

## **A DIFFICULT ADJUSTMENT: IRAQI REFUGEES IN DETROIT**

*By Daniel Sturm, RefugeeWorks*

In November 2007, when refugees from Iraq began arriving by the hundreds, RefugeeWorks launched a research project with the goal of improving employment services for this new population.



Iraqis are actually not a “new” population in America, of course. People from the Fertile Crescent have been immigrating to the U.S. for more than 100 years. Many have settled in Michigan, where the booming auto industry once attracted skilled workers and professionals from around the world. Today, an estimated 500,000 Arab and Chaldean Americans reside in metro Detroit. It is expected that a majority of the 12,000 Iraqi refugees slated for resettlement will enter into the U.S. workforce in Detroit and San Diego, Calif., where they can rely on the support of large Iraqi-American communities.

Surveys, media accounts and statistical data indicate that a significant portion of Iraqi refugees have skilled and professional backgrounds. Additionally, preliminary results from RefugeeWorks’ own employment survey (recently sent to refugee service providers across the U.S.) show that a majority of the new arrivals are college-educated.

In December 2007, RefugeeWorks national coordinator Jonathan Lucus and staff consultant Daniel Sturm organized a four-day field trip to Michigan to meet with the Chaldean Federation of America (CFA), Lutheran Social Services of Michigan

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### **CONSULTANT’S CORNER:** *Jonathan Lucus*



Hello everyone.

RefugeeWorks recently had the opportunity to work with the Minnesota State Refugee Coordinator on an exciting two-day training that centered on the topic of finding “hidden jobs.”

In the style of Donald Trump’s, “The Apprentice,” after a full day of workshops more than 40 job developers worked in teams of three to find employers with job openings in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area. Participants had the chance to use their job development skills to create employment opportunities for refugee clients.

On the morning of the second workshop

day, after meeting with prospective employers, they returned to the training site to discuss their experiences. Astoundingly, participants had spoken with 68 different employers and had found more than one hundred and twenty job possibilities.

Oh, did I mention that it was the coldest day of the year, with temperatures dipping to twenty degrees below freezing? And I thought job development was hard under normal conditions! It goes to show you that (as job developers) determination is the best skill set we can have in our repertoire.

**Jonathan Lucus**

Senior Consultant and National Coordinator

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**A Difficult Adjustment: << 1**

(LSSM), the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS) and the Refugee State Coordinator’s office.<sup>1</sup> What follows is a summary of our selected interviews with 30 Iraqi refugees.

**Language**

Roughly 70 percent of the refugees we interviewed had come to the United States within the last two months, which explains why very few had begun applying for jobs. Many were still struggling to navigate their way through Detroit, enroll their children in local schools, and adjust to the new living environment. Most importantly, many were still waiting to receive their driver’s licenses.

Case managers estimate that as many as 40 percent of the new arrivals suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of persecution, the loss of jobs and homes, the death of family members and the overall refugee experience. Talking about these tragic experiences was a touchy subject for many interviewees.

<sup>1</sup>Special thanks to Joseph Kassab (CFA), Sonia Harb (ACCESS), Belmin Pinjic (LSSM), Al Horn (State Refugee Coordinator) and the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement for making this study possible.

**IRAQI REFUGEE EMPLOYMENT SURVEY**

**What level of education do your clients have?**

College	63%
High School	36%

One couple we spoke with had been kidnapped, for example. Some described their home country as a place that no longer guaranteed access to basic health care, shelter and food. Prior to the invasion, these middle-class Iraqis had held positions as professors, teachers, physicians, pharmacists, network administrators, accountants, artisans, and civil engineers.

We weren’t surprised to learn that most refugees spoke English fluently. RefugeeWorks’ survey data on the Iraqi refugee population showed that basic English language ability would not be a major obstacle. As a matter of fact, we mostly encountered urban professionals from

**IRAQI REFUGEE EMPLOYMENT SURVEY**

Shortly before the winter break, RefugeeWorks developed an online survey to explore employment options for Iraqi refugees. What occupational backgrounds do your Iraqi clients have? And how easily have they been able to find jobs?

