



SPOTLIGHT FOR DECEMBER 2005:

Community Strengthening with Refugees - Community Building: Helping Refugee Families Feel At Home

What makes a house a home; what makes a neighborhood a community? For refugees who have experienced displacement, homelessness and resettlement in a new country, these are important questions. Developing a sense of home and community can be an important factor in any refugee's journey towards integration in their adoptive homeland. This sense of security and connectedness can also significantly impact the well-being of children, both refugee and non-refugee, by creating safe, welcoming, active and thriving neighborhoods.

Over the past several years, agencies working in the fields of child welfare and social policy have been developing and refining the concept of "community building" as a more localized, resident-driven approach to strengthening families by also strengthening neighborhoods and residents' connection to, and investment in, their neighborhoods.

The *Family Strengthening Policy Center* defines "family-centered community building" as:

...the process of engaging family residents and other stakeholders in sustained collaborative efforts to strengthen and improve conditions for families with children in an identified geographic area. [1]

It further describes family-centered community building as a "strategy for transforming tough environments into family-strengthening neighborhoods." [2]

Mercy Housing, a leading national not for profit housing developer headquartered in Denver, CO, provides a vivid example of this type of community building. The main task for Mercy Housing, as the housing technical assistance provider for the Office of Refugee Resettlement, is to assist the refugee resettlement community to address a wide range of housing issues faced by refugees; however, the broader mission of Mercy Housing is "creating and strengthening healthy communities." [3] Mercy Housing's affordable rental properties typically go beyond the provision of housing to also include space for activities such as after school programs, ESL (English as a second language) classes, and in Denver, facilitating the creation of a community garden.

The Community Garden project grew out of a collaborative parenting workshop between BRYCS and Mercy Housing, assisting Somali Bantu families. Mercy Housing staff identified community gardening as a project for which there was refugee support and interest. Refugee Housing Program staff and Grace Apartments Resident Services staff identified an undeveloped two-acre plot of land adjacent to Mercy Housing's Grace Apartments. Staff worked to cultivate relationships with Denver City Council members, ultimately getting City Council approval to develop the land as a community garden. They have also worked extensively with Denver Urban Gardens to design and install appropriate irrigation, pathways, a children's play area and a fence around the garden space. A community workday brought out 70 community members, about two-thirds of them Somali Bantu refugees, who volunteered in preparing the area for gardening. A spring planting is planned, with dreams of further developing the land to include a soccer field and benches. The community garden has also sparked a funding proposal to work with Somali Bantu refugees on marketing their produce to local consumers, and a longer-term dream of purchasing a communal farm to be run by refugees. [4] (For more information on the Mercy Housing Community Garden, please read the [BRYCS featured program.](#))

Efforts such as the Community Garden described above help neighbors to work together and learn about one another, while also helping them feel safe and comfortable in their new environment. For refugees who have been displaced from their homes, families, cultures, and primary language, such projects are a vital element in establishing connections to their community and empowering them to become agents of change. Involving refugees in community building can be inspiring and therapeutic, helping them regain some sense of control over their environment after experiences of mistreatment, flight and resettlement.

While community building and engagement have obvious benefits for refugee families, there are also hurdles. Some refugees struggle with feelings of isolation from the new world into which they have been resettled. Others may find community within small ethnic enclaves in the United States, while feeling detached from the broader culture, systems and services. Children who grow up in culturally isolated families may feel isolated themselves, or they may face the role reversal of being a cultural bridge for their parents between their family's culture and American culture.

One document on community engagement notes that immigrants (or refugees) who speak little English may be among the most isolated neighborhood residents, rarely venturing out or becoming part of local organizations. [5] Furthermore, refugees from countries with dysfunctional or persecutory governments, or refugees who have personally experienced trauma, may approach civic engagement with suspicion or fear.

