

# Harnessing Volunteer Energy

to Support and Welcome Refugees in Your Community

Five tips for success



WELCOMING  
AMERICA

WELCOMING  
REFUGEES





# TODAY'S OPPORTUNITY

This toolkit highlights some of the best practices in engaging, supporting and managing volunteers to help welcome refugees in your community.

Shifting United States refugee policy over the last few years amid a spike in global migration has sparked a national conversation on refugees. As Americans learn more about refugees, who they are and what they have been through, many have taken an interest in helping their new neighbors settle in—from donating household items to volunteering their time to help a family learn English or navigate our healthcare system. In 2017, Church World Service, a refugee resettlement organization, reported that its volunteer base quadrupled, while donations to the global humanitarian relief organization World Relief from individuals, churches and nongovernmental sources have nearly doubled since 2016.

Harnessing the energy of volunteers by creating opportunities for long-term residents to help their new neighbors navigate their surroundings is an effective tool for empowering and welcoming refugees into their new community. Mentoring—a coaching relationship that lacks the formality of a teacher or a supervisor—is a tool routinely used in U.S. schools and workplaces to help new or inexperienced individuals acclimate to their surroundings or practice a new skill in a more informal setting. Incorporating mentorship into resettlement programming may yield many benefits for refugee integration, such as the development of job and language skills, expanded networks and increased self-confidence and self-reliance.

However, supporting refugees through volunteer engagement requires empowering volunteers with the tools and support they need to be a mentor and a friend to someone who has recently endured hardship and is restarting their life in a foreign land and culture.

**“I want to extend my warm thanks to my mentor for always being available to hear and answer my questions. Thanks for spending time to help me improve every time, and for your wise guidance to achieve my professional goals. It is a privilege having you as a mentor.”**

*— Refugee client, Global Talent Idaho*



# FIVE TIPS FOR ENGAGING VOLUNTEERS

## TIP 1

### RECRUITING VOLUNTEERS

#### Use social media to generate volunteer interest

Social media is a low-cost and efficient tool that can be used to generate volunteer interest, from introducing refugees to the community to posting volunteer opportunities. A few ways to effectively and creatively use social media to create opportunities for individuals in your community to learn, serve and connect with refugees include:

- Using social media platforms to educate the community-at-large about refugees through stories of individuals;
- Promoting organizational volunteer needs as well as cross-promoting opportunities with other community partners;
- Working with social media influencers (i.e., individuals with a large social media following) to increase traffic to your platforms and awareness of need and opportunity in the community; and
- Posting donation needs (diapers, hygiene products, cleaning supplies, etc.) and pictures of people receiving distributions to encourage additional donations.



#### FIELD SPOTLIGHT: UTAH REFUGEE CONNECTION

Utah Refugee Connection (URC) provides a platform for Utah refugee organizations, programs and providers to connect goods, services and volunteers from the larger community of Utah. Run by three part-time staffers, URC generated 40,000 hours of service and \$1 million in in-kind donations to benefit local refugees **relying primarily on their social media pages to serve as a clearinghouse for volunteer needs in their community**, including opportunities with partner organizations such as the Granite School District, the Workforce Services Refugee Services office and the International Rescue Committee. By dedicating the time to create and maintain a social media presence, as well as **cultivating relationships with social media influencers** in the community, today URC is now able to help fill just about any need that comes their way—from finding an English tutor to acquiring a mattress for a refugee family.



## Provide a menu of options for volunteers to engage

Flexibility and listening to the types of opportunities volunteers are interested in is critical to successful engagement and retention. Not all volunteers want to engage in direct service or have the availability to sign up for a multi-week commitment. The more clarity provided up-front regarding volunteer opportunities and expectations, the better for all parties involved: the organization, the volunteer and the refugee. While volunteer opportunities should be designed to respond to the needs of the local community, the types of volunteer activities may include:

- Providing in-kind donations and/or creating kits for delivery (e.g., back-to-school backpacks with school supplies, Halloween costumes, hygiene kits and cleaning kits);
- Community engagement activities (e.g., field trips to parks and museums, and community gardening);
- Professional mentorship and skills-development support (e.g., resume review, interview coaching and English tutoring);
- Building community awareness (e.g., writing local refugee stories for social media and helping with cultural programming); and
- Assistance in navigating American systems (e.g., schools and healthcare).