**What do you see as the biggest challenge in helping Iraqi refugees secure jobs?**

Language	21%
Attitude	16%
Over-Qualification	16%
Transportation	5%
Health Problems	5%

**What occupational backgrounds do your Iraqi clients have?**

Technical/Mechanical	38%
Administrative	29%
Health Sector	28%

Between October 2007 and January 2008, 1,324 Iraqi refugees have been resettled in the U.S. Based on feedback from 12 resettlement agencies in 20 states, we were able to aggregate statistics that represent the employment situation of roughly 50 percent of newly resettled Iraqi refugees. Before the war, Iraqi higher education had had an excellent international reputation. It is therefore no surprise that employment counselors surveyed responded that 68 percent of their Iraqi clients spoke English “well” or “very well.” Quite significantly, also it was found that 63 percent of recent Iraqi refugees held a college degree.

You will find these and more survey results throughout our current issue. As more Iraqi refugees enter the country, within the next six months we are also planning a follow-up survey. Are Iraqi professionals able to find employment that matches their professional skills? In this newsletter we open a dialogue on skilled employment, a topic that affects all refugee populations. This will also be a topic at our upcoming trainings in California, Texas, Indiana and New Hampshire (see details on page 7).

Baghdad who had traveled to Europe and to the United States for conferences, business and exchange programs prior to the 2003 war. Some had held positions in international work environments before and after the war, which explains their high level of English proficiency and comfort with a “western” work style.

## Financial Situation

When we interviewed refugees who had come to the U.S. from Jordan and Syria, we learned about the troubling loss of personal financial assets. One Iraqi eye doctor had a son who used to work as an interpreter. The son was severely injured at a checkpoint accident by U.S. troops and is now in vegetative state. Although the U.S. government compensated the family for this accident, the parents still spent their entire life savings



to stabilize their son's health.

Many interviewees reported that access to health care was either impossible or had become unaffordable following the 2003 war. Families with sick relatives often left for Amman, in Jordan, in search of treatment. Some spent a significant portion of their savings to cover for the medical care of relatives. Many had lost at least one close family member. In the mayhem of the Iraq invasion, interviewees' families had been torn apart and scattered around the globe.

Others had spent a significant portion of their savings to cover cost-of-living expenses in Jordan, including air fare, housing, food and the horrendous exit-visa fee of \$2 per day for every day spent in the country (beyond a two-week grace period). In the case of one larger Iraqi family, the exit visa fee used up their entire life's savings.

We were frequently told that the Iraq of the 1970s and 1980s

***When we interviewed Iraqi professionals who had come to this country during the late 1990s, it struck us that age was an important factor.***

had allowed men and women entering the workforce to pursue professional careers. Men and women climbed up the career ladder and were able to attend conferences overseas and spend time visiting international friends and relatives. Despite the acknowledged loss of their homes, relatives and careers, when reflecting on recent events people were still happy to have escaped the “nightmare” that Iraq has become today. As they entered this new phase of their lives, in the country of second asylum, they wondered what would become of them. They were uncertain about their ability to reclaim their careers, and to find a way to adjust economically to their new lives in Michigan.

When we interviewed Iraqi professionals who had come to this country during the late 1990s, it struck us that age was an important factor. The majority of the earlier arrivals who had successfully managed to enter professional careers in America tended to now be in their 30s and 40s. People without families had less difficulty relocating and climbing up the career ladder. It seemed psychologically more daunting for older Iraqi professionals to start over.

A man who had worked as a jeweler in Iraq, and who was also a poet, said he'd begun to divide his life into 19-year cycles. “The first 19 years I waited until Saddam was gone,” he said. “Now I've completed the second 19 years of my life. I don't know how many more 19 years I have left.”

## Transportation

Most refugees identified transportation as the most burning issue. They had been waiting for weeks to receive their driver's licenses, to no avail. The public transportation system in Detroit was so unreliable that many feared they might not be able to make the commute to the suburbs, where there were more professional jobs.

“We are confined to our apartments,” one Iraqi man told RefugeeWorks when asked whether he had already begun to search for a job. “We know that we need to be on time for a job. But how can we be? We don't have our driver's licenses,

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**A Difficult Adjustment: << 3**

and accessing public transportation is going to be a huge problem.”

