTION

Refugees come to this country searching for safety and then for opportunities for education, employment, and ultimately to be part of a thriving community. Some newcomers make the large cities of the United States their new homes, and some follow the opportunities that present themselves in smaller and more rural parts of the country. Rural communities often have quite a bit to offer these newcomers: steady employment, a reasonable cost of living, social cohesion, and for many, the chance to live in a place that is similar in size to where they come from. While newcomers are usually drawn to rural places out of economic necessity, they stay when these smaller and more rural places start to become home. Refugees and immigrants feel welcomed when smaller and more rural communities have created programs, partnerships, policies, and opportunities that engage them. Rural areas also thrive because their U.S.-born population is typically older, while the younger generation is drawn to cities; refugees and other immigrants represent an opportunity for addressing population decline and revitalizing communities.

As the following four community profiles show, there are successful rural initiatives that are bringing together receiving community residents and refugees and demonstrating what is possible when all residents are connected, supported, and involved.

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THIS TOOL

While there are many positive examples across the country of refugee welcome in rural communities, this tool explores four groundbreaking community-based initiatives that are engaging, supporting, and welcoming refugees in rural areas.

In this toolkit, we highlight how different types of community actors are working together to create more vibrant communities for all. This includes:

- 4 Economic Development: Austin Area Minority Business Project**
Austin, Minnesota
- 6 Community Building: Cazenovia Welcomes Refugees**
Cazenovia, New York
- 8 Ethnic Community-Based Organization: Karen Society of Nebraska**
Madison, Nebraska
- 10 Faith Community: Cactus Nazarene Ministry Center**
Cactus, Texas

We examine some crosscutting strategies and trends that emerge from these promising practices, including:

- 12 The Importance of Building Partnerships**
 - 12 Engaging Refugees in Community Building**
 - 13 Focusing on Positive Messaging and Communications**
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Economic Development

**AUSTIN AREA
MINORITY
BUSINESS
PROJECT**



In the southeast corner of the high plains and frozen tundra of Minnesota lies Austin. Austin is a community of just over 25,000 people and houses the corporate headquarters of the Hormel Foods corporation. Austin’s demographics began shifting when more refugees and immigrants began moving to the community to work in the meat processing industry in the 1990s. Now the community is home to refugees from Sudan, Ethiopia, and Burma. Austin has worked hard to create a welcoming community for all residents, with a special emphasis on breaking down barriers to entrepreneurship. Recognizing that refugee small business owners face hurdles such as a lack of familiarity with American regulations, few business networks, and misunderstandings around legal issues related to opening and sustaining a business, the [Austin Area Minority Business Project](#) was created to help new business owners overcome these obstacles.

Economic development has long been a focus for Austin, which as part of a broader strategy to create a welcoming community, works to generate economic opportunities and financial pathways for all residents. Creating a community where all newcomers can thrive is central to the focus of the Austin Area Minority Business Project. This project provides economic-development legal services to immigrant and minority business owners and employees. Comprehensive services under this project include: business technical legal support and education; immigration legal services; holistic pro bono legal services; and longitudinal, holistic evaluation and outcome analysis. Recognizing the opportunity presented by the burgeoning foreign-born population in and around Austin to strengthen and diversify the local economy, the project partners provide supportive wraparound services to immigrant business owners and their employees.

The following partners work together to share expertise and ensure that participants in the program have every opportunity for success:

Development Corporation of Austin (DCA)

DCA serves as a Small Business Development Center (SBDC) satellite office for the Austin area. SBDCs provide assistance to small businesses and aspiring entrepreneurs throughout the United States and its territories. SBDCs help entrepreneurs realize the dream of business ownership and help existing businesses remain competitive in a complex, ever-changing global marketplace.

