

# DENVER IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE COMMISSION



2015

## Listening Session Report

This report is an overview of the Denver Immigrant & Refugee Commission Listening Session that was held on September 16, 2015. An analysis was conducted to break down the various themes that occurred during the session. The next section gives four recommendations that the commission can champion. The final section are the organizations that participated and some of the topics they discussed on that day.

# Denver Immigrant and Refugee Commission

## Listening Session Report

### Executive Summary

To improve the well-being and quality of life for immigrants and refugees in the city of Denver, various community organizations, non-profits, and educators collaborated with the Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs to present at the DIRC's first Listening Session on September 16, 2015.

Many of the organizations shared the challenges and success stories that the immigrant and refugee population that they personally work with experience. Reoccurring themes started to become more prevalent as the listening session went on. From these emerging themes, many organizations also had recommendations that the Denver Immigrant Refugee Commission can do at the municipal level to make Denver a more welcoming city that values its immigrant and refugee residents.



## Challenges in the Immigrant and Refugee Community

### LANGUAGE ACCESS AND LACK OF TRANSLATIONS

- ❖ Interpreters not being available in their native language
- ❖ The wait is too long for translators
- ❖ Lack of information on what languages are provided prior to contacting

#### Testimony

*“The 311 access language is probably a big issue; language access is a big issue across the board. We have been working on this a long long time in our community...the barrier is that sometimes you might not get an interpreter.”*

**Joseph Wismann-Horther**, Integration Program Supervisor, Colorado Refugee Service Program

*“10 years ago, 75% of our request were Spanish. Now it is down to 60%; meaning we probably have the same amount of Spanish request, but we now have many many more outside of that... There are still new arrivals and an aging community that need those (translation) services.”*

**Janice Rhyne**, Director of the Translation and Interpreter Center, Denver Center for Crime Victims

---

### LEGAL CHALLENGES

- ❖ Notarios who have no legal accreditation scam individuals and families out of money and jeopardize their immigration status
- ❖ Many do not know what visa they should apply for
- ❖ Lack of translations for the applications
- ❖ Hard to gather the needed documents for various applications
- ❖ Individuals being detained for long periods of time in detention centers



#### Testimony

*“Throughout the country, everyday there is up to 34,000 people are held in immigrant detention centers. Here in Aurora, we have about 420 held in detention every single day and that is per contract with ICE, a private prison company...We see 50% of asylum seekers from all over the world; now from 70 different countries, speaking 30-something languages every year.”*

**Kenny Hood**, Program Coordinator, Rocky Mountain Immigrant Advocacy Network

*“Citizenship affects a lot of the elderly refugee communities. A lot of the refugees from Bhutan and Burma are hitting up that seven-year deadline to become citizens they will lose their SSI benefits...A lot of them are too old to learn a new language but don't qualify for the medical waiver. A lot of them are very worried. We are starting to hear more talk about suicidal ideation, especially with Bhutanese refugees. Their suicide rate twice the national average.”*

**Harry Budisidharta**, Health Equity Advocate, Asian Pacific Development Center

*“A few weeks ago, I was at a clinic and I met with a woman who saw a notario that is infamous...This woman went to this notario to do her husband’s permanent residency application. The notario said that he would need a waiver, so she did (completed) a waiver and it got denied. So, the notario said go to your appointment anyway, it should be fine. So he left and of course it got denied, and after talking to her, he (her husband) wasn’t even eligible for the waiver. He wasn’t eligible for his residency, he had a permanent bar. Now, he’s stuck outside the United States permanently, no way to get back. There is absolutely nothing I can or any other attorney can do to get him back here, legally. So that family, now with young children, is facing a permanent separation, unless he tries to re-enter illegally.”*

**Alyssa Reed**, Chair, Colorado Chapter of American Immigration Lawyers Association

## NAVIGATION OF THE SYSTEM

- ❖ Many immigrants and refugees are trying to adapt and navigate the systems that the city of Denver offers. The lack of guidance leads to additional trauma that many individuals are already experiencing. Some of the systems are:
  - Transportation
  - Health Care
  - Jobs
  - Housing



