

## **Voices from the Field: A Conversation with Exodus**

### **Refugee Immigration**

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In this Voices From the Field, we explore the roles that Exodus Refugee Immigration plays in our state of Indiana. Kari, Marian, Grace, and I met to discuss the ways that Exodus is having an impact in Indiana.

**Beth:** What are your major activities as an organization?

**Kari:** We are a refugee resettlement organization contracted with the US government to provide resettlement services to clients who are approved to come to the United States through the US Refugee Admissions Program. We have an office in Indianapolis that was established in 1981 and an office in Bloomington that started in early 2022. We welcome people who are newly arriving to the country through the resettlement program and offer a variety of services to them as they're getting settled. We provide housing for the clients that are placed with our agency. New clients are connected to a case manager who helps with things like establishing medical care and applying for public benefits. They'll also get connected to our education team for

English classes and other trainings like cultural orientation, employment training, and financial literacy. They'll be assigned to an employment specialist who will help them find a job. Then we have a whole host of supportive programs that people have access to. The initial program is 90 days (about 3 months), and then there are supportive programs that go well beyond that. Our employment services are available for up to five years. We have a women's program and a youth program. We have built out a mental wellness team. We have a legal team that's new in the last few years, which employs four immigration attorneys and some legal assistants as well. When the Afghan evacuation happened in 2021, we had lots of clients who needed to apply for asylum because they came in on a temporary status and needed a more permanent option. Our legal team files asylum applications and helps clients apply for green cards or family reunification, as well as helping with a variety of other legal needs. In addition to people with refugee status, we work with other "immigrants of humanitarian concern," as we call them, such as people who are seeking or have been granted asylum. We serve Cuban and Haitian Entrants, who have a special eligibility for our program. We also work with refugees who have moved to Indianapolis or to Bloomington from other places. They may have been resettled in Texas, for example, and moved to Indiana to join friends or family members. They're still eligible to receive our services for up to five years from their date of arrival in the country. We can help with things like finding a job or transferring their benefits. We also do a lot of advocacy, because there are lots of systems issues that affect our clients, for instance with the BMV, with FSSA, with fair employment or with language access. We also try to focus on advocating for those changes that may be needed.

**Beth:** Is there advocacy for just like the public climate, like how people are feeling about welcoming immigrants? Are you involved in that in any way?

**Kari:** I would say our development team is always trying to show what we do to welcome people, why it's a good idea to welcome refugees and immigrants to our communities, and what they bring to our communities. We try to also be a public face of welcome. That's a part of what we do as well.

**Grace:** And here in Bloomington, just because we have a development team of one, I step in a lot and do our Refugee 101 presentation and meet with all sorts of folks. But primarily I'm meeting with employment partners. I'm the manager of employment and education programs here in Bloomington. I really focus on meeting with those members of the community, but I've spoken all over. One of our primary missions is to educate and inform.

**Beth:** So, are there roles that have opened for you in Indiana that you didn't originally anticipate? Or I mean, maybe a different way of saying that is how have your roles changed over time? Since 1981?

**Kari:** It was a much smaller operation back then. Over the past 40 years, I think lots of things have changed. One of the challenges of resettlement is it does depend on the national climate. Depending on the presidential administration, for instance, we've seen ups and downs concerning general support for resettlement. We've also seen changes in the populations that we serve. For instance, we have welcomed lots of people from Burma over the past 20 or 30 years. When I started at Exodus in 2012, our arrivals were primarily people from Burma, mostly Karen, Karenni, or Chin folks. Then our population shifted. We started to welcome a lot of people from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Then we had the Afghan evacuation in 2021, and we welcomed over 300 Afghans in a short period of time. So, our population has shifted depending on what's going on in the world. Populations change and the needs that we see change, so our activities shift in response to that.

**Beth:** I brought a class to visit your office in 2018. And at that time things were kind of slow.

**Kari:** Yes, that was because of the presidential administration and their stance toward immigration. The President directly determines the refugee admissions number for each year, so we're really affected by whether the President is friendly to our cause. During his last year in office, President Trump set a refugee admissions goal of only 15,000, which is tiny. Now it's 125,000—obviously that's a huge swing. In 2018, though, things were really cut back. A lot of resettlement offices closed around the country. Exodus also went through a lot of layoffs after Trump was elected because we just can't sustain the same level of operations if we have that many fewer people coming. There are some ups and downs related to that, but I think that has also caused us to really build out our private funding and find ways to provide stability in our operations.

**Marian:** The population of Indianapolis has changed. And we've seen more people who resettled as refugees in other states moving to Indiana and being eligible for services. The Haitian population has been growing in Indianapolis, so we have been serving more of them. I've been at Exodus since 2019. Since I've arrived, we've opened a program for seekers of asylum. That's new. We've seen that even if refugee admissions numbers change, we're still serving the people who are here in Indianapolis. The refugees who are in the United States are eligible for services for five years from their day of arrival.

