



Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services

WINTER 2006 SPOTLIGHT:

Refugee Resettlement and Child Welfare: Collaboration for Child Protection

BRYCS Interview with Frances Johnson

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BRYCS: What prompted this collaboration?

Frances Johnson: St. Louis was experiencing an increase in refugees from Bosnia and other countries. Also, a foster care case involving a refugee family went badly, resulting in a meeting between the International Institute and staff from the Missouri Department of Social Services Children's Division. That case taught us that we need to have an understanding of other people's cultures and the Refugee Providers need to understand Child Protection laws.

BRYCS: Describe the evolution of the relationship between child welfare and refugee [immigrant] services in your area? What steps have been taken to develop/nurture this collaboration?

Frances Johnson: We fell into a natural collaboration because we worked well together and each agency had something helpful to the other: our child welfare agency needed training in how to respond in a culturally appropriate manner from the International Institute, and the International Institute needed training on child protection laws and services.^[1] The cross-service training needed to be not just a "one-shot deal," but throughout the year we need "booster shots" of training as well. If we respond together, it is better for families as well as the agencies.

BRYCS: What successes/progress have you seen?

Frances Johnson: We now have a much more supportive way of working with families. In addition to training:

1. We have a joint response when a hotline report is made on a refugee family. In some cases, the International Institute will contact us before a hotline report is made so that we can discuss who would be the best CPS staff person to respond, share information, and to coordinate and make arrangements on responding together on a child abuse and neglect investigation. International Institute also helps to arrange interpreters when needed, whereas before we might not have known the language when the worker went out to investigate a report.
2. We have some child protection workers assigned to particular schools in the city. In response to some child safety concerns in one school with a large refugee student body (due to accusations that American adults may be taking advantage of some New Americans), we helped to start a Boy Scout/Cub Scout program in the school as a means of providing child protection information and supervised activities after school. The International Institute has also started a Girl Scout/Brownie troop and the two programs participate in some joint activities.
3. We collaborated with another refugee-serving agency to conduct about six in-home child protection meetings with the Bosnian community. A Bosnian host family would invite a few neighbors to meet over coffee with a child protection staff member, explaining that the neighbor might not need this information but they might know someone else who does. The atmosphere was comfortable and informal, but allowed people to ask questions like how to respond to a child who says "If you spank me I'll call the police." This enabled discussions about state laws regarding child abuse and neglect, the role of child protective service, discipline methods and parenting issues.
4. We have included International Institute employees in "staffings" [interdisciplinary meetings about specific cases], and job shadowing.
5. We have had child protection letters that are sent to families translated into eight different languages and the safety plan that is signed by both the parent and worker has been translated into Bosnian, as well as

Spanish. Workers also carry a laminated form which they can show families to identify the language spoken in the home, so that an interpreter in the correct language can be sought.

6. We have had a refugee working group arranging periodic meetings between the child welfare agency and local groups working with refugees and immigrants.

BRYCS: What challenges/bumps in the road have there been?

Frances Johnson:

1. In any large organization it is hard to get the message to everyone – to make a cultural change in the agency. Those with an interest or sensitivity to cross-cultural issues tend to be the ones to come to trainings. We need to do a better job of engaging those staff who need the information but are not as interested.
2. Lack of designated money and time for this work can be a challenge.
3. Staff turnover at both the child welfare agency and the refugee resettlement agency.

BRYCS: What advice would you have for other agencies embarking on a similar collaboration?

Frances Johnson:

1. Find a key person at your collaborating agency and develop a good working relationship. Foster good working relationships between staff at all levels, not just the management level, and don't be rigid about who can be contacted or who can talk to whom.
2. Don't let money, or the lack of money, get in the way. Sometimes not having money for this work will get people involved who are doing it because it's the right thing to do.
3. One thing that gets in the way is saying, "We only have one or two families from that culture." Most CPS agencies don't really know how many refugee or immigrant families they are working with because the statistics don't capture it (for example, Bosnians may be categorized as Caucasian). We don't have a good way to statistically count members of particular ethnic groups or even how many people speak a certain language.
4. Even if you do only have one family from a refugee/immigrant background, being able to treat them in a culturally respectful way is really important. This is true for simple things – such as whether to remove shoes in the home or to accept a drink – as well as more significant things – such as how members of a culture tend to handle stress. It is important to remember that how you interact with each and every family has a tremendous impact on them.
5. Start small but as you progress, you will find that you can do more and more.
6. Remember that this is mutually beneficial for both agencies, and most importantly that it is beneficial to families. Now that we're doing this, we don't know how we could do it without relationships with the refugee community.

BRYCS: What future developments would you like to see?

Frances Johnson:

1. The biggest thing I wish for is workers of other cultures to be on my staff. We had a Bosnian worker on staff for a while, which was immensely helpful. One option that I would recommend to others is to compensate bi-lingual Child Protection Workers for their language skills by paying them at a higher rate.
2. We have a video that Focus St. Louis translated into Spanish and Bosnian (produced by the Minnesota Department of Education), which explains the expectations of parents in the U.S. educational system.^[2] We would like to get a portable DVD player so that workers can show this video to families in their homes. We get a number of educational neglect reports with refugee families, such as a family not sending their child to school because they don't understand how to catch the bus, or the children staying home to translate when their parents go to the doctor. This video could help our workers explain how parents can be involved and become advocates for their children. [Click here](#) to download a copy of this report.
3. I would like to have a Bosnian language class here in this building for child welfare workers. There is currently such a class teaching Spanish to workers, and the community education center seems willing to start a similar class in Bosnian.

BRYCS: Do you have case examples that illustrate this collaboration's benefits that you can share with us?

Frances Johnson: We have many, but two recent cases come immediately to mind.

1. Children from a refugee family, known to the child welfare agency through the school and CPS' involvement with the Boy Scout troop, were reported as coming to school hungry. Rather than making a formal abuse and neglect report through the hotline, the school talked with child welfare staff involved in the Boy Scout troop at the school, who were able to speak informally with the family. It turned out that there was food in the household; however, it was frozen, the mother was in the hospital and the father did not know how to cook. The agency was able to offer support services without requiring a formal investigation. This type of response was more service-oriented and helpful than a full CPS response.
2. A refugee family and their children visited a state office to apply for food stamps. The family needed some additional paperwork from home, so they left their children alone at the state office while they returned home to get the additional paperwork. A caseworker at the food stamps office considered reporting the children as abandoned and the children were placed in foster care. The children came to St. Louis to be placed with relatives. The St. Louis foster care worker didn't believe the parents' explanation until the refugee services provider met with the CPS worker in a joint staffing, and explained that this was accepted behavior in the family's home country. Both workers can now educate the family regarding child supervision expectations in this country.

FOOTNOTES:

1 - For more information on BRYCS' work in St. Louis, see the following BRYCS publications: *Building Bridges: A Guide to Planning and Implementing Cross-Service Trainings*, <http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=0701>; *Report: BRYCS' Cross-Service Trainings, St. Louis, Missouri*, <http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=0548>; *Foster Care Training, St. Louis, MO Pilot Site*, <http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=0546>; and Morland, L., Duncan, J. et. al. (2005), "Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services: A Case Study of Cross-Service Training", in *Child Welfare Journal of Policy, Practice and Program*, 84, No. 5, pp. 791-812. <http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=1777>

2 - Focus St. Louis (November 2003). *New Americans: Building the Future of the St. Louis Region*. Available for free download from <http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=1786>.