### Testimony

*“In a really short period of time, they (immigrants and refugees) have to learn and adapt to new systems of gaining employment, completing their education if necessary, and supporting their familiar. Even for English speakers, and I can say even as a native American, I found it a little tricky...Navigating transportation systems, finding adequate housing, securing gainful employment, and putting kids in school. All these things can be very intimidating and for non-English speakers it can prove to be debilitating and lead to unnecessary isolation.”*

**Paula Schriefer**, President, Spring Institute

*“Refugees are facing increased barriers because they are so new to the community and do not have the resources to truly navigate housing resources...The problem we are seeing is the gentrification of our city and rapidly rising rents.”*

**Jennifer Gueddiche**, Director, African Community Center

## EDUCATION

- ❖ Some refugees need more supplemental English classes than they currently receive
- ❖ Many immigrants have higher education degrees and skills that were acceptable in their home country but not in the U.S.
- ❖ Students are also struggling when learning English and also do not know where to turn when there is an education gap between high school and college, especially if they do not pass the exam or age out

### Testimony

*“So last year I went to the Botanical Gardens with the 7<sup>th</sup> grade photography class...There was a particular plant that one of the boys recognized as something he recognized from Asia and I asked him, Do you know what’s it called in Burmese? He said no he couldn’t remember. Well I asked him, “how do you say flower in Burmese?”, just out of my own curiosity. And he pointed at his friend, he was like I don’t know ask him, he’s the only one of us who still speaks*

Burmese well. It was that first inkling or realization to me that these boys who I identified as newly arriving refugees, they've been here for more than half of their lives now and they are losing their native language...They want so much to ne Americanized, so to speak or their parents want so much for them to succeed in the America system, that there is loss of language and possibly culture happening...We really started looking at that question, How do we make sure that we ae supporting these students in not losing something that should be celebrated and valued?"

**Erin Kobler**, Grants/Community Outreach, Place Bridge

"They (refugees) may come in at 16 or 17 years old with no schooling or with a lot of credits but based on their English-proficiency, they are struggling to graduate on time. We'll keep them until they are 21 years old. So the semester they turn 21 they are allowed to finish that semester...The challenge we have with that is many of our students can't reach that level if language proficiency before 21, and once they don't meet the expectations of proficiency, they can't go on to Emily Griffith. Beyond that are only Adult Learning Centers. There's a gap of formal education once they turn 21. And so it's a point of frustration; one young lady has decided she might as well give up and not attend at all, because she know she can't make it."

**Cheri Hilton**, Assistant Principal, South High School

---

## IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE WORKERS

- ❖ Immigrant workers are being underpaid or not being paid at all for their work
- ❖ Lack of information on employment rights



### Testimony

"When the evaluator did a survey, they also looked at the Craigslist ads for domestic workers and nannies. It was just amazing to see, we can pay \$20 a day. The hours are from 7am-6pm, no breaks, we also need light house cleaning and some meals prepared. And you're just thinking wow for \$20 a day?"

**Sarah Shikes**, Executive Director, El Centro Humanitario

"Wage theft, it disproportionately victimizes immigrants, low-wage workers, racial minorities, and women. And I think the focus is often on immigrant and refugee communities, which are most less likely to report incidents of wage theft. So it may be my line of work, but I have not met very many low wage income Latinos that have never been a victim of wage theft; it's rampant."

**Nina DiSalvo**, Executive Director of Towards Justice

## RECOMMENDATIONS

During the listening session, the DIRC gathered information from participants on various issues such as language access, affordable housing, legal issues, health care systems, and youth services.

### 1. Enforce current policies that already exist in the city of Denver

#### Testimony

*“There is a Denver city ordinance that makes wage theft a crime. I think it has only been enforced three or four times since 2007...it is a crime and the police should be investigating. It might require working with the state attorney’s office to train the police, so they understand and better enforce the Petty Theft Ordinance.”*

**Nina DiSalvo**, Executive Director of Towards Justice

*“The biggest challenge is that with every application (U visas) we are struggling with law enforcement. For example, if a someone was a victim of a crime, there has to be a police report of the district attorney gets involved. Either the officer is not interested in helping the client because they found out they are undocumented or you have a district attorney that really doesn’t want to help the client...It’s an area where a lot of people can use that to project their personal biases...Sometimes the reasons they give for not signing those documents are really uncalled for. We have a client who was refused an U Visa certification by a district attorney and the reason for that was they don’t think she’s a threat to be removed from the country. Statements like that should not be made by law enforcement.”*