**Beth:** It seems to me that 125,000 is still a low number. I know it's a politically sensitive number, but it seems to me that this country could welcome more people than that each year and resettle them without a whole lot of pain.

**Kari:** I think the highest number we ever had was about 207,000 in the early '80s. But you're right, it still seems small. It was the same target last year (125,000) and we didn't even come

close to hitting it because so much of the infrastructure is not there anymore. That all had to be rebuilt after the last administration, and I think we probably may not even see 125,000 again this year. We expect 650 new arrivals through the Indianapolis office and 150 through the Bloomington office in the fiscal year 2024. But to provide some context, last year, we served over 1,800 people through one of our other big federal grants. There are a lot of people other than new arrivals who are continuing to receive other services.

**Beth:** That gets into the next question, which is about challenges that you've encountered in the last few years. Is there anything you want to add about the ups and downs of presidential administrations and priorities there? Or funding or anything else?

**Marian:** Housing.

**Kari:** Housing is scarce and so much more expensive than it used to be (see Fultz, 2023). That's a major challenge in addition to the ups and downs of the refugee admissions number. Housing costs have skyrocketed. I think Indianapolis went up more than any major US city; a 30% increase. We might have families who are paying \$1,700 a month in rent, yet the jobs that they can get are going to pay \$16-\$17 an hour, usually because of a lack of English skills or US work experience. Everything has just gotten tighter.

**Marian:** Speaking of new roles, I did not imagine I'd be creating a virtual English program, but that's just what we had to do. It's one of our requirements to enroll refugee clients in their first 90 days in an English program. And we are fortunate to have an in-house English program. Getting clients into other local adult Basic Ed programs can take more time. And during Covid, because we were able to develop a virtual program, we were taking clients from another agency in Ohio because they couldn't get their clients into classes at a local school. They'd come to our classes virtually. Within a couple of weeks, we took our in-person curriculum, and we started bare

bones, creating lesson plans for WhatsApp. And then we moved to Zoom. And we've had so much volunteer support to help adapt our curriculum for virtual lessons. That has completely changed our whole program. Now we have in-person and virtual classes. And our attendance numbers are the highest they've ever been in ten years. With the virtual classes, while there are downsides, clients can attend more frequently because they don't have to get on a bus with their kids for an hour and a half to get to class. We are one of the few programs in Indianapolis that lets you bring your kids to class. It's challenging as a parent of young kids to bring your kids to class. Our in-person classes tend to be one group of people with grown kids or no kids. Families with smaller children and long bus rides, they're choosing the virtual classes.

**Beth:** Do you offer the classes in the evenings?

**Marian:** They're all in the mornings. Our program really is focused on people in their first few months in the States before they start employment. You can continue in the program beyond that. But for people who attend the morning classes, usually they aren't employed yet. Once people do start employment, a lot of them, if they're working the night shift, they're still able to roll out of bed and come to an 11:00 A.M. virtual class.

**Grace:** We've been lucky here in Bloomington to be able to piggyback on the virtual classes that Marian created. We do have some students who struggle to attend those classes and would prefer an in-person option. But they are required to attend classes to maintain their state benefits, so I remind them of that. I understand that it's not an ideal class situation, especially if you've never been in a virtual classroom before. I'm sure we would all prefer to be in the same room together. But I explain that it's better than nothing, and we can get them in immediately because the LCORE (Language, Cultural Orientation, and Readiness for Employment) classes have rolling enrollment. You can join any class any time--you fall right in.

Students who can't do the LCORE virtual classes can take classes at Broadview Adult Education Center in the Monroe County School Corporation. But they must go through the assessment and then wait for the next session to start. So, we're lucky to have the LCORE option here. Because if we didn't have LCORE, Broadview would be our only option, so some students could be here sitting around for a month and a half before they could get into an English class. By then they might have a job and that would be it, such a missed opportunity. The fact that we opened our Bloomington office with LCORE as a ready resource has been so amazing for us and for our clients. Like Marian was saying, though, we've also identified a large group of people who really want to continue taking English classes but can't because they work a 9-5 job. I worked with the Immigrant Welcome Center and the Department of Workforce Development and Goodwill and Broadview to create a partnership for folks who have a traditional work schedule but still want to go to English class. Those numbers are growing. They meet on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. Two days are virtual, and two days are in person. And they're doing it at the downtown library branch.

**Beth:** You mentioned LCORE. What does that stand for?

**Marian:** Language, Cultural Orientation, and Readiness for Employment.

**Beth:** What are some promising successes or results that you've observed recently?

**Grace:** For our new Bloomington office, having the availability of the institutional knowledge of the Indy office has been really helpful. For example, Marian just handed me the assessment pack (to assess student English level for LCORE classes). For us in Bloomington, it's just been a seamless opening. And then also being able to connect with the community resources and to start this English at-work class. I started in March of last year, so I've been doing this work a little under two years.