Case managers told us that newly arrived refugees were having a hard time getting their driver’s licenses issued at metro Detroit DMV offices, despite the fact that an official letter of agreement existed between the secretary of state and the resettlement agency. The Michigan Attorney General’s recent ruling preventing immigrants without legal permanent resident status from obtaining driver’s licenses didn’t make matters easier for newly arrived refugees. Several organizations are currently working with the state legislator to make exceptions for refugees.



**Recertification**

The majority of refugees with college degrees were afraid that the paperwork they brought might not be sufficient for recertification.

An Iraqi physician who had successfully passed the first three steps of the multi-year recertification process told us that his application had stalled, because his Iraqi alma mater was not responding to requests for a transcript evaluation. Without this last step, he said, he had no chance of advancing to the final stage of recertification, which is needed to apply for and obtain a physician’s residency.

An IT professional who had worked as a network administrator for the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad said that he

**Experts recommend helping refugee doctors to seek employment in related fields such as public health, research or in the pharmaceutical industry.**

might run into problems obtaining copies of the certificates he had earned in Iraq. He was grateful to have found a job working as an interpreter for LSSM, because of his ability to speak Chaldean, Arabic and English.

Some Iraqi professionals doubted whether recertifying their professional degrees was worth the effort. An Iraqi civil engineer said that he was discouraged about the job prospects in Michigan due to the economic crisis. A cousin from Detroit who worked in the construction industry told him that his business was in a deep economic crisis. He advised him to pursue other options.

In a related case, an Iraqi woman with a Ph.D. in educational psychology said that she wasn’t sure if she could ever teach in a university environment again. In Iraq, she had been an associate professor specializing in cognitive psychology. “All of my publications are in Arabic,” she said. “And I am not sure if my English is good enough to ever be able to teach at an American University.” She said that she’d gladly accept a job opportunity to work as a research assistant.

A refugee woman in her early 30s said that she had obtained a Bachelor’s degree from Baghdad University. She had then worked as an English interpreter and teacher in Argentina and Ecuador, where she had picked up Spanish. In the United States she was able to find a job as a substitute teacher at a suburban Detroit high school. Although her principal supported her attempt to obtain a teacher’s license, she found it very difficult to enter into this field. Public schools weren’t hiring new full-time teachers. And if they did, she felt that they certainly would not hire a teacher from the Middle East.

ACCESS’ Community Health and Research Center executive staff members said that a large majority of physicians from Middle Eastern countries had been unable to reclaim their careers in America. Rather than trying to find employment for them as physicians in a very competitive market, they recommended helping refugee doctors to seek employment in related fields such as public health, research or in the pharmaceutical industry.



## Peer Networks

Refugee program directors said that the timing of the most recent wave of Iraqi refugees wasn't optimal. The Michigan economy was in a crisis. Only a few months before the first Iraqis arrived, the state's refugee employment services budget had been cut by 60 percent. As a result, LSSM job counselors reported workloads of 70 cases and more. Many job developers acknowledged that it would be nearly impossible to provide additional services, such as recredentializing Iraqi professionals. Matching refugees with American volunteers who have similar professional backgrounds, they say, would be a desirable goal.

One of the Iraqi men we interviewed at ACCESS had come to the United States in 1993 with a law degree from the University of Baghdad. Realizing that it might be too difficult to enter a career in a country with an entirely different legal system, he went back to college to pursue an IT management degree. Currently, he is finishing a Ph.D. in Organizational Management. When asked how he succeeded in enrolling in college and graduate school, he said that he had relied entirely on the support of his four best friends, who had arrived with him from refugee camp in Saudi Arabia. "We really supported each other during college," he said. "Other than that, we didn't have any support."

## Establishing a Career Counseling Pilot Project

Refugee employment specialists have become frustrated with the increasingly limited job opportunities for their highly skilled clients. In the current job climate, matching clients with jobs that require "niche" specialization is difficult, they report. As a result, many skilled refugees are underemployed or working at jobs that do not utilize their skills. Refugees with engineering degrees end up delivering pizzas and foreign-trained nurses work in fast food and janitorial services. The result is a tragic waste of human talent and expertise.

