



# REFUGEEWORKS

THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR REFUGEE EMPLOYMENT AND SELF-SUFFICIENCY



## NEWSLETTER 25 HEALTHCARE HOTSPOTS

ISSUE 25 April/May/June 2008

### FAST-TRACKING REFUGEE NURSES AND DOCTORS

By Daniel Sturm, RefugeeWorks

For years, Wilhelmina Holder has been advocating for programs that assist refugees with the professional training needed to remain in their chosen career fields. “Why should you have to start over from scratch?” says Holder, who is today the director of the Women’s Initiative for Self Empowerment (WISE) in St. Paul, Minn. “It’s such a waste!”

As a public health physician from Liberia, Holder can strongly identify with the struggle that refugees, asylees and immigrants experience when trying to reclaim their careers. “When I came to this country, at first I wanted to spend time with my children,” she recalls. “By the time they were old enough, I felt like I was too old to go back and take my license.”

Instead, Holder decided to dedicate herself to the issue of underemployment and over-qualification. She incorporated three steps into her recertification program for medical professionals: 1) providing financial aid so that clients can afford to take time off for study, 2) building mentorship networks with American-trained medical professionals, and 3) publishing a scientific study to impress potential funders.



Results from interviews with 165 foreign-trained doctors and nurses showed that newly arrived African immigrants came to Minnesota with a broad range of medical education and training. But despite their professional qualifications, 80 percent were relegated into entry-level medical positions such as nursing aides — or, worse, into unskilled jobs as taxi drivers or parking lot attendants — simply because they lacked the necessary U.S. licensing required for professional medical employment.



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#### CONSULTANT’S CORNER: Jonathan Lucus



Hello Everyone. The topic of re-certification brings to mind a Congolese gentleman I met a few years ago. He had just arrived in the U.S. and was looking for a job, but not just any job. He was an educator in his former country, a college professor to be exact. He wanted to teach again, to inspire students, to make a difference. When he spoke of his teaching experience his eyes widened along with his smile. As he spoke of his former career, his words carried the excitement of a dog greeting its owner and the nostalgic sorrow of remembering the first time being in love. I knew that helping this man

become an educator again would not be an easy task. Surprisingly, the biggest barrier was not having a process in place to get people like him into the educational field in an inexpensive, timely manner. Yet, the public school system was in need of quality teachers. RefugeeWorks hopes this issue, paired with our on-going research, will help job developers navigate successfully in the world of re-certification. You see, just like the Congolese gentleman, many refugees can solve the equation to America’s professional worker shortage: Passion plus Experience equals Commitment.

**Jonathan Lucus**  
Senior Consultant and National Coordinator



## TALKING POINT

### WELCOME BACK INITIATIVE HELPS IMMIGRANT MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS

*When the Welcome Back Initiative was launched in 2001, it found that 70 percent of foreign-trained healthcare professionals surveyed were not working in medical fields, but in non-skilled jobs such as taxi drivers, factory workers and fast-food restaurant employees. This didn't come as a surprise to the program's director, José Ramón Fernández-Peña, who is himself a physician from Mexico. "Ninety-eight percent of the time life gets in the way, rather than lack of language skills or training. It's their families here and abroad, and it's housing and money." The Welcome Back Initiative, funded through a grant from The California Endowment, aims to change this. Since its inception the program has assisted 8,000 asylees, refugees and immigrants to re-enter the healthcare workforce. RefugeeWorks spoke about the program with Fernández-Peña, an associate professor at San Francisco State University's Department of Health Education.*

**REFUGEEWORKS:** What is the biggest obstacle for refugees attempting to reclaim their careers?

**FERNÁNDEZ-PEÑA:** The biggest obstacle is not that they weren't well trained, but that they were trained somewhere else. In Mexico, for example, you wash and sterilize syringes rather than throwing them away, because we don't have that many of them. We also don't know what patient confidentiality is, and there are no medical malpractice laws. In my country, there are just nurses. But here you have the certified nursing assistant, the vocational nurse, the practical nurse, the bachelor's nurse, the master's nurse, the nurse practitioner and the nurse midwife. It's confusing! So we have created a course called "Introduction to the U.S. Health System." If this curriculum and Welcome Back had existed 20 years ago, I might be in medical practice right now.