Immigrant Law Center of Minnesota (ILCM)

ILCM provides immigration legal services, education, and advocacy to low-income immigrants and refugees of all nationalities across the state. Specific activities supporting this project are outreach and education presentations with established community organizations to promote awareness of services; ongoing intake appointments, which provide screening for full representation and comprehensive immigration advice as well as brief service; full case representation, which primarily includes assisting individuals in submitting applications for immigration benefits to United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS); and representing individuals in immigration court.



Hispanic Advocacy and Community Empowerment through Research (HACER)

HACER works in concert with Latino communities to generate and access credible, relevant research in order to inform institutional decisions and public policy. Project partners collaborate with HACER to provide third-party evaluation services for the project. Research and documentation will allow for program expansion.

Ballard Spahr Pro Bono Team

The Ballard Spahr Pro Bono Team represents the commitment of the national law firm to community service through uncompensated legal services. Activities to support this work include the following: assistance with real estate law, such as commercial leases; leveraging household equity and assistance with small business legal issues, such as incorporation, business mergers and loans, contracts, taxes, wages and benefits issues, and vendor agreements; and support for clients in immigration cases.

Working together has allowed each of these organizations to bring their strengths to this unique partnership. Prior to this initiative, refugee entrepreneurs were unlikely to access comprehensive services, and they might have spent valuable time and resources on a business that couldn't succeed. To date, this project has served more than 15 new business owners in the Austin area and assisted in a variety of business ventures and needs. The project has engaged refugee service agencies in the community to help with outreach, and they have hired legal assistants and translators from within these communities. The project has also engaged translators and other service providers as champions for this work. Today, Austin's commitment to economic development and entrepreneurship is clear, with a thriving downtown that is home to new ethnic grocery stores, restaurants, and other businesses that are making a positive contribution to this rural community.

Community Building

**CAZENOVIA
WELCOMES
REFUGEES**



The village of Cazenovia is nestled on the shore of Cazenovia Lake in central New York and is home to almost 3,000 people. Founded in 1793, the village's historic architecture and beautiful main street have long made it a destination for those seeking refuge from the city. Today, a group of community members are working to make this village home for others seeking refuge, specifically recently arrived refugees. Cazenovia Welcomes Refugees is a community initiative that is building the multi-sector support that recently arrived families need to thrive.



In the spring of 2016, Cazenovia received funding from a community initiative called the Common Grounds Challenge Grant (CGCG). The CGCG committee and an interfaith collaborative started asking themselves how a small community like Cazenovia might respond to a global challenge like the refugee crisis. Out of this conversation and subsequent support by the CGCG, Cazenovia Welcomes Refugees was created. CWR members include representatives from sectors including education, government, faith communities, nonprofit, refugee resettlement, civic, business, and private citizens who are dedicated to 1) directly supporting newly resettled refugees as they integrate into American life, and 2) engaging the long-term residents of Cazenovia to create a welcoming place for refugees to live, work, go to school, and recreate.¹ Expanding from a small group of committed citizens to a collaborative initiative of community entities that together can support a family or families can be challenging. CWR has addressed those challenges in three ways:

Creating a Mission and Vision

Creating a strong mission and vision is key to a successful community venture. Being able to clearly articulate what the organization is about and its vision for the future can be highly motivating. When they are expressed clearly and with intent, and when they are communicated effectively to everyone, a mission and vision also express an organization's purpose to a broader community and demonstrate shared values. CWR's commitment to the process of creating that mission and vision gave the initiative a strong start for outreach and education. Being clear about how to talk about the organization is also a great way to support those involved in the initiative as they speak to neighbors and friends who may be feeling apprehensive or ambivalent about newcomers in the community.



Engaging Experts

Early on, CWR reached out to InterFaith Works and its Center for New Americans in nearby Syracuse, New York, which provides resettlement and post-resettlement services. Their expertise in resettlement and refugee support programming provided a general road map and helped CWR avoid many of the potential pitfalls facing community collaboratives.

Community Education

CWR has sponsored education events in accessible forums like the library and the local college campus to engage all residents in discussions on questions such as the following:

- How can a small community like Cazenovia respond to the global refugee crisis?
- How did CWR begin and who is involved?
- What progress has been made with the project to resettle refugee families in Cazenovia?
- What are the logistical and physical steps to settling a family in Cazenovia?

