

WELCOMING THE STRANGER: NYANA and the Indochinese Refugees

ARIE BIERMAN, ACSW

Assistant Executive Vice President for Resettlement Services, NYANA, New York

and

VALERIE OLTARSH, MPA

Former Director, Center for Women and Families, NYANA, New York

The Refugee Urban Skills Project, conceived and run by NYANA from 1984 to 1987, was an innovative approach to the resettlement needs of Indochinese refugees. It taught refugees vital skills for functioning in an urban setting; developed linkages with locally based agencies and resources; assisted refugees with specific housing, crime, and intergroup issues; and empowered refugees to advocate for themselves and develop their own support network.

Out of a deep humanitarian concern for the plight of the Vietnamese "Boat People," and the thousands who fled the horrors of the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia and in response to a request from the U.S. government, in 1979, NYANA began extending its services to Indochinese refugees arriving in New York City. During the course of its Southeast Asian resettlement program, NYANA resettled close to 5,000 Southeast Asian refugees. More than a third of them were Cambodians, survivors of the "killing fields": the rest were from Vietnam.

The refugees from Indochina arrived in New York with only the clothing on their backs. This was a traumatized refugee population. They had suffered many losses and spent years in squalid holding camps in Southeast Asia waiting to be allowed to come to the United States. They were eager to rebuild their shattered lives and practice again rich cultural traditions.

The NYANA Indochinese Resettlement Program employed the same casework/social work methodology used so effectively in the case management and resettlement of other refugee groups served by NYANA over the years. Each refugee family was assigned a social worker who, with the help of specially trained bilingual para-professional staff, saw each family on an on-going basis. They were responsible for assisting in all aspects of the

refugee's adjustment. Housing, counseling, orientation, health care, financial aid, as well as help in finding a job and learning English, were all provided.

However, this traditional service delivery method did not adequately address the multitude of problems faced by the Indochinese refugees. Innovative approaches and programs had to be, and were, developed. The Refugee Urban Skills Project, conceived, initiated and run by NYANA, was the most innovative and successful example of such attempts. The Project, which began in February, 1984 and ended in September of 1987, was operated and supervised by NYANA on behalf of the New York City Refugee Resettlement Agency Forum, a consortium of all 12 resettlement agencies then functioning in the city. The Refugee Urban Skills Project served Southeast Asian refugees regardless of agency affiliation.

REFUGEE URBAN SKILLS PROJECT

The refugees from Indochina were resettled into areas of New York that were often described as "transitional"—neighborhoods marked by a higher incidence of crime and affordable yet declining housing stock. There was a paucity of community-based services able to assist these refugees with their transition from a Third World rural experience to a complex urban environment. Crises were

erupting. The absence of heat and hot water as well as other housing-related issues threatened the health of the refugees. Inter-group and inter-racial stresses flared up. Local agencies felt frustrated at being unable to cope with these newest members of their communities—refugees whose language, culture, and life experience seemed so alien.

The Refugee Urban Skills Project grew out of a NYANA-based graduate social work student project. In 1983, two students, one from Fordham and the other from the Wurzweiler School of Social Work at Yeshiva University, were sent into these communities to assess the needs and to start addressing some of them. The students began forming refugee tenants groups, visiting local agencies, and providing orientation to both refugees and local service providers such as clinics and schools. The student effort highlighted the urgent needs and also provided a viable and effective model for meeting them.

With grants from the Ford Foundation, Exxon Corporation, and the Lebrun Foundation as well as funds from the New York State Refugee Program, the Refugee Urban Skills Project formally began in February of 1984. Under the supervision of one of the recently graduated students involved with the project from the beginning, service teams were formed and trained to work in high-density refugee communities. Operating in the Bronx and Brooklyn, the two boroughs of New York City where Indochinese refugees were resettled in large numbers, these teams had four goals:

1. teach refugees vital survival skills for functioning in a complex urban setting
2. help develop linkages and relationships with a host of locally based agencies and resources
3. assist refugees with specific housing, crime, intergroup, and educational problems
4. empower refugees to advocate for themselves and develop communal and institutional supports

The typical Urban Skills team, of which there were three, comprised a master's-level social worker and a bilingual paraprofessional aide. These community aides were themselves refugees who were intimately aware of the problems and concerns of their communities and lived in the very same areas. The Project's basic approach stressed the need for staff to be out in the community, in the refugee apartments and neighborhoods. Using the group work modality, these teams worked in apartment buildings with a significant refugee clientele.

The Refugee Urban Skills Project was active in more than 40 buildings in both the Bronx and Brooklyn with a combined tenancy, refugee, and non-refugee, of approximately 12,000 people. In every building where the Urban Skills teams worked, the improvements in basic services affected all of the residents. Part of the project's philosophy was that all of the building's tenants, whether native- or foreign-born, were invited to join the project's tenant-based building improvement teams. The refugee tenant groups organized by the Project were viewed as effective instruments by their non-refugee neighbors.

For example, in one apartment building in the Fordham area of the Bronx, "We didn't know how to get along in this city and couldn't talk to anybody except other Vietnamese," recalled Tran N. who lived in that apartment building. Although rents were low, there were serious heat and hot water problems, bursting pipes, and a leaking roof and windows. Much of what once was inhospitable improved with the help of the Urban Skills team who formed a tenants association that included many American tenants. This joining together of forces—putting all rent funds into an escrow account and learning other empowering and advocacy techniques—was instrumental in obtaining improvements in the building and in building positive relationships with neighbors. Within a year of the tenants association's formation, significant repairs were done in the building.