A case in point is the situation of registered nurses and licensed practical nurses in Michigan, a state that has a shortage of

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***To help refugees transfer their degrees, we suggest the establishment of a career counseling pilot project that helps with recertification.***

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roughly 2,500 nurses. If present trends continue the state will be short 18,000 nurses by 2015. Roughly 40 percent of all nurses in Michigan say that they plan to retire within the next ten years. Governor Jennifer Granholm is considering the adoption of a bill that would financially support a "fast track" for nursing students. Based on the fact that many Iraqi refugees have worked in healthcare related fields, incorporating Iraqi healthcare professionals into this program seems like a tremendous opportunity.



In addition to the lack of credential evaluation, refugee underemployment is triggered by language, transportation, vocational training and financial barriers. Employers are often unable to properly assess these factors when screening internationally trained applicants, and refugees have difficulties marketing their skills.

Job developers face the paradox of overeducation and underemployment on a daily basis – not only in the case of Iraqi refugees. While recognizing the validity of newcomers' professional accomplishments in their home countries, career counselors have to be realistic. Many job developers acknowledge that it is nearly impossible to provide additional services such as recredentializing programs, in light of the fact that they have to assist a high volume of clients on a limited budget. Rather than helping highly skilled refugees reclaim their careers, they often focus on getting them their "first jobs." In the unskilled service sector, former professionals find themselves working in gas stations and hotels. Job developers reassure their clients that they may be able to pursue better careers as soon as they reach self-sufficiency. "Don't give up," they say. "Get that first job, and go from there." In many cases, this is a pragmatic approach.

We believe that recertification is one of the most critical hurdles that Iraqi refugees will face in the work world. To help refugees transfer their degrees, we suggest the establishment of a career counseling pilot project that helps with recertification. RefugeeWorks will work with its partner organizations to identify appropriate resources to design such a program. As we gather research on the job prospects for refugee professionals and talk to experts throughout the country, we would encourage you to share success stories with the refugee employment network. Please e-mail us!

## IRAQI REFUGEE RESOURCES



Citizenship and  
Immigration Canada.  
(2007). Iraq – *Cultural  
Profiles Project*.

<http://www.cp-pc.ca/english/iraq/index.html>

Refugee Studies Centre. (2007). “Iraq’s Displacement Crisis: The Search for Solutions.” *Forced Migration Review*.

<http://www.fmreview.org/iraq.htm>

Robson, B. (1995). *The Iraqis: Their History and Culture*

<http://www.cal.org/co/iraqi/index.html>

Shoeb, M., Weinstein, H.M., & Halpern, J. (2007). Living in Religious Time and Space: Iraqi Refugees in Dearborn, Michigan. *Journal of Refugee Studies*.

<http://jrs.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/abstract/20/3/441>

## THIS ISSUE’S RESEARCH QUESTION

Does your agency have a partnership with CVS stores? If so, we’d like to hear from you. Drop us a line to give your feedback on refugee service providers’ employer relations with this chain. Thanks!

## NEW REPORTS

Recertification Fact Sheets (Office for Refugee Resettlement, December 2007)

Three new fact sheets on re-licensing of refugee professionals are now available.

<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resources>

E-Verify: Case Resolution (USCIS, 12/2007)

<http://www.immigration.com/newsletter1/everifyuscis.pdf>

E-Verify Fact Sheet, “Not a Magic Bullet” (National Immigration Law Center, 09/2007)

National Immigration Law Center

<http://tinyurl.com/3ys3lj>

Raising Children in a New Country. An Illustrated Handbook (Bridging Refugee Youth and Children’s Services, 2007)

<http://www.brycs.org/documents/RaisingChildren-Handbook.pdf>

## REFUGEEWORKS LAUNCHES AN ELECTRONIC NEWSLETTER

RefugeeWorks is pleased to announce the publication of its first electronic newsletter. This occasional E-Newsletter (monthly or bi-monthly) is devised to bring refugee employment issues to your attention in a timely manner. Do you have news items, or stories that relate to refugees in the workplace? If you’d like to submit them for publication in an upcoming E-Newsletter, contact Daniel at [dsturm@refugeeworks.org](mailto:dsturm@refugeeworks.org)

Unsubscribe or manage your RefugeeWorks E-Newsletter subscription at:

<http://lists.lirs.org/mailman/listinfo/refugeeworks>



# REFUGEEWORKS

## EMPLOYMENT TRAINING INSTITUTE 2008 SCHEDULE



REGISTRATION  
IS NOW OPEN FOR  
ALL FOUR SESSIONS!