**REFUGEEWORKS:** Our employment survey data shows that many refugees from Iraq have



professional skills in the healthcare industry. How difficult is it for them to get transcripts from their home countries?

**FERNÁNDEZ-PEÑA:** It's been extremely difficult to get transcripts for immigrants from Iraq, Afghanistan and Burma. In some cases the transcripts are non-existent, in some cases the countries are in such disarray that it's impossible to get them. The same is true for participants from Bosnia and Cuba.

**REFUGEEWORKS:** What advice do you give those participants?

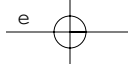
**FERNÁNDEZ-PEÑA:** We ask them, "Do you have somebody in your home country who can go for you to the school to get the paperwork?" Because often, if you try to do it by mail, either the letter is intercepted or, if they see a letter coming from the U.S., it may be destroyed. There are too many ifs.

**REFUGEEWORKS:** If re-licensure is not an option, do you then explore parallel career paths with your clients?

**FERNÁNDEZ-PEÑA:** Some of our participants decide not to pursue a clinical career, but a career in public health. Most of them have the equivalent of a bachelor's degree, and some have a master's degree. Some have gone into careers in research, some have become teachers. Others have become administrators and do policy work. We understand health broadly.

**REFUGEEWORKS:** Healthcare occupations are projected to account for nearly one in six new jobs in the U.S. between 2004 and 2014. What's your take





## Welcome Back Figures

7,546 active participants  
 891 clients passed licensing exams  
 740 clients obtained licenses in their original professions  
 524 entered new careers in healthcare  
 958 obtained employment in the U.S. health sector for the first time  
 56 were accepted into medical residencies

on the job opportunities in this sector?

**FERNÁNDEZ-PEÑA:** There are unspoken shortages, such as for dental hygienists, medical lab technicians and respiratory care therapists. When we assess our clients, we try to understand where their hearts are and where their training is, and then try to match those. There are so many jobs in the healthcare field.

**REFUGEEWORKS:** Do you encourage placement in lower-level healthcare jobs, such as nursing assistants?

**FERNÁNDEZ-PEÑA:** What we try to do with our participants is to explore options. If they come to us and they're driving a taxi, we try to set up short-term, mid-term and long-term goals. And a short-term goal is to get them back into the healthcare workforce, even if it's at in a position well below their level of training. At least that's a foot in the door. That's where people begin to be exposed to the U.S. health sector, the policies and procedures, and the lingo and environment that may be different from their countries of origin.

**REFUGEEWORKS:** Do you offer any language training specific to healthcare?

**FERNÁNDEZ-PEÑA:** Typically, ESL curriculum is designed for folks with a lower level of literacy. So you learn to say, "Hi, my name is Bob, may I have soup, please." But you don't learn what you need for certain career levels. So we created an accelerated, health-focused ESL curriculum that's completely contextualized in the health setting and focused on oral communication. The written aspect is focused on writing

charts and notes, electronic and on paper. When participants come out of our classes, they can say, "Hello, Mr. Smith, where does it hurt?" And while they may not be able to discuss a book with you, or talk politics, they can write, "Patient refers pain on lower-left quadrant."

**REFUGEEWORKS:** Have you had to fine-tune your program?

**FERNÁNDEZ-PEÑA:** Initially, instead of testing participants for English placement exams, we asked them to self-assess their language skills on a scale from 1 to 10. We thought these folks had enough problems in their life. After awhile we realized it was important to do an objective assessment of their English competency, because that determined academic options for them. Doing this initially would have saved a lot of time.

**REFUGEEWORKS:** What advice would you give to people who'd like to launch a similar program?

**FERNÁNDEZ-PEÑA:** It's really important to have an educational partner in the mix, because 99.9 percent of the time our participants will need some kind of educational intervention.