**Eric Som**, Executive Director, Association for Immigrant Defense

### 2. Provide translations in different formats so it can be targeted at variety communities.

#### Testimony

*“Language has been a huge barrier in terms of working with the city or getting resources. There was fear in calling 911; how do you explain the issue, how would you report it, will they be able to understand you? The good thing about Westwood Unidos there has been a translator here from the beginning and she has helped to lift us out.”*

**Norma Brambila**, Westwood Unidos

### 3. Send letters of encouragement or discouragement to the city and state administration about certain policies that affect the immigrant and refugee community.

#### Testimony

*“There are things that this commission can put forward to our state body of legislators. That is rescinding House Bills, like I think it is either 1024 or 1023 of 2006, that denies benefits to our undocumented populations here. We are overwhelmed, we cannot provide mental health services because we are not allowed to serve our indigent undocumented community. We cannot provide youth education and leadership and work development services because of that House bill.”*

**Rudy Gonzales**, Executive Director, Servicios de la Raza

*“There are three pieces of pending legislation at the federal level. They have to do with modernizing the refugee program and how they enter the country...Currently when you enter as a refugee, you enter with a temporary visa. After twelve months, you have the opportunity to transition to become a legal permanent resident or green card holder. Two of these bills would allow people to come in as Legal Permanent Residents. That would impact so many issues here in the city of Denver, in terms of refugees accessing services...I would like to see our commission take a stand on this and perhaps write some letters to encourage our Mayor to be interested in this issue.”*

**Jennifer Gueddiche**, Director, African Community Center

---

**4. Increase educational opportunities so that immigrants and refugees are informed about certain issues and resources.**

*Testimony*

*“Where I think you all (the commission) can come in and we all can come together...is maybe launching some sort of comprehensive public service announcement or some sort of a directed, targeted message to the immigrant community that you need to use a licensed immigration attorney or BIA (Board of Immigration Appeals) accredited representative.”*

**Alyssa Reed**, Chair, Colorado Chapter of American Immigration Lawyers Association

*“They (immigrants and refugees) can ask a question and feel like it’s not going to go directly to the Mayor. I think there is that perception of libraries being a safe haven, so we get a lot of questions. As we work with the immigrant community and immigrant networks, we have to keep up to date on what is going on with the licensees, the executive action, so we can pass that information out into the community. Knowing what resources are available and so we can refer accurately.”*

**Will Chan**, Program Administrator, Denver Public Library Services to New Immigrants

## Community Organizations Who Participated in the Listening Session

### **TI Center (DCCV), Janice Rhyne**

- ❖ Provides free language services for victims of crime
- ❖ 10 years ago Spanish was 70% of language service requests, a number that has dropped to 60%. Increase in other languages include Somali, Arabic, Russian, Vietnamese and Burmese.
- ❖ They largely see barriers in language service use and access in the community
- ❖ City Suggestions:
  - Include the services in the Colorado General Grant request form
  - Provide grant funding for visas and asylum cases

### **Towards Justice, Nina DiSalvo**

- ❖ Focus on employment rights and wage Theft
- ❖ City suggestions:
  - In Public Works projects, include provisions to prevent wage theft and subcontractor requirements
  - Provide education around wage theft and immigrant workers' rights
  - Provide more education to consumers (through grants)
  - Enforce existing laws: Petty Theft Ordinance

### **South High School, Cheri Hilton**

- ❖ Increased refugee population coming into the schools
- ❖ Many cannot reach English proficiency; gap in formal education especially once they reach 21 years.
- ❖ Education received in other countries does not count here
- ❖ City Suggestions:
  - Make condensed summer classes an option
  - Home tutoring for students and their families
  - Make public transportation free for student after they graduate from ELA status
  - Adult English Program

### **Spring Institute, Paula Schriefer**

- ❖ Provide Integration programs
- ❖ Lack of orientation information for refugees and immigrants
  - Hard to navigate public transportation, the school system, housing options
  - Had a two-week program (Road to Success) that introduced orientation information to refugees
  - Suggestion: the city of Denver can partner and continue providing this education
- ❖ Increased language access is needed
  - English ability makes navigation easier
  - Refugees can receive free English classes for the first 5 years, with many needing supplemental classes
  - City Suggestion:
    - Develop the OIA plan
    - Address LEP individuals
    - Promote more conversational English groups
- ❖ Applying for permanent resident/citizenship cards
- ❖ Need and more access to quality health care
  - Harder to understand what's provided and covered