Each of our two-day trainings will highlight one special topic and cover a range of themes, such as vocational training, new populations, financial literacy and career upgrading.

### Los Angeles, California

> **Focus: Transportation, Housing & Jobs**

**March 4-5, 2008**

**Host: Refugee Forum of Los Angeles County**  
Three quarters of low-income residents live in city centers despite the fact that 75 percent of employment in the United States today is located in the surrounding suburbs. To overcome this disparity, some refugee resettlement organizations help their clients to find housing that is closer to where they work. Others focus on improving transportation options. Bringing the workplace to the client is another potential solution. Attend this training and take back home with you solutions and practical ideas that will help bring your clients to their workplaces.

### > Fort Worth, Texas

**Focus: Engaging Employers**

**April 15-16, 2008**

**Host: Catholic Charities of Fort Worth**

Since the refugee program was created in 1980, providers have amassed a wealth of knowledge on how to entice employers to hire refugees. Over the course of this two-day workshop, we will explore some of the tactics that have worked best, and will brainstorm solutions for the future. Come and participate in exciting expert panels and discuss best job development practices with employers, refugees, employment specialists and scholars.

### Indianapolis, Indiana

> **Focus: Recertification & New Populations**

**June 17-18, 2008**

**Host: Exodus Refugee and Immigration**

Recertification allows refugees with university degrees and professional training to remain in their chosen career fields. And job upgrading can lift refugees out of entry-level employment and increase their income

level and self-sufficiency. In this training, you will hear success stories from refugees who have reclaimed their careers or built new ones and meet recertification specialists. You will also learn more about new refugee populations and hear about RefugeeWorks' Iraqi Refugee Employment Survey findings.

### Manchester, New Hampshire

> **Focus: Employment Strategies from A-Z**

**August 19-20, 2008**

**Host: International Institute of NH**

This workshop is designed to bring experienced refugee employment professionals together with newcomers in the field, enabling both sides to learn from each another. Attend this training and learn the essential skills of an effective workforce development specialist. Seasoned professionals will be encouraged to share their secrets of success with new colleagues from across the country. Topics will include marketing, career upgrading, employment obstacles and more.

### REGISTRATION FORM *Please Fill Out One for Each Registrant*

Institute (Check One):  LOS ANGELES  FORT WORTH  INDIANAPOLIS  MANCHESTER

Mr  Mrs  Other \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Title \_\_\_\_\_

Organization \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Would you prefer vegetarian meals?  Yes  No

Have you attended a RefugeeWorks Institute before?  Yes  No

How long have you worked in refugee employment? \_\_\_\_\_ (Years)

### PAYMENT INFORMATION

**Registration Fee:**

**\$50/per person** includes breakfast, lunch and training materials (does not cover travel and hotel)

**Enclosed is my check for:**

\$, \_\_\_\_\_  
made payable to: RefugeeWorks/LIRS

**Please charge:**

\$, \_\_\_\_\_ to my  
 Visa  MasterCard  Discover  
Account Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Expiration Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Print Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Authorized Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

RefugeeWorks will send logistics and accommodation information when we receive your registration and payment.



# REFUGEEWORKS

THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR REFUGEE EMPLOYMENT AND SELF-SUFFICIENCY

## NEWSLETTER 24

### IRAQI REFUGEES IN FOCUS

**“Are Iraqi professionals able to find employment that matches their professional skills? This is a topic that affects all refugee populations.”**

RefugeeWorks, Iraqi Refugee Employment Survey



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RefugeeWorks is published pursuant to grant number 90RB0017 from the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). The views expressed are those of RefugeeWorks and may not reflect the views of ORR.

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