**Kari:** A major success is how much more access people have to our English classes now that we have both the virtual and in-person options. The virtual classes started as a painful necessity when COVID hit us all. But I think it's turned into something that has really enabled a lot of people to keep coming who otherwise wouldn't be able to.

**Marian:** We have 23 volunteers that we work with now on top of three staff teachers teaching classes. We're running eight classes a day, and the volunteers have jumped in to help with curriculum in many, very substantial ways.

**Kari:** I want to make sure to mention our literacy program. When I started at Exodus in 2012, we had a significant number of our clients who had no formal schooling; mostly Karen and Karenni folks at that time. We realized that there was a different type of need there. I had my master's in teaching ESL, but I had never had any training on what you do with someone who doesn't have first language literacy. That's a whole different situation. At the time I went through graduate school, I don't think that training for teaching adults with low literacy was really on the radar of a lot of programs. I honestly felt like I was floundering even as a trained ESL teacher because I just didn't have that specific type of pedagogical knowledge. Over the past several years, we've really worked to figure out how we can help clients who are at that starting point. We connected with Ginger Kosobucki, who is now at the Immigrant Welcome Center. Ginger and I did a study that was published in this journal (Kosobucki & Moore, 2021) to see what people's needs were, which has really helped to provide a foundation for future work. We at Exodus also started our own pilot program for literacy learners in the months just before COVID. We continued to work on that, and also partnered with Pathway to Literacy to help move forward on providing appropriate services to literacy level learners in our community.

**Marian:** I would add Indy Reads, the public library system, and several teachers at different



school corporations, all coming together. A teacher at Washington Township, a teacher at Central Nine, an instructional, and a teacher at Catholic Charities. We've all been meeting regularly over the past three years to develop and pilot a curriculum. The Pathway to Literacy program has been developed under the leadership of Ginger Kosobucki at Immigrant Welcome Center in collaboration with a cohort of teachers from Exodus, Indy Reads, Washington Township, and the Indianapolis Public Library. It's wonderful. We're using the curriculum and sharing it with other programs in other states. Ginger Kosobucki presented on it at INTESOL. Ginger and Kari presented on it at LESLLA. We are trying to get the word out there because there are just so few resources and those clients are getting overlooked.

**Beth:** What are some federal or state policies that are on your radar currently? Is there anything that we can think about in terms of advocacy?

**Kari:** Right now, we're keeping an eye on some laws related to driver's licenses. The Biden Administration has been creating niche programs for specific groups, such as the Afghan Placement and Assistance program and the Ukrainian Humanitarian Parole program. There is a federal exemption allowing Afghans who were part of that program to get driver's licenses, and the State of Indiana approved Ukrainian Humanitarian Parolees to get driver's licenses, but we haven't seen other nationalities with the same legal status given that permission. Things have gotten uneven. So, we're keeping an eye on a bill in the State of Indiana that would give other people who have humanitarian parole the ability to get a driver's license, such as Cubans or Haitians who have parole. Because why Afghans and Ukrainians but not Cubans or Haitians?

**Beth:** Anything else in terms of policies?

**Kari:** The process for claiming asylum seems to be getting harder. For instance, there's a new program for people from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. Again, I could maybe go into

more detail in a written form, but just trying to keep an eye on what we want to advocate for people to be able to come and claim seek asylum. We don't want that to be a hard pathway for people. There's just always a lot of maneuvering, it seems like, going on politically around those kinds of things. That's another thing we always keep an eye on.

**Beth:** How can English language practitioners in Indiana be supportive of your work with newcomers? How can members of INTESOL and our international readership be supportive?

**Kari:** English teachers are wonderful people who have a sympathetic heart for newcomers. They work with newcomers every day. We really appreciate all those teachers who make a big impact on the lives of our clients. A thing to remember about refugees is that they're in a time of intense upheaval in their lives. They've just moved across the world. They're having so many stressors in their lives. They're in a new community. They have immediate pressure to find a job and get established. It's just a stressful time, and I think it helps a lot to give newcomers some slack and try to be understanding of the huge transition they're going through and the ways that may come out. We also need to understand that sometimes, as much as obviously we all believe in the importance of education, parents are focused on basic needs. Stable housing and income might come first on their priority list before they can think about other needs. They're taking in so much new information, going through an intensive training schedule, and that's a lot. People are going to need patience. They're going to need repetition. Don't get frustrated if they don't remember everything right away.

Another challenge we see is that sometimes parent and child roles reverse a little bit. Kids tend to pick up English faster or they may already speak some English. And so they can get put in a position of interpreting for their parents or explaining things to their parents. And we work hard to avoid that by, for example, hiring a professional interpreter to communicate with parents

rather than putting a child in a position to do that.

