



Serving Immigrants and Refugees

Dear supporters, friends, colleagues, and visitors, welcome to the Somali American Community Association's website:

Somali refugees are currently being resettled in Maryland by refugee resettlement organizations that provide support services only for the first few months. Some of the services we have provided to refugees while with the resettlement agencies and for a period following it are as follows:

- Providing translation and interpretation, and document completion,
- Assisting with school enrollment, purchasing supplies, and providing tutoring,
- Providing transportation to access key services,
- Finding relatives in the region or the US and bringing community members together to support new refugees,
- Providing food when food stamps and temporary cash assistance is not enough,
- Purchasing cell phones until they can establish credit history or get employed, and getting clothing donations, specially for Muslim women and girls,
- Getting financial support from Mosques in the area and completing financial assistance applications,
- Communicating with health care providers and getting a waiver on privacy issues so we can freely communicate with their health care providers and get calls from healthcare providers about their health needs,
- Helping them understand basic child welfare (e.g., not leaving young children home alone),
- Finding affordable housing near the Somali community and Masques so they can get additional community support. Also gave a list of apartments to the resettlement agency for their Somali consumers, and

- Communicating their concerns with the resettlement agency to clarify misunderstanding on services refugees expect from the resettlement agency.

These are many of the functions SACA has performed over the years and they are the major reasons for establishing the organization in 2004 in Maryland in response to the sentiment among individuals and families within the Somali community that many of their concerns could not always be addressed on their own; particularly following the influx of refugees and immigrants escaping from the continual turmoil, factional fighting, anarchy, and absence of a central government.

The inability to communicate freely and access opportunities in their community has hindered many Somali families from participating fully in the opportunities available in their communities, including accessing employment training programs, attending Parent-Teacher conferences and back to school nights, tutoring their children, and enrolling their teens into enriching activities.

In the past, issues affecting Somalis were either addressed informally or did not get enough attention from the community members. Individuals took time off from their work to accompany the needy to community programs or made phone calls in search of programs and information about community needs and concerns was frequently shared and solutions identified at homes, Mosques, and coffee shops. Although these are unique and creative ways to help fellow Somalis, they are often inefficient. Services are not delivered in a timely manner and are inadequate due to lack of follow-up.

The establishment of SACA has significantly alleviated demands on the community to search for help and provides community-based organization to help address community needs. In summation, a multiplicity of reasons account for why many Somali refugees and immigrants are not participating fully in the opportunities in their community, some which have their bases in language, cultural, and educational barriers.

Major Challenges Experienced by Refugees and Asylees Based on Our Experience

One of the major problems we have experienced with new refugees resettled in Maryland, particularly those who are coming from Somalia, is their varying degree of adaptability to American environment. We have found that those who came from Kenya have an easier time adjusting than those who came from Yemen and Ethiopia, that is, the latter do not speak English and have not had much basic education. This is a huge problem for children and a great source of frustration for their parents. One such challenge is that children, regardless of their educational background, are placed in age appropriate grade level by US school system. Thus, we see children in 8th grade who are learning the alphabet and basic math. Our program is doing the best it can to tutor these children and work with their teachers, counselors, and principals. The most helpful thing has been recruiting tutors who reside in the same zip code to go to the home and tutor these children.

We track not only what type of services we provide but how our services actually benefit our consumers in the short and long terms. Refugees and immigrants who benefited from our programs are from different parts of Africa (e.g., Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Sudan) in Prince George's and Montgomery counties and who have learned about our program from their Somali friends or neighbors. Our capacity to reach out to more children is limited and as more and more refugees living alongside the Somali target group learn about our programs they want the same services.

Results of Focus Group Discussions in 2008 and Online-Based Short Rapid Assessments in 2011 Conducted by SACA

Based on our focus group discussions in 2008 with key community informants, natural leaders, and parents, we found the following major challenges experienced by Somali refugees and immigrants in Montgomery and Prince George's counties:

- 1) High number of unemployed and underemployed adults, particularly women,
- 2) Parents who are unable to assist their children with homework,

- 3) Children who need to learn about the consequences of conflict, exercising self-discipline, developing self-management skills, including challenges due to the integration process
- 4) Inability to communicate freely and understand how to participate in the opportunities available in the county leading to feelings of exclusion.

In 2011, we have done a survey among key stakeholders in Prince George’s County, Montgomery County, and the City of Takoma Park in Maryland. We interviewed 21 individuals who are familiar with the needs of refugees in these localities. These individuals, included Americans, Iraqis, Somalis, a City Council member, and individuals working in local government and nonprofit sectors. They have either provided services or are familiar with the needs of refugees from various countries. Below are our findings:

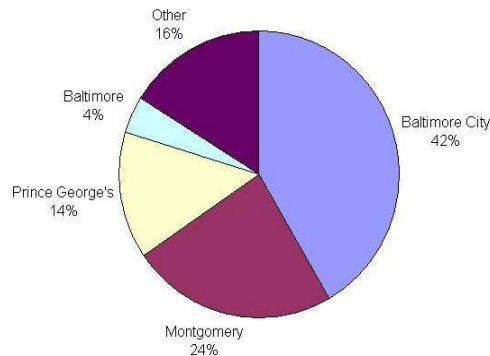
<u>CATEGORY</u>	<u>IMPORTANT AND VERY IMPORTANT</u>
Job training and placement	85%
Tutoring for their children	95%
Connecting with local community leaders	85%
Getting services (e.g., health, housing, utility)	95%
Help with education and college planning	90%
Translation and interpretation	85%

Data of Refugees in Maryland

Based on the latest available data on State Profiles which provides basic state level data on new refugees, we have found that from 2005 to 2009, approximately 8,740 refugees arrived in Maryland, 10,652 in Virginia, and 1,350 in Washington, DC.

The following pie chart provides geographic breakdown of refugee arrivals to Maryland from 2004-2008:

Maryland Office for Refugees and Asylees
Chart D. Refugee Arrivals to Maryland by County of Residence
FY 2004 - FY 2008



Furthermore, the April 2011 Report to Congress by Kathleen Sebelius, Secretary of US Department of Health and Human Services, illustrated the key profiles of refugees in the US. The Report is a valuable resource for understanding refugees' socioeconomic conditions and indicates that:

- Refugees are twice as likely to be unemployed compared to the general US population.
- Only 66.3 percent of refugee households are self-sufficient, 20.0 percent live on a combination of public assistance and earned income; another 8.7 percent receive only public assistance.
- About 44.2 percent receive benefits from Medicaid or Refugee Medical Assistance.
- Approximately 28.8 percent receive some type of cash assistance about once year. The most common form of cash assistance is Supplemental Security Income, which is received by about 13.7 percent of refugee households.
- About 50.4 percent of refugee households receive food stamps, and 24.4 percent receive housing assistance.
- Refugees in the five-year sample population had 9.2 years of education before arrival in the U.S. The average number of years of education was the highest for the refugees from Latin America (12.3 years), while the lowest was for refugees from Africa (6.8 years).
- About 12.7 percent of refugees reported they spoke English well or fluently upon arrival, but 52.3 percent spoke no English at all.

For more information or to find out how you can get involved in our programs, please contact me.

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