The practical resource [*A Community Builder's Toolkit*](#) addresses these issues head-on by noting:

The cultural composition of virtually every American city and town is undergoing unprecedented change. People are moving in from all over the world. As populations become more diverse, misunderstanding often spreads and tensions mount—and sometimes explode. ... What can be done to move people closer, rather than driving them apart? How can the places in which people find themselves become neighborhoods, and the neighborhoods become communities? [6]

The Toolkit goes on to describe the essential steps in building a community as identifying matters of concern to the majority of residents; residents themselves creating a vision for what makes a good place to live; skilled leaders organizing people and working through an equitable process for improvement; and then action by organized residents to strengthen a neighborhood. [7]

Among the 15 essential tools for community building laid out in this Toolkit are several tools with particular relevance for work with refugee communities:

- **Making plans with people, not for them** – “It’s important for data to be broken down by race or ethnicity, by neighborhoods or by other groupings...to show a clearer picture of how people are being affected by existing policies and practices.”
- **Tackling racism directly** – “Even with the best intentions, multiracial groups may have to invest years of hard work in honest discussion and shared experiences in order to build genuine understanding and a shared level of trust.”
- **Drawing strength from multicultural identities** – “Different cultural perspectives may prompt different understandings of key elements such as ‘community,’ ‘family,’ and ‘neighborhood’ and make us more ethnically sensitive as we come together with others to make decisions, resolve conflicts and work for change.”
- **Bridging language barriers** – “The more successful programs are creating ways at every important gathering for people to listen and talk in every represented language.” [8]

As an example of this last “tool” the Toolkit itself is being made available in Chinese, Korean, Spanish, Tagalog and Vietnamese.

The [Annie E. Casey Foundation](#) has made a ten-year investment in community building through its *Family to Family and Making Connections* network of programs. AECF summarizes their child welfare reform approach as: *Children belong in families. Strong families need strong communities. Public agencies must partner with these communities in order to keep children safe and build strong families.*^[9] Regarding their community-building efforts, AECF has identified the following evidence-based outcomes for their Making Connections initiative:

1. Families have increased earnings and income.
2. Families have increased levels of assets
3. Families and youth increase their civic participation.
4. Families have strong supports and networks.
5. Families have access to services that work for them.
6. Children are healthy and ready to succeed in school. ^[10]

Sometimes refugee resettlement programming emphasizes #1 – that is, employment – over the other needs in the list above. By contrast, a community building approach acknowledges that people are part of a variety of systems – their families, their neighborhoods, their communities, their school district, their religious institutions – which can influence, and be positively influenced by, local residents. Helping refugees to feel at home in their new communities, engaged with the systems around them and active participants in the services which affect them, is all a part of a refugee family's journey to making their new community their home.

This month's [featured search](#) highlights community building resources that are free on the Web. A list of [additional resources](#) are also available free or for purchase.

FOOTNOTES:

- 1 - National Human Services Assembly, Family Strengthening Policy Center (September 2005). "Family- Centered Community Building," Policy Brief No. 9, p. 1.
- 2 - Ibid.
- 3 - See: <http://www.mercyhousing.org/>
- 4 - For more on Mercy Housing's community garden project, contact Scott Robbins, at: ScottR@mercyhousing.org
- 5 - Annie E. Casey Foundation (n.d.). *Residents Engaged in Strengthening Families and Neighborhoods*, p. 9. <http://www.aecf.org/upload/publicationfiles/ec3655k747.pdf>.
- 6 - The Institute for Democratic Renewal and Project Change Anti-Racism Initiative (n.d.). *A Community Builder's Toolkit: 15 Tools for Creating Healthy, Productive Interracial/Multicultural Communities*, p. 6, <http://www.projectchange.org/publications/toolkit.pdf>.
- 7 - Ibid.
- 8 - Ibid, p. 10, 19, 21, and 22.
- 9 - Personal communication, 11/30/2005, Gretchen Test, Program Associate for Child Welfare System Reform, Annie E. Casey Foundation, quoting the AECF Web site at www.aecf.org.
- 10 - For more information on the Annie E. Casey Making Connections Initiative, go to: <http://www.aecf.org/MajorInitiatives/MakingConnections.aspx>. For more information on their Family to Family Initiative, go to: <http://www.aecf.org/initiatives/familytofamily/>