**Marian:** Remember the importance of repetition and think about the way that trauma impacts the brain. A brain under stress is not a good learning brain. So, take notice of that in your students. They may be going through a period where participation is difficult, and that might be different on different days based on what they're going through.

**Kari:** Refugees are coming to the US permanently; they're going to be here for the rest of their lives. They're building their lives here, so we're trying to focus on self-sufficiency: teaching people how to do the things that they're going to need to know how to do rather than doing things for people. Volunteers who work with a family, for example, need to make sure that they're supporting in a way that focuses on that client being able to do things for themselves ultimately. That's key because we're not going to be around forever to do things for people. That's never our goal; it's to teach and support. Our clients are more capable than others give them credit for; they have already navigated a lot of really difficult situations. I remember a conversation I had with an older client who felt really discouraged about learning English: "I've never been to school. I'm not going to be able to do this." I asked her to think about all she had already overcome in the past, how she had gotten her whole family, all her kids, to the US. And if she has already done all that, she can come to English class. I promised her we would take it slow.

People have already done a lot and they're very capable. There are some things we need to help them figure out, but they're totally capable. So having that mindset and focusing on people's strengths and what they can do, rather than assuming they're never going to be able to adapt. Creating dependency isn't helpful for anybody.

**Beth:** If you could have any wish granted for newcomers that you work with, what would it be?

**Grace:** I grew up in Orlando, Florida, one of the cities that was chosen after the Vietnam War as

a resettlement city. I was so lucky to have the opportunity to grow up in a place that was so multicultural. One part of town is Little Saigon. You can go there and feel like you were in Vietnam. Later, when I visited Vietnam, I was amazed because it felt familiar. Having that experience in my childhood really laid the foundation for what I believe. I understand what newcomers can bring to a community and how they can revitalize a community. I think that's what's happening in the Midwest now. After urban flight caused people to leave these big communities, settling refugees there brings back the vitality. I saw firsthand how it made my childhood so much richer. When people in the US hear the word, "refugee," their mind goes to a million different places. I love giving the Refugee 101 talk in our communities because I get to help people understand how refugees contribute to their lives. I think that my dream is to see some of these barriers fall.

**Marian:** I think I would want them to feel safe where they are and welcomed. The climate that we're in now is difficult. Like Grace said, when people hear the word refugee, that can lead them to a misinformed idea of who the person in front of them is. I think that there are so many systems that are just so needlessly hard. I wish that the way would be made easy for everybody to be included. I think Indiana is becoming a more welcoming place for literacy learners because of Ginger Kosobucki and all our work with the Pathway to Literacy Initiative. Broadview now has a class for emergent readers. And IUI's TESOL program has an emergent readers course. A lot of schools still don't have resources. And the way that the testing and programming and funding is set up in Indiana seems to exclude literacy learners. The citizenship naturalization process excludes literacy learners. I hope for a more inclusive and welcoming Indiana and world for them.

**Kari:** My hope is just that our clients and the newcomers to our state find what they're looking

for: a safe and stable home and life for themselves and their families. That's what we see people in search of. Yesterday, I helped to pick up a new Afghan family from the airport and the dad was bragging on each one of his children. He wanted me to know how smart they are and how excited they are to go to school. And he had his son count for me in English all the way to 45. "Look, he speaks English!" I hope that we have systems that include and embrace all these folks and just recognize how much they bring to our community.

**Beth:** Is there anything else?

**Marian:** We can put in a plug for volunteering with Exodus or any local agencies. We have internships available in Bloomington and Indianapolis. Come intern with us!

**Grace:** If anybody interns or volunteers, there's always something to do. We have shifted our community team model from a focus on mostly faith-based organizations that were coming in and just working with families. We found that that was inequitable, so we have a new model where all clients have equal access to assistance. We have an airport team, a transportation team, and an employment team. These volunteers are committed to helping all our clients. It's taken some adjustment because it does take people out of that traditional model of really becoming intimate with families. And I think that was a big draw for a lot of volunteers. We've been trying to convince people that this is a more equitable way to serve everyone. Most people are on board. But change is hard.

**Beth:** Kari, when you were on the INTESOL board, I remember you voicing some concern that adult education and refugee education wasn't getting the attention that it needed. I hope that this "Voices from the Field" conversation is a step in the right direction.

**Kari:** Yeah, it's going to be so great to get our story out there and help people know we're here.

**Resources**

Immigrant Welcome Center: <https://immigrantwelcomecenter.org/>

EL-CORE: <https://eleducation.org/resources/core-practices-updated>

Pathway to Literacy: <https://www.pathwaytoliteracy.org/>

Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults: <https://www.leslla.org>

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