- Project Shine- provide interpreters/translators
- City suggestions: promote more health literacy and changes in policies that help healthcare workers

**Emily Griffith Technical College, Linda Van Doren**

- ❖ ELA provider that serves 3500 non-native students with 35 career and tech programs
- ❖ Goal- is to get better jobs for their students
- ❖ Need more support for:
  - English Language Acquisition
  - Education pathways (the end goal), employment, & housing
  - Free legal services (translations); need to understand the implications
  - Housing- many are getting pushed further away from the city of Denver; make housing more affordable

**Rocky Mountain Immigrant Advocacy Network (RMIAN), Kenny Hood**

- ❖ Help people who are currently in the process of currently being deported stay in the country
- ❖ Lawyers give a “know your rights” presentation at immigration detention centers
  - Present different options of relief (e.g. bail)
- ❖ Involved in child court/juvenile court; help with visas
- ❖ Social project- work with the detainees that has been there for years; receive substance abuse therapy, help with housing, etc.
- ❖ Some issues- the lack of public defenders

**Casa De Paz, Sarah Jackson**

- ❖ Hospitality home across the detention center
- ❖ Provide free hospitality for families coming out of town to visit detained families
- ❖ Post Release Detention
  - Many aren't from Aurora, have no family nearby, have no English skills
  - Let them stay until they're connected with family
  - Provide public transportation to airport/bus
- ❖ Visitation Program
  - Train volunteers to be a friend to the detainees
  - Takes them into their home
  - Challenges- nor resources are available from the government when detainees are on bond

**Denver Public Library, Will Chan**

- ❖ New Americans Project- gateway agency for other city organizations
- ❖ Plaza Program (Participant driven)
  - Largely grant-funded; the person is able to ask questions and the lib is able to provide/refer resources (e.g., housing, citizenship, information about resources, English conversation, inter-generational conversations, etc.)
- ❖ English Language Acquisition Program in partnership with Spring Institute
- ❖ Expanded to various populations (Arabic, Ethiopian, etc)
- ❖ Trying to continue to build trust
- ❖ Support- more trainings for the library staff

**Office of Children's Affairs, Antonio Pares**

- ❖ Works with legislation education & the Mayor's office pertaining the K-12 policy agenda
- ❖ Program: Countdown to Kindergarten

- Better transition into K (from preschool/Headstart), for students, teachers, & families
- Neighborhoods- Collegeview, Sun Valley, Westwood
- ❖ Ford Corridors to College Success
  - Community focus from SW Denver (JFK & Abe HS)
  - Goal- to get more students ready for post-secondary options
  - Working groups- how to help parents; money, post-secondary options
  - College matters Yes 2 bill- funding source; can help undocumented and have lived in Denver for 3 years
- ❖ Connect Home Initiative
  - Partnership with Denver Housing Authority
  - DPS, library, goodwill; bring high speed broadband to certain communities
  - Install them into computer labs, then to move to individual units

**Office of Children's Affairs, Joey Pace**

- ❖ Outside of the education
- ❖ Mayor's Youth Commission (expanded to 20 youths & 8 adults)
- ❖ Opportunity to connected with the youth
- ❖ My Brother's Keeper, a program for young men of color:
  - More culturally competent academia
  - Develop relationships with the police & youth
  - Workforce opportunity
  - Social/emotional mentoring

**Servicios de la Raza, Rudy Gonzales and Myrna Castro**

- ❖ Work around the Affordable Care Act with immigrants & refugees
  - Lack of affordability, coverage, & access
  - No idea of benefits, how to qualify; there's lack of public transportation
  - Need of more people who are medical providers to speak their language
- ❖ Senior citizens are usually forgotten
- ❖ City- rescind bills that stop giving benefits to immigrants; grants aren't for multiple years