Photography Courtesy of: Global Talent Idaho



### FIELD SPOTLIGHT: GLOBAL TALENT IDAHO

Global Talent Idaho (GTI) helps highly skilled refugees return to the professional fields they left behind in their home countries. GTI's comprehensive program includes trainings, workshops, interview practice, professional English courses and network building. GTI channels volunteer interest by **incorporating volunteers into GTI's programmatic offerings and providing a range of ways for volunteers to support refugee job seekers**. One of GTI's programmatic offerings is preparation prior to a job interview. By developing a volunteer opportunity to conduct mock interviews, refugee job seekers benefit from having the opportunity to practice and receive feedback before the actual interview. Volunteers who are interested and available for a multi-week commitment supplement GTI's advanced professional English courses by serving as a one-on-one English coach for an hour a week outside of the classroom. Volunteers also help celebrate the successes of refugee job seekers by interviewing and writing blog posts for GTI's website.



## SUPPORTING VOLUNTEERS



### Onboard all volunteers prior to service

Providing some form of orientation for volunteers prior to their start of service is critical and serves several important purposes:

- It creates a systematic way to track and meet all volunteers before they engage in a direct service;
- It provides an opportunity to educate volunteers regarding refugees generally and what to expect when working with this population; and
- It serves as a time to better gauge interest and skills of volunteers as well as provide necessary training, including how to support and empower survivors of trauma.



Photography Courtesy of: Refugee Connect



### FIELD SPOTLIGHT: REFUGEECONNECT

RefugeeConnect, an organization dedicated to improving the lives of refugees in Cincinnati, Ohio, while fostering community acceptance and inclusion, was started by the Junior League of Cincinnati as a volunteer initiative, and its ability to serve refugees in the community is contingent on volunteer empowerment and support. To manage increased volunteer interest over the past couple of years and ensure that volunteers feel prepared to work with refugees, RefugeeConnect **created an ambassador workshop that is the first touch for all prospective volunteers**. Individuals interested in volunteering are directed to sign up for a free workshop. As an organization that grew out of a volunteer initiative and understands the necessary ingredients for volunteer retention, RefugeeConnect strives to ensure that volunteers feel capable, empowered and supported when working with individuals who are not only settling into a new community but are also recent survivors of trauma. During the workshop, prospective **volunteers learn more about the refugee experience** and are provided a space to ask questions and address common misconceptions regarding the different religions and cultures they may encounter. During this time, **volunteers also learn about the different service opportunities and work with RefugeeConnect to find a good fit based on their skills, experience, geography and availability**. Through the ambassador workshops, RefugeeConnect has trained more than 500 individuals who have volunteered in a variety of ways, from direct service mentorship, gardening, tutoring and advising student leadership international clubs to indirect web design, strategic planning and research.

# TIP

## Support volunteers throughout their time of service

Finding ways to support and appreciate volunteers is important for retention, as well as for creating a positive experience for both the volunteer and the refugee. Creating opportunities for ongoing support is particularly important when the service opportunity is out of office (e.g., at-home English classes, as in Patient Navigator, etc.). Ways to support and show your ongoing appreciation for volunteers include:



- Monthly optional coffee meet-ups;
- Weekly newsletters;
- Periodic phone call check-ins;
- Informal gatherings (e.g., picnics) for the volunteers and refugees; and
- Providing opportunities for short debriefing sessions following service sessions.