The Refugee Urban Skills Project also worked with over 45 locally based community groups and agencies. The Project helped to ease some of the enormous pressures these agencies faced, alleviating the huge caseload and burdens with which they coped. It became an active partner in these agencies' efforts at neighborhood stabilization, at stemming the decline of services, and in preventing the further deterioration of housing.

In one example of community-based involvement, after a series of break-ins at an apartment building in Brooklyn, the Refugee Urban Skills team served as a liaison with the local police precinct. As a result of their efforts, a community affairs officer came and met with the refugee tenants group. The Indochinese refugees had many fears of police based on experiences in their Communist homelands. Similarly, the local precinct commander in Brooklyn was at a loss on how to reach out to these newest residents. He knew they were being victimized, but they were reluctant to seek police help. The language and cultural barriers seemed overwhelming. The tenants group meeting with a police official became one in a series in which the Urban Skills staff served as translators as well as facilitators. The sessions with the tenants resulted in increased patrols and monitoring of that particular building, created a better understanding of American law enforcement by the refugees, and gave the police a less stereotypical view of Asian refugees, their culture, and needs.

Another role of the Refugee Urban Skills Project was to act as cultural intermediary between Indochinese refugees and local health care providers. Culture plays such a critical role in a patient's interpretation of illness and healing; health care providers need to understand what their patients see as the causes of illness, how a malady was handled in their more traditional society and home country, who traditionally treated disease, and how certain beliefs, such as the body's balance between hot and cold, would affect their reactions to diagnostic and treatment procedures routinely performed in the United States.

Consider this case illustration.

Mr. K from Cambodia had been in the United States for seven months when he went to a local Bronx health clinic. He was experiencing nightmares and a severe cough with flu-like symptoms. The Urban Skills Project helped the American doctor understand the Cambodian patient's reluctance to have blood drawn. The drawing of blood was viewed by the refugee as a draining of the spirit, of his life force, and was thus something to be avoided. Similarly, Mr. K felt it was not necessary to take the full course of antibiotics because the pills were meant for Americans who were physically much bigger than Asians and therefore he, as an Asian, needed fewer pills. With Urban Skills staff help the clinic doctor was able to communicate to Mr. K a respect for, and an understanding of Cambodian traditional health beliefs. The Cambodian's compliance with medical treatment improved through the use of a bi-cultural, bilingual interpreter, by minimizing testing procedures, and by explaining in detail the rationale for the medication prescription.

The Project averted inter-group and inter-racial conflict, thereby easing stresses in the community. In one such example, the Urban Skills staff had formed a tenants group in a building in the Allerton area of the Bronx. They tried to encourage non-refugee tenants to join, but were meeting resistance. Finally, several of the African-American residents agreed to attend a meeting. The Urban Skills team sensed some tension in the room and encouraged an open discussion. After some awkwardness and hesitancy, one of the non-refugees opened up and said that she was angry that the refugees were getting special treatment from the government. When asked what she meant, the women said she and others have seen trucks come to the building delivering large sacks of free rice to the refugees and how unfair it was for the government to do this; the Americans deserved rice too. The refugees then explained that these were not government trucks, but rather were

from stores in Chinatown. The refugees bought rice in bulk at a savings, and the stores offered free delivery in order to keep them as customers. The tension eased, especially when the non-refugees were invited to purchase rice with the refugees at a discount using the same stores and truck service delivery. It was instructive for all to have experienced how a minor misunderstanding created tensions and fed into negative perceptions. Once the rice incident was resolved, the group was forced to tackle other common issues faced by refugees and non-refugees. The African-American tenants became regular participants in the tenants association meetings.

The Refugee Urban Skills Project was instrumental in establishing community-based coordinating mechanisms such as the Bronx Alliance for Refugee Services (BARS), which was operational for seven years. That coalition of community organizations rapidly evolved into an effective clearinghouse of information, an advocate for services, and a coordinating body on service issues. Issues of turf were minimized, and agencies, instead of blaming one another for problems and gaps in service, found common cause in finding solutions.

Another important achievement of the Urban Skills Project was the key role it played

in helping the Bronx Cambodian refugee community purchase a building to serve as a Buddhist temple. Buddhism and particularly the Buddhist temple played a central role in Cambodian culture, serving as a source of spiritual and communal strength and stability. The establishment of a temple in the Bronx and one later in Brooklyn was a notable undertaking and remains to this day a symbol of the unique role NYANA played via the Refugee Urban Skills Project in helping the refugees from Southeast Asia.

As planned from the outset, the Refugee Urban Skills Project ended in September of 1987 after three and a half years of service. NYANA, which originated and ran the project, provided invaluable help to hard-pressed communities in New York, to refugees and non-refugees. The Project's goals of educating and empowering refugees and their neighborhoods to better help themselves had been met. Indochinese refugees often expressed their appreciation to NYANA and the Jewish community and wondered why NYANA seemed so unique and special. The response was a natural one. We, the Jewish people knew all too well what it was like to be persecuted, to be refugees, to be the stranger. Our history, and our tradition of helping the stranger is a long and proud one to which NYANA added a small yet meaningful chapter.