

Chicago CO Collaborative

The Chicago CO Collaborative started in June 2010. Staff members from Heartland Alliance, Refugee One, and Catholic Charities combine resources to offer cultural orientation (CO) classes to Chicago-area refugees from all three resettlement agencies. The collaborative has offered a number of such sessions, attracting substantial attendance from a wide variety of refugees.

The idea started with an employment team comprised of staff members of the three agencies providing employment-specific workshops for refugees. The success of this initiative spurred three individuals, one from each agency, to plan a general CO class together. The four-hour session (with a break for a brown-bag lunch) have been offered on Fridays, a day that seems to work best for all involved. The first session attracted approximately 40-45 refugees; the second session 70-80 participants. Numbers have continued to grow each session. The majority of participants are from the major refugee groups in the Chicago area: Bhutanese, refugees from Burma, and Iraqis.

The Chicago CO Collaborative has featured topics such as street safety, domestic violence issues, money management and shopping, and home safety. In addition, the Pan African Association, a mutual assistance association serving refugees and immigrants in the Chicago area, has been a partner in the Chicago CO Collaborative to assist with specific health-related topics.

In terms of structure, the resettlement agencies have found it helpful to divide into smaller language-specific groups for interpretation purposes. Interpreters come from the different agencies to assist. All participants are presented with the same information simultaneously: they watch and listen to the presenter in English, then hear their assigned interpreter convey the same information. The resettlement agency staff strives to use a variety of methods to deliver CO, such as giving examples, having volunteers act out role plays, and lecturing.

Advertisement for the Chicago CO Collaborative has been through flyers, agency contacts and emails, and, most effectively, word-of-mouth. To attract participants for the workshops, resettlement agencies have gathered seasonally-related donations (such as hats and gloves in winter) to distribute as benefits for attending the session.

The sessions have been conducted at a church with whom the Refugee One resettlement agency regularly partners. The church is located in the area that houses the largest concentration of refugees in the Chicago vicinity.

In addition to refugees having the opportunity to learn more about topics of interest or concern, the Chicago CO Collaborative agencies have noted other benefits:

- The Refugee Health Agency Task Force has been developed amongst partnering service providers, and meets every other month to discuss related issues and ensure services are provided appropriately.

- Heartland Alliance has developed their Heartland Health Outreach program to include the creation of a Women’s Support Group for Heartland-specific clients. With assistance from students attending a local university focusing on public health, this group meets twice a month.
- Heartland’s Health Outreach Program conducted a successful Women’s Health Week in May 2011.
- A Refugee Pregnancy Support Group, an 11-week program for pregnant women and those with children under the age of one, has been developed.
- The Tri-Agency Adjustment Services Team, made up of partnering resettlement agencies and other service providers, are developing a website for refugees, asylees, and immigrants.

The Chicago CO Collaborative plans to conduct additional sessions in the near future.

Links:

- Heartland Alliance: <http://www.heartlandalliance.org/>
- Refugee One: <http://www.refugeeone.org/>
- Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago: <http://www.catholiccharities.net/>
- Pan African Association: <http://www.panafricanassociation.org/>

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