These discussions have also included panels in which New Americans who came to central New York as refugees shared their experiences, and experts from InterFaith Works' Center for New Americans explained the process of refugee resettlement and discussed federal policy around resettlement programs.

Building a broad base of support for a community initiative can be one of the greatest challenges facing coalitions. CWR's innovative approach to outreach has strengthened the community's ability to meet the needs of newcomers. In keeping with their mission to engage residents, the CWR steering committee also approached likely and unlikely allies in their community—everyone from the Community Resource for Independent Seniors to the Boy Scouts to numerous faith communities—and asked them to engage with the initiative. Their beginning ask was a simple, concrete question: "Consider the mission and vision of CWR, and consider your mission. From there, can you write a specific declaration of support?" This approach created the opportunities to engage new partners, to discuss any feelings of apprehension about refugee resettlement, and to provide a very concrete way for CWR to document the community's commitment and support.

*Ethnic Community-
Based Organization*

KAREN SOCIETY OF NEBRASKA



Two hours northwest of Omaha, Nebraska, lies the town of Madison. The 2010 census puts the population of Madison at just under 2,500 people. The town's largest employer employs just over 1,200 of those residents. This year more than 15% of the students enrolled in the Madison County School District are part of the English Language Learners program, and minority enrollment in the elementary school is 87%.² One of the more recent ethnic groups calling Madison home are the Karen people from Burma. They are moving to the community for a chance to be part of a small but diverse school district; to find well-paying jobs; and to create a space for themselves amongst the fields, grain elevators, and endless horizons. They are looking for a place to call home, and the Karen Society of Nebraska (KSN) is providing the support newcomers need to do just that. Founded in 2008, KSN's approach is to "join hands and work together as a family; we are leading our community in moving forward to achieve

self-sufficiency."³ This refugee-led organization uses an innovative model to serve their community and educate the receiving community about the Karen people across the state. A big part of their effort is refugee leadership development, which has been key to their success in scaling across Nebraska. They rely on a committee structure that decentralizes leadership and allows many in the community to be involved in ways that easily align with their skill sets and interests.



KSN Community Service Committee

This committee is designed to connect newcomers to services that promote integration and independence while making sure basic needs are being met. Specifically, these services include:

- Reading mail: utility bills, insurance forms, bank notices, appointment letters, court documents, police tickets, letters from the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), medical forms, etc.
- Filling out applications: employment, financial aid, food stamps, health insurance, housing, green cards, etc.
- Employment assistance: searching and applying for jobs, creating resumes, preparing for interviews, physical wellness checks, and orientations.
- Immigration assistance: filing for a green card, citizenship, travel documents, and the Refugee/Asylee Relative Petition.



KSN Cultural Committee

The KSN Cultural Committee is dedicated to preserving the culture and heritage of refugees from Burma. They work to maintain cultural identity and educate the community in a variety of ways, including participation in local festivals, events, and activities. Some of the ways KSN helps make Karen culture available to all is through language classes, dance classes, and classes that teach traditional weaving.

KSN Education Committee

The Karen Education Committee believes education is the key to future success for individuals and the greater community and that parent engagement is essential for success. Many families arrive with very little knowledge of the educational system. The members of this committee share their own knowledge and strategy to make sure parents and students understand the expectations of the school district.

KSN Women's Committee

The KSN Women's Committee provides an environment in which women can support one another, increase their education, and develop the leadership skills needed to reach their potential and attain self-sufficiency.

KSN Youth Committee

The goal of the KSN Youth Committee is to create a space where Karen, Zomi, and Karenni youth in the community can grow, be creative and unique, and feel empowered to reach their dreams and achieve life success. The Youth Committee is comprised of youth of all ages, including elementary, middle, high school, and college and university students, as well as adults interested in working with youth. Friendships, networking, and connections serve as a bridge for youth to make smooth transitions from one education area to another.