### FIELD SPOTLIGHT: PROJECT SHINE

Project SHINE, a program of the Spring Institute in Denver, Colorado, provides health literacy training, community engagement activities and patient-navigation services to refugees and immigrant families living in Denver and Aurora. Once volunteers complete their orientation and receive their placement with a local partner, their contact with the Spring Institute is limited since most volunteer activities take place outside of the office and in the community. To stay in touch with volunteers and supplement the support they receive at their community placement, Project SHINE developed **a short informal email that goes out weekly** that not only includes reminders and upcoming opportunities, but also highlights cultural events in the community and includes a **brief volunteer spotlight**. Project SHINE continually receives positive feedback for using short electronic notes to highlight opportunities and to express their appreciation for the volunteers. Additionally, Project SHINE offers **optional monthly coffee meet-ups** as a way for volunteers to engage with one another and with Project SHINE staff.



## MANAGING VOLUNTEERS

# TIP

### Design volunteer opportunities that are manageable and support organizational needs.

When an organization is understaffed or overwhelmed, an extra set of hands often seems like the easy solution. However, without the proper infrastructure to manage volunteers, one risks a negative experience for the organization, the volunteers and the clients served. Individuals who volunteer are choosing to direct their free time to contribute to their community and can play a very valuable role in moving forward the priorities for a nonprofit, but not if they are thrown into an unstructured volunteer program—neither will the individual feel fulfilled, nor will the organization be able to further advance their mission and goals.

To create manageable volunteer opportunities it helps to:

- Create volunteer opportunities based on organizational needs and programs;
- Only add volunteers into programs in which staff can provide the proper support and eliminate volunteer opportunities in which you lack oversight capacity;
- Be up-front with volunteers regarding expectations and commitments; and
- Use a combination of a dedicated staff person and online tools (e.g., Google documents, Salesforce, Sign-up Genius) to keep track of and stay in touch with volunteers.



### FIELD SPOTLIGHT: NEW AMERICAN PATHWAYS

New American Pathways (NAP), a refugee resettlement organization based in Atlanta, Georgia, provides approximately 5,000 refugees a year with the necessary tools to rebuild their lives and achieve long-term success. NAP supports refugees from arrival to citizenship. Programs include welcoming and orienting refugees to their new community (e.g., housing, basic needs, cultural orientation and doctors' appointments), English classes, first job placement, a women's program for survivors of domestic violence, youth programs, health management and immigration services.

**Providing English language instruction to refugees is a programmatic priority** for NAP. However, for a variety of reasons, including lack of transportation and childcare, many refugees are unable to attend the English classes offered at NAP. **Under the direction and oversight of their on-site ESL instructor, NAP developed an English-at-home program** that has become one of their most popular volunteer offerings. **English-at-home volunteers go through a training program** with the NAP ESL instructor prior to placement and receive a curriculum to help them provide English instruction. **Volunteers also commit to visiting the refugee's home at least once a week for three months.** The English-at-home volunteer program's success is attributed to (1) it being a volunteer opportunity that is in line with a programmatic priority and a critical client need; (2) the fact that NAP is able to provide the proper training, oversight and support for volunteers; and (3) creating an opportunity for the volunteer and refugee to make a meaningful connection and develop a relationship.



## ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS



Photography Courtesy of: New American Pathways

Volunteers are wonderful assets to organizations and the ability to harness their energy to guide and support refugees in their new community can be a very powerful experience for both the volunteer and the newcomer. Additional insights and advice to keep in mind:

- If staff capacity to effectively take on and manage additional volunteers does not exist, consider creating a toolkit of self-guided activities individuals can do on their own to support refugees, such as forming a dinner club, visiting refugee-owned businesses, etc.
- Discern volunteer interest and commitment levels before committing too many resources and training time to a volunteer. Be clear on expectations up-front and consider creating mechanisms to streamline interest. For example, have prospective volunteers fill out a form, financially contribute to their background check (even if just \$20) and attend an orientation session before discussing placement and adding them to the roster of individuals you are managing.
- In addition to conducting background checks for all prospective volunteers, ensure an organizational protocol is in place regarding refugee confidentiality and that all staff members are clear on what type of information volunteers have access to and what should be protected. Consider the sensitivities involved with home visits rather than meeting in public spaces and incorporate training and oversight to ensure that all parties are comfortable with the arrangement.
- Consider partnerships with AmeriCorps or college work-study programs to supplement internal capacity to manage volunteers. Make sure to have mechanisms in place to carefully track volunteer hours and identify opportunities for when those hours may be counted towards matching funds for certain grants. State governments with offices specifically dedicated to volunteerism may also be a useful resource and source of help.