**Association for Immigration Defense, Eric Som**

- ❖ 70-80% are victims of domestic violence
  - Violence Against Women Act- need proof that their spouse is a US citizen
- ❖ U visas (ability to not be removed this country)
  - Need certification from law enforcement/D.A.
  - There is no interest, or no help; lack of understanding
- ❖ Scared to report crimes to the police
- ❖ Partners with safe houses
- ❖ Need volunteers for translations

**African Community Center, Jennifer Gueddiche**

- ❖ Issue #1: Housing
  - Affects all, but especially those who are a part of the labor force
  - Lack of navigation information
- ❖ Refugee Outreach Program
  - Trying to get youth adapted & socialized to US society/culture
- ❖ 3 federal legislation currently being discussed in Congress at the moment that could affect refugees
  - Affects funding
  - At the moment, refugees are granted a short-grant with assumption that mainstream



- services will fill that gap after the grant expires
- Another legislation could be able to grant refugees LPR/green card visas when refugees are first resettled in the US
- ❖ Write letters to encourage the Mayor to support these types of policies
- ❖ Is Denver a Welcoming City?
- ❖ Have more jurisdiction support & communication between Aurora & Denver

**Street Fraternity, Yoal Ghebremeskel**

- ❖ Outreach to young men (between the ages of 14-25)
- ❖ About 90% are refugees/immigrants
- ❖ Provide: A private space, nightly meals, have a library (tutoring services), prayer room, gym, etc.
- ❖ Rely on volunteers to be mentors
- ❖ Provide music production classes
- ❖ Goal- build enough trust to build a brotherhood that would lead to personal individual growth
- ❖ Receive funding from individual & foundation donors; no city agency partnerships
- ❖ Some of the gaps the men experience are homelessness, problems with the healthcare system, struggling to stay in school and lack of a foundation to build around English, lack of consistent employment

**Colorado AILA, Alyssa Reed**

- ❖ Nonprofit, volunteer, national organization
- ❖ Monthly legal classes to keep lawyers up to date & CCE credits
- ❖ Provide Citizenship Day Clinics
- ❖ Help those who qualify for citizenship apply (e.g. passport photos, envelopes, etc)
  - Review the application before submission
- ❖ Donate to RMIAN with financial support & volunteers
- ❖ Problem: Notario/ immigration consultant
- ❖ City- could launch a PSA or increase promotion about notaries; specifically targeted towards immigrants

**El Centro Humanitario, Sarah Shikes**

- ❖ Worker center; street, daily, domestic workers exploitation
- ❖ Deal with the health & safety concerns of immigrant workers
- ❖ Some workers are not being paid/underpaid
- ❖ Hope to pass legislation that includes domestic workers
- ❖ Also provide direct services; a service where employers can call for an available worker
  - Promotes employment protection; helps with reports of wage theft and referrals
- ❖ Direct Action Team- made of volunteers can be resolved by a community effort (e.g. protest)
- ❖ Develop leaders; bring the workers & community together
- ❖ Researching the development of a Domestic Workers Bill of Rights
- ❖ Offer informal English classes

**Westwood Unidos, Tracy Kaye, Norma Brambila, and Fany Menedez**

- ❖ Organization made of community connectors & leadership doing advocacy work
- ❖ Provide workers opportunities to work in the home to make money
- ❖ Security Action Team
  - Issues around graffiti, illegal dumping in the neighborhood
  - Teach how to contact the city
  - Invite police to the meetings so the community can get to know them
  - Educate through flyers, presentations
- ❖ Barrier- Language, fear of how to explain/report; low levels of education; lack of resources, low income

- ❖ What do you people do beyond high school?

**Colorado Refugee Services Program, Joseph Wismann-Horther**

- ❖ Coordinate services for refugees in Colorado
- ❖ Shift narrative of outlook; especially for the Muslims & Mexican community
- ❖ Multicultural Outreach Centers in DPS- Provides language access & the need of increased family navigation
- ❖ Close the gap between high school & higher education by providing more scholarships; and more possibilities for students in college
- ❖ Increase frontline city employment at DPS
- ❖ Issues with (311); language access
  - Reaching out to city council
  - Barriers- might not get an interpreter or the wait is too long; little information on access known to the community
- ❖ Jobs (increased among refugees)
  - Work with the Office of Economic Development
  - Many immigrants come from a variety of backgrounds/skills
  - Commission should use more leverage influence around certification & funding
  - Provide forums
- ❖ Barriers to learn English, affordable housing, childcare, living wage
- ❖ More Denver community policing; proactive “unity” language

