



Project has refugees helping refugees
By BOB REEVES / Lincoln Journal Star

Refugees face many challenges, including adapting to a strange culture, learning a new language and becoming productive members of American society.

So who better to help them than refugees who have already gone through that?

That's the philosophy behind a new project based at the Asian Community and Cultural Center, which will assist refugees from four target populations.

"We will find refugees (or former refugees) interested in volunteering to help other refugees in their own communities," said Jason Varga, who will coordinate the project under a three-year grant from the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement.

Varga, who began his new job this week, is seeking volunteers from Lincoln's Asian, Middle Eastern, Eastern European and African communities to serve on a community leadership team.

The 12-member team, with three representatives from each target group, will meet to help plan the new program and work with individual refugees.

"Refugees come with unique needs," which can best be understood by people who share their cultural background and experiences, he said.

"But they also have many of the same needs as other refugees."

Besides being of help to other refugees, the leadership group will focus on how Lincoln's refugee populations can work better together and help each other, Varga said.

"There are several cultural issues every refugee must learn, such as the health care, schools, work protocol and more," said Modesta Putla, executive director at the Asian Center. "The project's intent is not to make them give up their own culture, rather encourage them to keep it, but learn what they need to (learn) in order to be self sufficient."

Varga has considerable experience working with refugees. He helped immigrants and refugees learn English as a tutor, tutor trainer and project director with the Lincoln Literacy Council for nearly five years.

For the past 3½ years, he was program manager for the F.I.R.S.T. (For Immigrants and Refugees Surviving Torture) Project, which had another federal grant to help immigrants and refugees who were victims of torture. His was one of five staff positions eliminated when the project lost its funding.

Varga also has served on the New Americans Task Force, made up of representatives

of nearly 40 human service agencies that work with immigrants and refugees in Lincoln and Lancaster County.

“Over the last several years I believe Lincoln has gained a reputation for helping refugees,” Varga said. “With this project, I hope to further extend that reputation and continue to educate the community about what refugees endure as well as how they help our community.”

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