These committees are all volunteer-led, and the organizational leadership team creates opportunities for volunteer leadership development and growth. Giving many new residents the opportunities to share their talents and gain new skills is exactly how the KSN has been successful and able to share their program model and strengthen their organizational capacity as they serve the newly changing Madison community.

Faith Community

**CACTUS
NAZARENE
MINISTRY
CENTER**



In the dust-covered plains of the Texas Panhandle, small towns dot the interstate, and one of those towns is Cactus. Cactus, Texas, is a small community of just of over 3,000 residents. The population of the community grew during the 1990s and 2000s as many refugees began moving to the area to work in the meat processing industry and raise their families. Cactus Nazarene Ministries (CNM) is a ministry of the West Texas District Church of the Nazarene. It was founded in 2013 as Cactus Nazarene Ministry Center (CNMC).⁴ CNMC serves the growing diversity of cultures in Cactus and surrounding areas, primarily refugees and immigrants from Central America, Burma, Somalia, and Sudan. Through English classes, legal assistance, health clinics, sports ministries, after-school programming, family services, and more, CNMC has become the one-stop shop for Cactus residents and provides comprehensive services. CNMC also hosts Cactus Iglesia del Nazareno, Cactus African Church of the Nazarene, and Cactus Community Church of the Nazarene.

Some important areas of work include:

English Classes

Classes serve adult learners in the community and bring people from many of the different ethnicities and cultures together to learn conversational and workplace-based language skills.

An Immigration Office

Many residents require assistance during the naturalization process, and the CNMC serves as a location for lawyers from larger communities to come and meet their clients.



Health Clinics

In 2017, CNMC hired its first full-time physician; soon they will be opening The Well Health Center. The Well Center’s holistic approach will care for the whole person with an emphasis on family support. Medical missions will also continue to serve the community.

Children’s Programming

Summer lunch service, after-school programming, and block parties are hosted as part of their focus on youth development. Other programs include efforts to support academic achievement, a year-round sports league that uses soccer to engage youth and their families but also provides an opportunity expose youth to other sports. CNMC works closely with the City of Cactus and the Cactus school district to ensure that programming is reaching as many residents as possible.



This multi-service agency provides the backbone of support to a community that is isolated in many ways and has become a place of refuge and welcome for the many families in the area. Through the years, the programming had grown and become more community-focused, and where they once thought they were simply serving kids’ meals or providing coats, they have now come to recognize that their job is to build opportunities for families.

WHY IT WORKS

While these rural efforts are all unique and use different approaches, there are a number of common strategies they share that make them successful:

The Importance of Building Partnerships

Working together creates more sustainable projects. Partnerships are defined as “a collaborative relationship between entities to work toward shared objectives through a mutually agreed division of labor.”⁵ All of the examples cited have relied on partnerships in some way, whether those partners are schools, legal services, nonprofit organizations, or others. Successful partnerships require work on the front end, and they can be time consuming. The National Council for Voluntary Organizations has five recommendations for building lasting partnerships:⁶

- Agree to a shared set of values from the start
- Determine the commitment from each partner
- Set down the roles and responsibilities of each partner
- Establish who will lead the partnership
- Set this down in a contract Memorandum of Understanding

Following these simple steps is a great way to get started. To learn more about building and sustaining collaborations for refugee welcome, see Welcoming America’s [Get Started Guide](#).



