

Stresses anew for refugees resettled in Vt.

Recession adds to pain carried from homeland



Jacob Bogre (center) has worked to help some of the refugees overcome the problems they face. (Caleb Kenna for The Boston Globe)

By [Brian MacQuarrie](#)
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BURLINGTON, Vt. - The complexion of this overwhelmingly white city is undergoing a dramatic change from a continuing surge of refugees, many of whom are now encountering severe stress that officials and volunteers are scrambling to assess and address.

Not only are 5,000 refugees from war and persecution living in Vermont - the vast majority of them in Greater Burlington and many from Africa - but unemployment among them has soared to an estimated 80 percent since the recession began. A range of worrisome social concerns appear to have followed for many families who probably never heard of Vermont before they settled here in recent years.

Domestic violence is a problem, marriages are under duress, and the social and referral networks that often are well established in larger states with large refugee populations are straining to respond, according to volunteers and officials at nonprofit agencies.

"It's not good right now," said Denise Lamoureux, the state's refugee coordinator. "In hard times, the most vulnerable are often the first hit."

Compounding the normal adjustment problems is the complication that as many as a third of the refugees are victims of torture. In Vermont, where Lamoureux is the only full-time state employee who works on refugee issues, trauma counseling for them is nearly nonexistent. The nearest specialized treatment facility is more than 200 miles away in Boston.

One result has been post-traumatic stress, anxiety, and depression that many torture victims try to suppress rather than confront by approaching the mainstream mental health community for help, according to Karen Fondacaro, a professor of clinical psychology at the University of Vermont. Fondacaro has launched a program to bring therapy to refugee clients who otherwise would go untreated.

"Virtually the entire refugee population here has been exposed to some trauma," she said.

One such refugee is Kyendamina Mukeba who fled war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and then lived in fear of arrest or worse in Zambia before being granted refugee status in the United States.

Now, he is another victim of the recession, a father who lost his job grinding metal and is struggling to find work to support his wife and two small children.

Mukeba, 42, is grateful for the peace he has found in Vermont, but being unemployed has added such stress to his life that he sometimes yearns to return to Africa.

"You can walk outside even at midnight here, at 2 a.m., and no one will arrest you," said Mukeba, a tone of wonder in his voice. "During nine years in Zambia, day by day, I was living in fear" that authorities would arrest or kill him simply because he was a refugee.

Mukeba helps his former countrymen by serving as an interpreter at the Association of Africans Living in Vermont, a bustling nonprofit in a small, two-story house that serves as a dispensary for a wide variety of social services. Here, among other needs, refugees can inquire about job placement, a ride to the hospital, and how to navigate the often-bewildering American bureaucracy.

One recent morning, Jacob Bogre, the association president, spoke with an Iraqi man who offered his Arabic language skills. Behind him, a steady stream of clients, many of them African women in traditional dress, streamed through the group's cramped quarters.

"When you first get here, the assumption is that it might be easier for you, but then you can't access employment easily," Bogre said. "Most of the refugees here have limited skills."

Since 2000, Vermont has tallied 542 refugee arrivals from Somalia, 174 from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 137 from Sudan, and 113 from Burundi. In all, refugees from 29 African countries are represented in the Burlington area, Bogre said.

The refugees are assigned to Vermont, as well as other states, through a collaborative effort among the US State Department, state officials, and nonprofit resettlement agencies. Once in Vermont, they receive help from the Vermont Refugee Resettlement Program, a nonprofit that uses federal money on a wide array of refugee services, including jobs, housing, cash assistance, and language skills.

A few hundred of the immigrants did not arrive as official, preclassified refugees. Instead, after entering the United States through legal or fraudulent means, and often after suffering torture in their homeland, they seek asylum in the United States. Patrick Giantonio, who represents many of them in their application for asylum, said the legal process can exact a debilitating toll from victims who must retell their horrific stories.

As a result of that strain, Giantonio said, "many of my clients are dealing with incredible physical and psychological problems."

Fondacaro, director of the university's Behavior Therapy and Psychotherapy Center, is helping asylum-seekers face their traumatic past and tell their painful stories. The service is the only one of its kind in the state.

"To witness the healing taking place is just astounding," said Giantonio, who occasionally acts as an interpreter during therapy sessions. "You're working with humans who have every right to be down and not get up. But what we see is the incredible resilience of the human spirit."

Naweza Muderhwa, 27, has seen that resilience. Both in her work at the African Association and as part of the first large African family to settle in Burlington, she knows firsthand the difficulties and rewards of adjustment.

The road has been strewn with challenges, she said, from becoming keenly aware of her "blackness" when she moved to Burlington in 1996, to her ongoing work with new arrivals who find themselves anxious, worried, and overwhelmed.

"You always have this image of America, the land of gold and money everywhere," she said. "But then you're making eight dollars an hour, and that's very stressful."

To Muderhwa, a native of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the change has shown that not all Vermonters are color-blind. But still, she added, "people are nice and you always have exceptions."

"I love Vermont," she said. "It's just so beautiful, it's small, and it's safe."■