Remember, volunteers are driven by a desire to give back to their community. By creating opportunities for volunteers to provide mentorship and support for new encounters (e.g., navigating U.S. institutions such as doctors, schools and banks), volunteers can play a critical role in helping refugees gain confidence in their new community, rather than feeling alone and overwhelmed in their new surroundings. However, volunteers need to be supported as well. While it may be tempting to launch a volunteer program to respond to a critical need, do not be afraid to take the time and put structure in place first. The Volunteers will be more fulfilled, and ultimately the refugees in your community will be better served.



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### **Additional Welcoming America resources:**

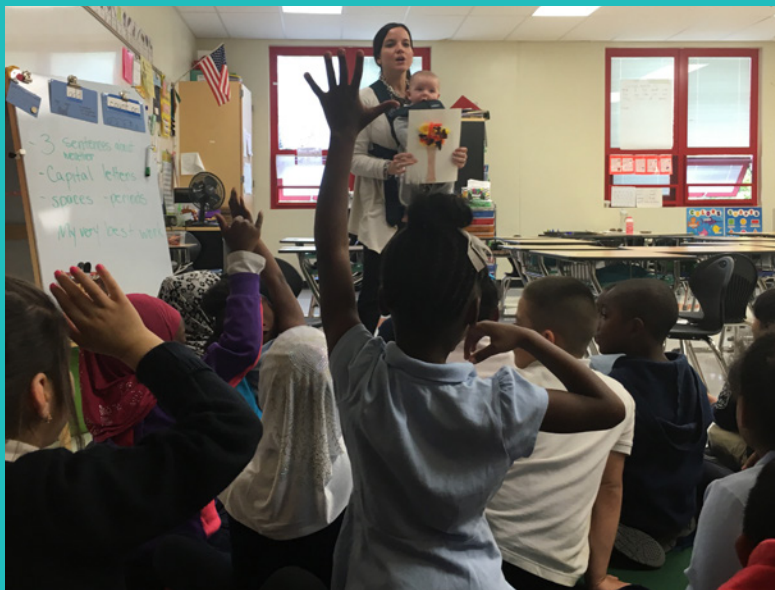
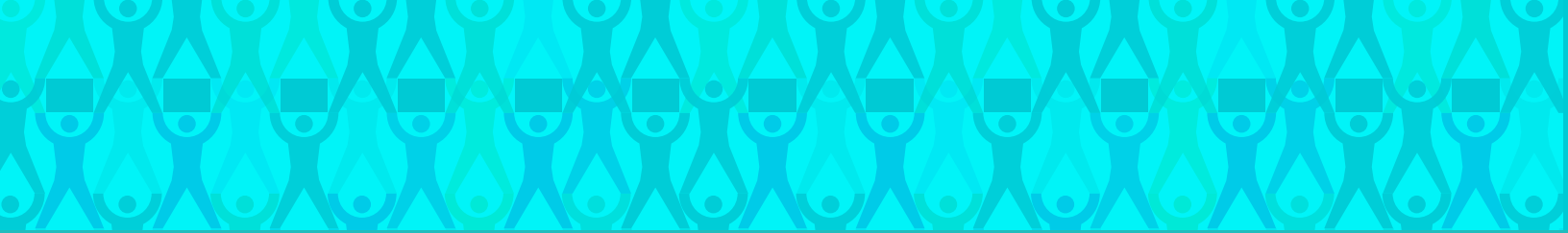
View Welcoming America's online video, a resource to help engage potential volunteers in your work:

<http://www.welcomingrefugees.org/resources/refugee-volunteer-recruitmentintroductory-video>