Engaging Refugees in Community Building

Refugees come to this country with skills and talents to share, and engaging refugees in the projects and programs that serve their communities—and the broader receiving community—can be a positive experience for community-based projects and organizations and a positive experience for refugees themselves. The Karen Society of Nebraska is engaging refugee leadership in all facets of the organization. From the board of directors to the committee volunteers, these individuals are giving back, building their own skills, and strengthening the whole community with their commitment. The Austin Area Minority Business Project has also been able to utilize the skills and talents of refugee leaders in their communities both through employment with the project and as spokespeople for the value of the project. Engaging refugee leadership can also help break down language barriers and elevate levels of trust in the community. There are a few strategies adapted from the Community Tool Box that provide some guidance on diversifying your engagement:⁷

- **Know your audience** – We are all motivated for different reasons, so spend a little time listening to, learning from, and figuring out what motivates the refugee populations you hope to engage.
- **Recognize strengths** – We all bring unique talents, values, and experiences to the table and we all have something to offer each other in our communities.
- **Consider needs** – What are the most important needs in your community, and who can help you meet them? Being involved in community builds social cohesion and improves the well-being of all involved.
- **Support the other interests of the community** – Community collaboration and engagement are often built through reciprocal support. Showing your support for the issues faced by different facets of the community is likely to increase community support for your work. Refugees may have other issues for which reciprocal engagement might be helpful.

- **Recognize that groups are made up of individuals** – We are all different and having our uniqueness recognized makes us more likely to stay engaged.
- **Remain organized** – We all are more encouraged to be part of a community-building effort that has clear goals and expectations.

These steps are helpful ways to think about how to engage refugees in the community and have a larger and more lasting impact.

Focusing on Positive Messaging and Communications

Refugees add value to our communities, and rural and small communities are no exception. Sharing the value newcomers bring to their community is an important part of how programs, organizations, and initiatives can build support and engage the broader community in their work. The Austin Area Minority Business Project has utilized their relationship with the local media to tell the story of entrepreneurs and business owners, and through this positive frame, the economic contributions of newcomers are lifted up for the whole community to see. The Cactus Nazarene Ministry Center shares its tale and the tales of the residents of Cactus, Texas, through voice-recorded stories on their [website](#). These powerful first-person accounts of growth and of personal transformation through service are a special way to celebrate the demographic change of the community. The Karen Society of Nebraska has also made positive communications and the sharing of the story of the Karen people central to their mission, and they share the culture, traditions and language with the broader community through presentations, dancing, and storytelling. Cazenovia Welcomes Refugees also recognized the value and importance of communications and began building support for refugees in their community through open forum dialogues, educational events, and public discussions at the onset of their initiatives. All of these programs and initiatives have utilized one or more of the following promising practices in communication:

- **Engaging the media**⁸ – Media can be a positive force for changing public opinion and area media can share local impact broadly with people who may be unaware of refugee contributions.
- **Storytelling** – Great storytelling captures people’s attention and drives them to action. When facts and characters, logic and emotion, and cause and effect work together artfully, the resulting stories affect us in a deep way.⁹
- **Community dialogue** – Working to engage the whole community in public dialogue leading to change takes time and dedication. The most successful efforts are led by a diverse group of committed leaders who come together to drive the process.¹⁰

To learn more about how communication strategies can play a role in creating a welcoming community, see Welcoming America’s [Receiving Communities Toolkit](#). For tips on crafting positive messages, see [Reframing Refugees](#).