**REFUGEEWORKS:** Do you plan to replicate the Welcome Back concept in other states?

**FERNÁNDEZ-PEÑA:** We are doing it right now. There is a new center in operation in Boston. And we're in the midst of launching two new sites, one in Rhode Island and one in Washington state. We also have partnerships in Maryland, New York and Texas. After seven years in operation, piloting the idea, evaluating and learning from our mistakes and the things that we did right, we have cleaned up the model quite a bit. So we are in a fairly good position to start disseminating it. We call the toolkit "Welcome Back in a Box."

## Welcome Back Center Resources

Welcome Back Center Informational Video

<http://www.welcomebackcenter.org/video.html>

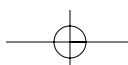
## Coping With Test-Taking Anxiety:

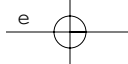
<http://www.studygs.net>

<http://www.counselingcenter.uiuc.edu/brochures/testanx.htm>

## General Study and Test-Taking Suggestions:

<http://www.harvardwestlake.com/students/studyskills/index.html>





# A REFUGEE NURSING TRAINING REPORTS SUCCESSES

By Daniel Sturm, *RefugeeWorks*

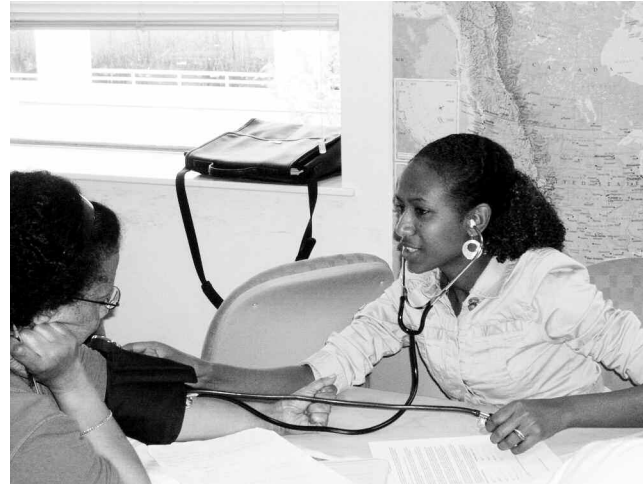
Noa Sadan becomes enthusiastic when asked about the career opportunities available for refugees in healthcare. “Area employers have been tremendously happy with our students.”

Sadan is the ESL director at Montgomery County Refugee Training Center in Silver Spring, Md. Since its inception in 1996, three hundred refugees have graduated from Montgomery College through the center’s four-month certified nursing assistant (CNA) program. Most of them find jobs in nursing homes as geriatric nursing assistants. Recruiters from ManorCare nursing homes often attend the program’s graduation ceremony in order to find nursing assistants for their facilities in Chevy Chase and Bethesda, Md. “They definitely woo our students,” Sadan said. In addition to the certified nursing assistant program, Montgomery College offers financial aid for short-term job training for pharmacy technicians, EKG technicians, and other medical technicians through the Maryland Office for New Americans. The Maryland Board of Nursing also offers course packets to help internationally trained nurses with recertification.

Sadan believes that the job prospects for refugees entering the healthcare workforce couldn’t be more positive. Healthcare occupations are projected to account for nearly one in every six new jobs by 2014. Nursing jobs are also well-paid. While the real wages for most U.S.



workers have increased only 5 percent



between 1997 and 2005, wages for registered nurses and radiology technicians have increased between 18 and 23 percent.

When asked about the danger of being trapped in a job with few opportunities for advancement (a problem especially for refugees with professional backgrounds) Sadan assured that climbing the career ladder was a very realistic option. After one year on the job, employees become eligible for tuition assistance and some go on to become licensed practical nurses or registered nurses.

She acknowledged that clients who had been nurses or

physicians, or worked in other professional occupations at home, often saw CNA as a temporary job. “But I advise them to stick with the job, in order to get a foot in the door.” She recently encouraged two West African men, who had been successful businessmen in their home countries, to enter the certified nursing assistant training program. “Both were scooped up immediately, and they became excellent care givers.” She advised the men to keep their eyes open for management positions. “You can become a CNA supervisor, or even end up managing a nursing home. There are so many possibilities.”