**Asian Pacific Development Center, Harry Budisidharta**

- ❖ Provide MH, Primary, ESL, legal, & youth
- ❖ Go to the legislator & city about issues that affect the refugee & immigrant community
- ❖ Issues: affordable housing, Medicaid transportation, crime in the neighborhood, & citizenship
- ❖ Unless refugees become a citizen after 7 years, they lose SSI benefits
- ❖ Many (elderly) don’t qualify for the waiver which causes increased suicidal ideation
- ❖ Develop tools to get the waiver approved
- ❖ Lack of data about the refugee community
- ❖ Some of the MH issues are- suicidal thoughts, PTSD, adjustment issues, youth fighting
- ❖ Tried a community garden in the neighborhood, which increased connection to the NB
- ❖ Medicaid transportation- people aren’t being picked up, the wrong type of car, etc.

**Place Bridge Academy, Erin Kobler**

- ❖ Serve 1000 students (4-14 years old)
- ❖ 75% ELA learners; 96% on free/reduced lunch
- ❖ Approached with non-academic resources
- ❖ Many of the students are losing their native language & culture, causing DPS high schools to now recognize if students are bilingual
- ❖ Tailor program to find jobs in the school system in their native language
- ❖ Having more flexibility with the English test; do not make students take it until they get to a certain level of English fluency

**Hope Communities, Sarah Fischer**

- ❖ Local affordability housing organization (4 properties)
- ❖ Hiddenbrook (East Colfax) has 79% refugees
- ❖ Offer adult education- 9 English classes; want to create night classes (applying for a grant)
- ❖ Have youth health & wellness program
- ❖ Barrier- language; have an interpreter
- ❖ Many are illiterate in writing & reading; want to increased skill in spoken English
- ❖ Commission- send letters of support

## Denver Immigrant and Refugee Commission

---

### **Colorado African Organization, Derek White**

- ❖ Many can't work for 6 months after filing for asylum
- ❖ Nowhere to go if there is no community/family support (some become homeless)
- ❖ Germany- post house openings for asylum seekers
- ❖ Also have seekers asking legal questions (how to adjust their status); have a community navigator
- ❖ Some issues are housing, mental health, domestic violence, driving/DMV

### **Colorado Black Health Collaborative, Thelma Craig**

- ❖ Goal is to achieve health care equity in the Colorado Black community
- ❖ Network of health care providers, non-profits, community members, government agencies, etc.
- ❖ Bring the community together; coordinated a state family reunion (vendors, resources, quarterly forums)
- ❖ Made various committees (Health Access, Health Education, etc.)
- ❖ Have a CDC grant- to help promote heart disease awareness in the black community
- ❖ Connect health providers with community resources (provide resource directories)

---

The Denver Immigrant & Refugee commission thanks all the organizations who provided testimony for this 2015 Listening Session. The Commission will utilize the information shared to develop action plans for 2016. We look forward to working with you to make Denver a more accessible and welcoming City of opportunity.

#### The Denver Immigrant & Refugee Commission

Fran Campbell (Chair)

Diana Higuera (Chair-Elect)

Victoria Aguilar	Jennifer Gueddiche
Paulo Alvarez	Yusuf Hassan
Mustafa Al Qaisi	Maricruz Herrera
Paul Ameen	Sher Mizer
Abdi Buni	Marcela Mendoza
Pilar Castro-Reino	Karima Osman
Susma Dahal	Chiara Subhas
Christina Eyre	Bridget Tetteh
Florian Ezui	Felipe Vieyra
Rowena Alegria (ex-officio)	

#### Commission Liaison

Jamie Torres, Deputy Director, Agency for Human Rights & Community Partnerships and  
Director, Denver Office of Immigrant & Refugee Affairs

#### Intern

LaTausha Rogers, University of Denver Graduate School of Social Work



[Denvergov.org/ImmigrantRefugeeCommission](http://Denvergov.org/ImmigrantRefugeeCommission) (Commission Webpage)



[Facebook.com/HRCDenver](https://www.facebook.com/HRCDenver)

201 W. Colfax Ave, Dept 1102  
Denver Colorado 80204