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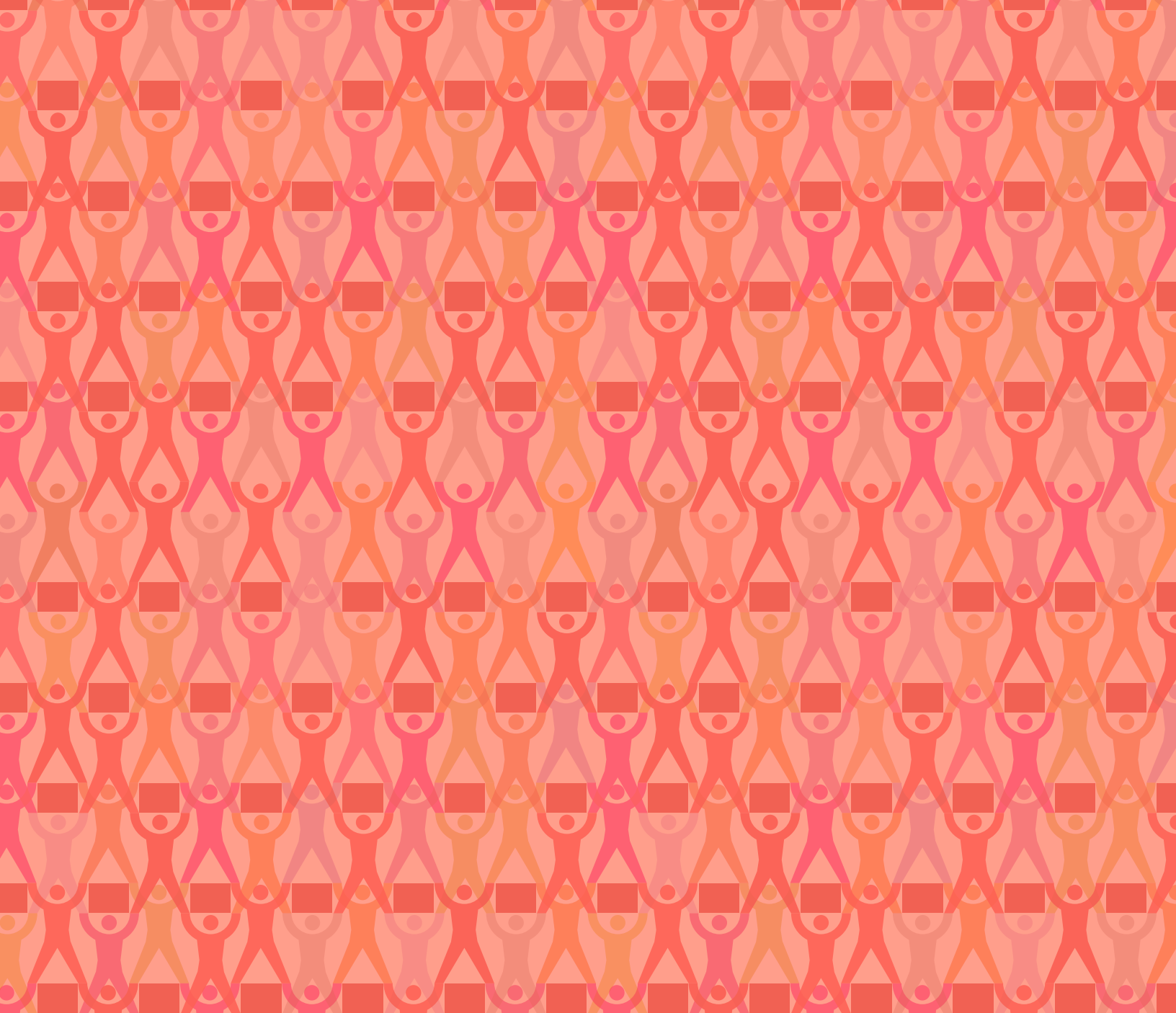
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