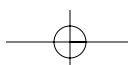
## Resources

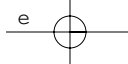
Maryland Board of Nursing licensure information for foreign-trained nurses, at:

<http://tinyurl.com/mzhx7>

Check out this funny promotional video on nursing jobs, at:

<http://tinyurl.com/5kvzw6>



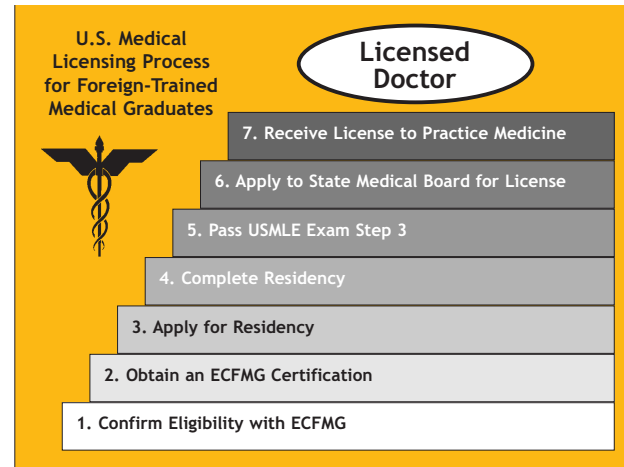


## RECERTIFICATION RESOURCE GUIDE

Developing career pathways for refugees with professional backgrounds can be stressful. Many intricacies of American work culture are not translatable abroad.

To help clear up any potential confusion, the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement has created three fact sheets, providing step-by-step information on the application materials required for re-licensure of foreign-trained registered nurses and physicians. Refugees and employment specialists may use this tool to get the application process started. The resource guide also includes a question-and-answer-style fact sheet providing information about the estimated length and cost of the re-licensure process. For example, medical re-licensing could cost more than \$4,000, in addition to residency costs and other fees specific to individual needs.

The following fact sheets are the result of a collaboration between ORR and the Employment and Training Administration at the U.S. Department of Labor. One goal is to develop strategies to encourage and enable refugee employment service providers to become partners with local One-Stop career centers. Inquiries regarding these



recertification fact sheets can be directed to the Office of Refugee Resettlement at 202-401-9246.

The fact sheets are available for download, at:  
<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resources>

## Recertification Programs

### Boston Welcome Back Center

Boston-Bunker Hill Community College  
 Daniel Lam, Executive Director  
 250 New Rutherford Ave. Rm. B206B  
 Boston, MA 02129  
 Phone: (617) 228-ICAN  
 dlam@bhcc.mass.edu  
 www.bhcc.mass.edu/inside/18

### Foreign-Trained Professionals Program

1199 SEIU Training & Employment Funds  
 Manhattan Office  
 330 West 42nd St. 2nd Fl.  
 New York, NY 10036  
 Phone: (212) 629-5505  
 www.1199etjisp.org/training/immigrants/foreign\_trained\_professionals.aspx

### Integrating Foreign-Trained Healthcare Professionals for Self-Sufficiency

Wilhelmina Holder, Executive Director  
 Women's Initiative for Self Empowerment (WISE), Inc.  
 Hamline Park Plaza  
 570 Asbury St., Suite 110  
 Saint Paul, MN 55104  
 Phone: (651) 646-3268  
 wilhelminaholder@aol.com  
 www.aafacd-inc.org

### Medical Careers for New Americans Program

International Institute of MN  
 1694 Como Ave.  
 St. Paul, MN 55108  
 Phone: (651) 647-0191 x 300  
 info@iimn.org  
 www.iimn.org

### New Americans in Nursing Program

Florida International University School of Nursing  
 (aka Foreign-Educated Physicians Nursing Program)  
 Mairelys de la Guardia  
 11200 SW 8th St., Rm. 492  
 Miami, FL 33199  
 Phone: (305) 348-7724  
 guardiam@fiu.edu  
 http://chua2.fiu.edu/NursingMD\_RN/

### Nursing Career Academy Links

Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association  
 Avni Patel  
 2500 Valleyhigh Dr.  
 Rochester, MN 55901-2739  
 Phone: (507) 289-5960 x 121  
 avni.patel@imaa.net  
 www.imaa.net/linked\_websites/NCA\_links.htm

