

Selected Remarks from 2/24/16 talk in Lexington

First of all, I just wanted to thank you all for inviting us here and for opening your hearts to refugees. It has been incredible lately to see so many communities coming together and being a voice of welcome in times when voices of fear and distrust are attempting to be the loudest ones.

Topics:

Communicating with ELL's

When working with an interpreter

- Speak directly to the client, not the interpreter.
- Coach your untrained interpreter if need be (for example if they don't seem to be delivering the message).

Without any interpreter

- Simplify and slow your speech but don't dumb it down.
- Keep rephrasing if necessary – don't give up right away
- Smiling, nodding, saying yes does NOT mean someone understands. Check comprehension by asking questions.
- Accept that awkward silences and miscommunications WILL happen and that's OK!
- Recognize when the message is too complex and needs proper interpretation.

Ways of helping.

When new families arrive through the refugee program, their needs are quite comprehensive, and so there are a number of ways an individual can help. Volunteers can help by

- Tutoring children and adults in English, or school subjects. A few tips:
 - Don't over correct mistakes
 - Do model the correct way of saying things
 - Fear of trying or of making mistakes is biggest obstacle to language learning
 - Praise attempts! Give compliments! Build confidence!
 - Beginning and intermediate learners don't need to know the "whys" of grammar.
 - Use pictures and real life situations as much as possible. Do not focus on spelling and writing for adult beginners.
 - For children in school, reading, spelling, and writing are very important.
 - Teaching families to use public transportation
 - Teaching a family to navigate and bargain hunt at the grocery store
 - Helping to provide transportation to appointments for times when public transport isn't practical
 - Helping to study the driving manual and learn to drive
 - Helping to understand how to read and pay bills, how to interpret the mail
 - Be a friend, show around town
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- **Remember that refugees have extremely diverse stories.** While one family may need you to teach them how to use a stove or computer, another individual may have masters in computer science and might be able to teach you a thing or two about technology. So try to find out where the family or individual is coming from first. I remember helping one gentleman from Afghanistan with his resume, and we were working in word, and I was struggling with getting something to format correctly. He was very patient with me, but finally, he politely asked to take control of the mouse and showed me what I was doing wrong. I learned a few tricks in word formatting today that I still use.

- **How to help by empowering rather than encouraging dependency.** – This is a really crucial point. When you provide a service for a family, ask yourself, “what would they do if I didn’t do this for them?” If the answer is that they could do it themselves, encourage them to try. If they would not be able to do it, ask yourself, “what would it take to get them where they can?” Teaching the bus rather than giving rides. Teaching them how to use their limited English effectively rather than calling the doctor for them. Practicing phone conversations. Showing them how to recognize which pieces of their mail are junk, and which are important. Often, it can take much longer to take the empowering approach. Giving someone a ride is quick. Throwing out their junk mail is quick. And sometimes, that’s all we have time for in the moment. But the long term goal is self-sufficiency, and ultimately we all need to work towards that goal.
- **How to set boundaries** –Boundaries are important. This is a new culture for people, and so they may not know how much they can or should rely on someone for help. In their culture, they understand the social norms for different relationships; they understand the subtle cues that we all use to communicate. Here, they don’t have that. So it is important for you to make sure those boundaries are there. A few points:
 - Don’t over commit yourself – you’ll get frustrated and burn out.
 - Don’t feel obligated to say yes all the time – see above.
 - DO encourage people to find out how to do things on their own – helps you set boundaries AND helps them long term.
 - DO give control to the refugee. They have been denied control over their own lives and decisions for YEARS and we don’t want to unintentionally continue that here.
- **Safety and Confidentiality**
 - “Above Suspicion” means never being alone with a minor child. Of course we hope that everyone has the best of intentions – but that’s why we say “above suspicion.” If there is always another adult present, then no one ever has to worry about those difficult questions.
 - How to talk (or not talk) about a refugee’s past: Often, we are motivated to help refugees because of the terrible hardships they have been through. But it may still be very traumatic for someone to speak about things that have happened to them in the past. Sometimes, people want to talk about it and bring it up, and that’s fine. But when they don’t, we want to avoid making them feel as though they must relive past traumas to fulfill our curiosity. Of course, we all want to understand what brought them here, so we can share in their relief of knowing they are now somewhere safe after enduring such hardships. But keep in mind even simple questions may be a minefield for refugees. For example
 - Questions that make bring up traumatic events:
 - Why did you leave your country?
 - What happened when you left?
 - What happened to your family/where is your family?
 - Positive questions that avoid bringing up difficult topics:
 - What did you like about your country?
 - What is your favorite place you have lived?
 - What are the biggest differences between Harrisonburg and the city you came from?
 - What is the food like where you came from?
 - Which do you like better, the weather in Harrisonburg, or in your country?

Once I was in an English class and we were doing a lesson on family, practicing various questions. The exercise was “What is your husband/wife’s name” And they had to answer “His name is...her name is...” We went around the circle and I asked one lady, who was from Bhutan. She didn’t answer so I asked again more slowly. Finally, she drew her hand across her neck and looked at the floor, and I realized that her husband had been killed.

I'm not saying you have to avoid all topics of conversations, but just that you should be mindful not to force those topics and to be aware that they can come up accidentally even around seemingly normal conversation.

Why confidentiality matters:

- Obviously - Sensitive information like social security numbers, alien numbers, etc can be used in identity theft, so those should be cared for as you would your own (if you happen to have contact with this sensitive information).
- Individual may not always want to be identified as a “refugee” first and foremost. Not everyone who knows or works with them needs to know every detail of their case history, medical conditions, etc.
- In certain cases, for example staff or volunteers who are intimately involved in the case need certain information.
- Often we want stories to share. Ask “Is this something I can share with my church/group/etc...?” Language may be a problem, so try to get a feel for the situation –do they understand enough to consent?

Safety – appropriate safety seats for children! Children under 8 should be in a child seat. Make sure to understand the regulations about what age/weight of child needs which seat before transporting children.

Importance of respecting culture and religion

- Many refugees are fleeing situations where they were threatened because of their political or religious beliefs. They have come here precisely to enjoy the freedom of religion and speech that we are so proud of in this country.
 - That means that we do not put pressure on them that might make them feel as though we are not respecting the religion that they have brought with them. Even though we may feel like our attempts to introduce them to another religion are gentle, kind, and well intended, we don't know what experience they have in their past may impact how they interpret those communications..
 - I have personally heard from refugees from Iraq who said that their biggest fear was that people were going to try to change their religion and their values here. Their faith is very important to them, and I think we can only try to imagine going through what they've gone through and then coming to a country where your faith is a minority and wanting to hold on to that for you and your family, your children. I have had one family who told me their story – they were narrowly missed by a car bombing in Iraq– and they said it was their Muslim faith that gave them peace and helped them to get through it. So we want to honor that and not put pressure on these families to leave behind their faith after they have already left behind so much.
- **When culture does have to change:** There are instances when what is normal in one culture is not acceptable in the US. This includes cases of strong physical discipline which would be considered abuse here, domestic violence of any kind within the family, not wanting girls to go to school. In these situations we need to focus on educating families about norms in the US, not on judging how things were done in their country. I remember working with a family from Afghanistan who were terrified to let their daughters go to school with boys. And here in the US, of course that is terrible to deprive a girl of her education. But to them, they were protecting her. She had hardly left the house before arriving here. So we had to say to them, “OK, I see where you are coming from, I know it's pretty scary based on your experiences, but here, this is how things work, and the schools will watch her and keep her safe”. So there is an adjustment curve. Of course, they sent her to school because that's the law. But remember, culture doesn't change overnight.