

SEEKING REFUGE: UNDERSTANDING THE REFUGEE AND ASYLUM PROCESS

BY IAN WATKINS

Topics of conversation surrounding immigration, refugees, and asylum seekers seem to be routinely in the spotlight these days. They are also topics that have been a persistent aspect of the American story. Despite this, misconceptions surrounding these topics seem to be growing, and confusions are just as persistent as the topics themselves. In February 2016, the Maine Humanities Council held *Seeking Refuge: Understanding the Refugee and Asylum Process*, a free, public, panel discussion that broke down the process here in Maine. Discussion touched on the screening that determines who can come to the U.S., the policies and laws supporting the process, and the everyday logistics of refugees and asylum seekers arriving in Portland as they begin new lives.

Offered in partnership with the Maine Historical Society and Portland Public Library, *Seeking Refuge* included

panelists Sally Blauvelt (Portland Field Office Director, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services), Barbara Taylor, Esq. (Senior Staff Attorney, Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project), and Tarlan Ahmadov (Program Director, Catholic Charities Maine, Refugee & Immigration Services & Language Partners). The Rines Auditorium of Portland Public Library was full of audience members, including immigrants themselves, trying to understand this complicated process.

Sally Blauvelt described the legal definition of a refugee as “a human being who has been uprooted from their home and compelled to flee their national borders as a result of events that cause them to be at fear for their safety.” “Home,” she noted, can be many places and include many people.

According to the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), there are currently

20 million people forced out of their country of origin, not including internally displaced populations, which include 20 million additional people. Of the roughly 40 million refugees, a mere 1% is resettled. This 1% of the world refugee population finds resettlement all over the world, and in consultation with the U.S. State Department, the UNHCR determines the number of refugees who can be resettled in the United States. In 2016, the number of refugees determined to enter the U.S. was 85,000. All of them undergo an exhaustive screening process. According to Blauvelt, “the scrutiny with which we look at refugees is greater than any other immigrant population by a long shot.”

Tarlan Ahmadov (Catholic Charities Maine) provides support systems for all refugee populations entering Maine. He described how, after the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services approve refugees, the U.S.

State Department then works with nine national entities to determine how refugees enter each state. Research is conducted state by state and includes a focus on housing availability, current refugee populations in the particular state, employment, and other economic factors. According to Ahmadov, 425 refugees will enter Maine in 2016, many of whom are joining family members who have already resettled to the state.

Ahmadov shared the demographic face of refugees in Maine: the largest populations are Iraqi and Somali, followed by people from Myanmar (Burma), Russia, South Sudan, Sudan, Iran, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Maine currently has a refugee population of over 18,500, most of whom having entered the state in the last 40 years.

Catholic Charities Maine assigns case managers for all entering refugees, conducts research on their families, assists in finding employment, and helps find schools for children, all of which are core provisions required by the U.S. State Department. But the end goal, according to Ahmadov, is “self-sufficient, self-reliant members of our society.” Individuals receive a modest \$925 reception placement fund, but many are thousands of dollars in debt after entering the state. Ahmadov stressed the lasting difficulties

undertaken by refugees; only after one year can refugees apply for a Green Card, and after five additional years can they apply for citizenship.

Entering the U.S. as a refugee requires many steps and many screenings. But refugees aren’t the only ones entering the U.S. Unlike refugees, asylum seekers ask for safety and protections upon arrival in the country. Many asylum seekers enter legally with a visa they have received from a U.S. Embassy, while others enter EWI (Entered Without Inspection), usually over a land border. The asylum seeking community in Maine is distinct, including populations from Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Sierra Leone.

Being granted asylum is a painstakingly long process, and it can sometimes take years to have a case heard. According to Barbara Taylor (ILAP), applications are often rushed in an effort to receive a work authorization, hurting the chances of approval. Many asylum seekers fall out of legal status during their long wait for asylum. According to Taylor, “of the 11–13 million people in the U.S. without legal status, a large chunk of them had legal status and then lost it because it expired or their circumstance changed. People move in and out of status all the time.” In the words of an asylum seeker attending *Seeking Refuge*, “We can feel that we have

become useless.” Other attending refugees and asylum seekers offered similar sentiments, asking what more they could do themselves to aid in the process of their resettlement.

New populations of Mainers will be an important topic for some time to come. Their experiences deserve respect, their culture appreciation, and their determination admiration. *Seeking Refuge* created space for the kind of conversation communities need to be having these days—and provided an example for the importance of the humanities in addressing contemporary topics. Immigrants to this country

bring with them an enormous breadth of history, depth, and experience,

all of which can be embraced and celebrated as valuable assets to Maine communities. As stated by Sally Blauvelt, we should all “shine a light on misconceptions and name them through education.”

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Meaningful exchange—in this case, facilitated by a panel—provides the opportunity to engender understanding and build community.

PHOTOS: DAN D'IPPOLITO