### Rochester Healthcare Academy

Workforce Development, Inc. (WIB)  
 Melissa Lewis  
 300 11th Ave. NW, Suite 114  
 Rochester, MN 55901  
 Phone: (507) 292-5152  
 www.workforcedevelopment.ws

### South Florida Workforce

Refugee Career Laddering Program  
 Arlene Diaz  
 7300 Corporate Center Dr. Suite 500  
 Miami, FL 33126  
 Phone: (305) 594-7615 x 399  
 adiaz@southfloridaworkforce.com  
 www.southfloridaworkforce.com/refugee.htm

### Upwardly Global

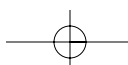
San Francisco Office  
 Christina Fialho, Executive Assistant  
 582 Market St., Suite 1207  
 San Francisco, CA 94104  
 Phone: (415) 834-9901  
 Christina@upwardlyglobal.org  
 www.upwardlyglobal.org

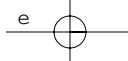
### Welcome Back Center (California)

José Ramón Fernández-Peña, WB Initiative Director  
 City College of San Francisco  
 John Adams Campus  
 1860 Hayes Street  
 San Francisco, CA 94117  
 Phone: (415) 405-0488  
 jrfp@sfsu.edu  
 www.e-welcomeback.org

### Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians

Amanda Bergson-Shilcock  
 1617 John F. Kennedy Blvd. 13th Fl.  
 Philadelphia, PA 19103  
 Phone: (215) 557-2864  
 Amanda@welcomingcenter.org  
 www.welcomingcenter.org





## OTHER NEWS



### A DRIVING SIMULATOR CAN MAKE A REAL DIFFERENCE

By Daniel Sturm, RefugeeWorks

When Paul Jericho received a copy of RefugeeWorks' fall newsletter, "Tackling Transportation," he whole-heartedly supported the statement that transportation was a huge barrier to employment.

"This is true for most small and mid-sized cities, where the jobs are

out in the county, and no public transportation is available," said Jericho, who directs the Hispanic American Council of Erie's refugee program.

Over the years, Jericho has tried different ways of assisting refugees to get driving permits and buy cars. They've used community volunteers to help clients obtain licenses. When the volunteers couldn't fill the demand, his program began sub-contracting with a local driving school to conduct lessons, while program staff served as interpreters sitting in the back seats. This approach worked well with refugees who'd previously driven. But refugees with no driving experience needed up to forty hours of driving lessons, which increased the cost to several thousand dollars per person.

It was time to begin thinking outside of the box. In 2005, the Hispanic American Council of Erie purchased two driving simulators for a total cost of \$10,000 and set up classes for refugees who'd never driven. The simulators did the trick. "They took away much of the new driver's fear and helped them build the confidence needed to get a license," Jericho said.

The new technology, which according to Jericho challenged new drivers more than driving a car on the street, was also a huge cost saver. Most of the 95 clients who have completed the driving simulator classes have needed only seven hours of instruction to obtain their licenses. For more info, contact Paul Jericho at: [pjericho@velocity.net](mailto:pjericho@velocity.net)

### Fast-Tracking Refugee Nurses and Doctors << 1

It makes good economic sense to help refugees enter the health workforce. According to U.S. Department of Labor statistics, there will be an estimated shortage of 1 million nurses by the year 2010. Refugee employment specialists point towards the tremendous job opportunities that exist in this industry.

Holder's nonprofit organization found that nurses and physicians with refugee backgrounds often lacked access to their university transcripts, which are required as part of the recertification process in the U.S. Sometimes the universities they attended had been bombed.

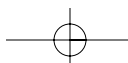
Additionally, the complicated licensure process was daunting for those who struggled with English. Finally, newcomers who had to sustain families in the U.S. and overseas lacked the funds necessary to pay for medical licensure exams, which could cost more than \$4,000.

