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Tennessee center links refugees' 'hidden skills' to jobs

Nashville-based Center for Refugees and Immigrants awarded grant to help refugees overcome language and cultural hurdles

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Hamdi Dahir can transform a woman's hands, legs and fingers from ordinary flesh into a canvas for temporary henna tattoos with almost brocade-like intricacy in a matter of minutes.

Dahir, a refugee from Somalia, has a talent. What she doesn't have is a job, or the ability to speak English with the confidence necessary to describe her self-taught design skills to a business owner who might need them.

Enter the Center for Refugees and Immigrants of Tennessee.

In September, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement awarded the Nashville-based Center for Refugees and Immigrants a \$195,608 grant for each of the next three years to help refugees like Dahir overcome the kinds of language and cultural hurdles that sometimes stand between refugees and meaningful work.

"In a withered economy, knowing how to market one's hidden skills and somehow finding out about those hidden jobs is absolutely critical," said Carter Moody, the center's development director. "That's where the work is."

Over the first year of the grant, the center hopes to connect 52 individuals with jobs that are held for at least 90 days.

In September, the most recent month for which data are available, unemployment in Tennessee stood at 10.5 percent, down from a high of 10.7 percent a month before.

The tough climate for jobs all but requires refugees and immigrants to draw on basic networking skills.

Most resettled in Nashville

Since the start of the year, 1,019 individuals have been resettled in Tennessee by nonprofit agencies that partner with the federal government. More than two-thirds have been resettled in Nashville and hail from countries such as Myanmar (Burma), Bhutan, Iraq and Somalia.

Most arrive with no money and only basic clothing. Refugees who are allowed into the United States receive eight months of public support, including medical care. But after that time, refugees must become self-sufficient regardless of their English-language skill level, and they are not eligible for some social service programs, said Kerry Foley, a program manager at the center.

The Center for Refugees and Immigrants of Tennessee was one of just 16 agencies to apply for the federal grant, and it was only one of two centers that received the full amount requested. Part of the reason may be that the center plans to use its three-year grant to do more than offer traditional refugee services.

Thanks to a partnership made possible by the grant, the Opportunities Industrialization Center of Nashville and Goodwill Industries will help coach, train and try to place refugee workers in so-called "hidden jobs" — ones available largely through word-of-mouth rather than help-wanted ads.

And the center itself will try to connect with employers in an effort to establish the kind of relationship that might bring a call about a job vacancy or a request for workers with specific skills, said Foley.

"Refugees can bring a lot to the table," said Foley. "One of the things that we like to point out is that many times refugees are going to have no problem working Christmas or Thanksgiving or other holidays that may have meaning to other workers. So one of the things I'll be saying is, 'If you have a factory or a business that needs to operate year-round, here's a whole group of legal workers to consider.' "

Other options for work

Earlier this year, Dahir's henna designs drew a long line at the Celebration of Cultures, a community festival at Centennial Park. Someone taking pictures noticed that the controlled way Dahir used a twisted bag of henna paste with a corner snipped off to create freehand designs on skin wasn't much different than how cake decorators work with icing.

"I had never thought of cakes," said Dahir, through a translator. "But I like the idea. ... My husband likes the idea, and I want to work." Dahir also has hopes of one day becoming a doctor.

Staff members from the Opportunities Industrialization Center have told Moody they receive calls from employers looking for cake decorators every year during the busy holiday season.

For now, Moody and Foley are working to develop a photo portfolio of Dahir's work and are contemplating ways to connect her with caterers, cake makers and other businesses that may need someone with intricate design skills. Foley even has a potential business name for Dahir's designs: "Henna by Hamdi."

But sometimes a refugee's search for work is more complicated than marketing. This week, the Tennessee Foreign Language Institute, another agency partnering with the center under the grant, began setting up community-based English language learning classes in partnership with the center.

To meet the center's goals for community-based language instruction, Moody hoped to attract about 20 people. Instead, 62 adults — mostly women — showed up for the initial testing necessary to participate in an English language course.



Sahra Roble watches as Hamdi Dahir puts a henna design on her arm. A federal grant is enabling the Nashville-based Center for Refugees and Immigrants of Tennessee to help refugees overcome language and cultural hurdles and find meaningful work by marketing their 'hidden skills' to potential employers. (LARRY MCCORMACK / THE TENNESSEAN)



Hamdi Dahir shows designs she drew on her arm and hand using a bag filled with henna paste. Dahir, a refugee from Somalia, says she hopes one day to be a doctor. (LARRY MCCORMACK / THE TENNESSEAN)



Sahra Roble shows the design Hamdi Dahir put on her hand using a twisted bag filled with henna paste — a technique much like a cake decorator's. (LARRY MCCORMACK / THE TENNESSEAN)