Utilizing a Place-Based Approach

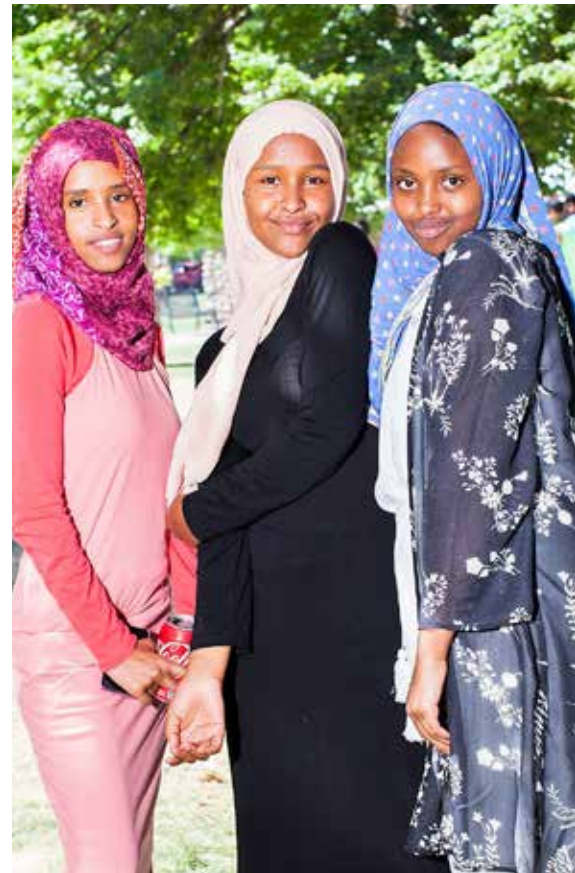
Place-based work brings together residents in their local environment to address community needs by harnessing the vision, resources, and opportunities of community members. Place-based approaches are long-term, collaborative efforts that give power to the community and recognize that success might look different from place to place.¹¹ Cazenovia Welcomes Refugees is utilizing this place-based approach in all of their efforts. From engaging unlikely partners to creating volunteer opportunities for young people, they are truly harnessing the power and potential of Cazenovia to welcome refugee families and ensure that they can thrive. The Karen Society of Nebraska is also utilizing a place-based approach to expand their services in Madison, Nebraska, knowing that the needs and assets of the community are different in small towns and tailoring their services to meet those needs and address the different challenges that refugees may face in the community. Successful place-based strategies share the following characteristics:

- **Ground up** – The needs, opportunities, plans, and actions are coming from the communities and are not driven by those with more power and authority.
- **People-centered** – Relationships are at the center of a place-based approach and knowing that all people bring value and assets is a driving factor in decision-making.
- **Long-term** – Creating goals that focus on what the community needs for future sustainability, and avoiding being shortsighted in planning programs.

Utilizing a place-based approach means so much for rural communities, who may have strengths and opportunities that don't fit inside the traditional model of refugee support but that may be the key to supporting newcomers in the area.

CONCLUSION

While rural communities may not always have the same financial and human resources as their urban and suburban counterparts, these examples show that many have a strong desire to invest in their newest residents and create opportunities for all. Rural and small communities all over the country are welcoming refugees and immigrants. Refugees are finding opportunities for employment, education, and ways to give back to these new places, ultimately making these communities their home. These are just a few examples of the diverse communities and organizations that are contributing to that welcome. We hope these replicable models and promising practices can provide inspiration and guidance for others working to support their changing communities.





ENDNOTES

1. From the Cazenovia Welcomes Refugees Mission and Vision Statement
2. <http://nep.education.ne.gov/Schools/Index/59-0001-002?DataYears=20162017&type=ELEMENTARY>
3. <http://www.karenksn.org/aboutus/index.html>
4. <https://www.cnmstories.org/blank-mpvle>
5. World Bank, Partnerships Group, Strategy and Resource Management, “Partnership for Development: Proposed Actions for the World Bank” (discussion paper, May 20, 1998), p. 5.
6. <https://knowhownonprofit.org/how-to/how-to-develop-partnerships>
7. <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/participation/encouraging-involvement/involve-those-affected/main>
8. https://www.welcomingamerica.org/sites/default/files/Receiving-Communities-Toolkit_FINAL1.pdf
9. <https://www.philanthropy.com/resources/toolkit/good-storytelling-an-overview/72>
10. <http://srdc.msstate.edu/tide/files/resources/organizingforchange-evdem.pdf>
11. <https://www.iriss.org.uk/resources/irisson/place-based-working>

RESOURCES

- <https://www.ilcm.org/our-work/projects/austin-area-minority-business-project/>
- <http://www.karenksn.org/index.html>
- <http://www.cazenovia.edu/news-and-events/event/cazenovia-welcomes-refugees>
- <https://www.cnmstories.org/blank-mpvle>

Welcoming America Resources

[Building and Sustaining Community Collaborations Guide](#)

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