Holder's advocacy work has paid off. In 2006, the Minnesota Legislature approved a one-time \$450,000 appropriation from the state's Workforce Development Fund for a pilot project to support the licensure of foreign-trained physicians, nurses, dentists, pharmacists, veterinarians and other allied health care professionals. To maintain the project, WISE successfully applied for a \$168,370 three-year renewable grant from the Office of Refugee Resettlement's Ethnic Community Self-Help program in 2007.

Holder's program, "Integrating Foreign-Trained Healthcare Professionals for Self-Sufficiency," is providing \$800 to nurses applying for licensure and \$1,500 to physicians. With the backing of the African

and American Friendship Association for Cooperation and Development (another nonprofit group Holder helped found) the recertification program is currently in full swing. American-trained physicians review the personal statements clients include in their residency applications. Since January 2007, 123 healthcare professionals from 18 countries have registered for the program, 14 physicians have completed their examinations, and two doctors have secured residencies. Two nurses have been re-licensed, and ten nurses are currently going through the credential evaluation and licensure process. The nursing program collaborates with the International Institute of Minnesota, which offers coursework for nursing students, medical assistants and surgical technicians.

Yared Endalailu, an Ethiopian asylee, who enrolled in the program in March 2007 as a physiologist, said that what he likes most is the connection with people who started off in the same situation in which he'd been. "When you first come to this country, everything seems so new and you doubt yourself," Endalailu said. The program also pays for books and credential evaluations, which Endalailu said helps tremendously, since he has a family with two small children to support. Recently, one Minnesota hospital hired a Somali refugee doctor. When the word spread, many Somali refugees switched providers. The increased demand made it necessary for the hospital to hire several additional Somali doctors. When asked about future plans, Holder said she'd love to see this pattern take off nationwide. "What's happening here is not anything extraordinary. It's entirely replicable."

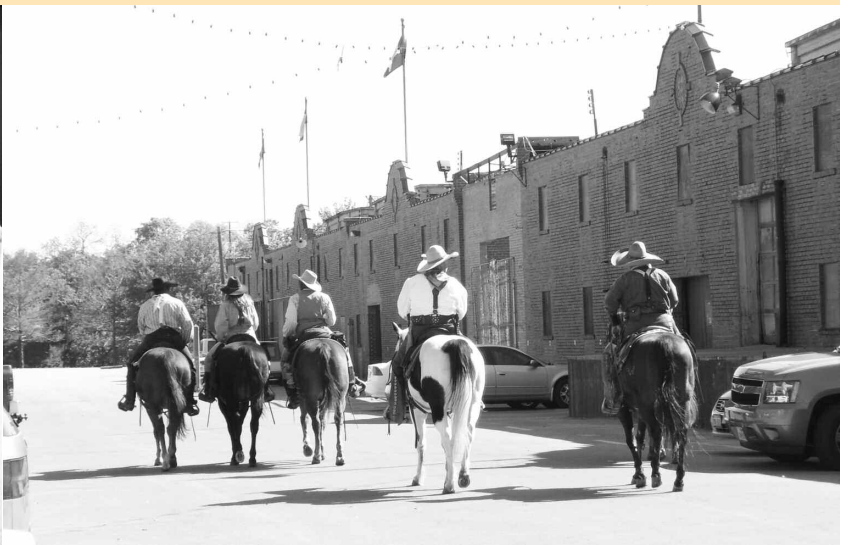


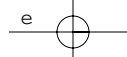


## REFUGEEWORKS

### ON THE ROAD

The 2008 **RefugeeWorks** training season is upon us. So far this year, our staff members have conducted workshops in Minnesota, Illinois, Virginia, California and Arizona. We also just returned from a trip to Texas, where we held our second conference of the year, "Engaging Employers." Thanks to Faith Lamb and her terrific team at **Catholic Charities of Fort Worth**, we had a great turnout of 50 participants, with inspiring discussions and several work site visits. Please join RefugeeWorks for our upcoming Employment Training Institutes in **Indianapolis, Ind.** (June 17-18) and **Manchester, N.H.** (Aug. 19-20).  
[www.refugeeworks.org/training.html](http://www.refugeeworks.org/training.html)





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*José Ramón Fernández-Peña, Director of the Welcome Back Initiative.  
See, RefugeeWorks’ “Talking Point,” p. 2*



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