

Uncommonwealth: Kentucky Refugee Ministries continues to grow its staff, budget and number of refugees it helps

By Cheryl Truman. ctruman@herald-leader.com. January 25, 2016 10:55 AM.

Highlights

- An offshoot of Louisville organization, it started with one employee
- Lexington could receive 300 refugees in 2016
- Refugees receive help getting settled, learning language, enrolling children in school, applying for jobs



Barbara Kleine, left, is director of Kentucky Refugee Ministries in Lexington and Dragana Zaimovic is the program leader and employment case manager. Pablo Alcala palcala@herald-leader.com

Barbara Kleine, director of Kentucky Refugee Ministries' office, points to a to-do list on the wall of her office: It's a couple of feet long and takes a minimum of 18 months to accomplish. Printed on it is every permit, form and check that refugees must pass on their way to becoming settled in a new home.

If all goes as planned, Lexington will receive 300 refugees in 2016 who will begin that step-by-step journey.

It's an obstacle course of bureaucracy, and Kleine's office is there to help refugees with official paperwork and the more day-to-day aspects of moving to a country where you may not speak the language, have a couch or a cooking pot or know how to enroll your children in school.

"It's a very well-screened group of people who come," Kleine said.



Globally, the numbers of refugees are stunning: The United Nations said that as of the end of 2014, nearly 60 million people had been forced from their homes — as refugees, internally displaced or seeking asylum.

Amberly Raider was teaching a class at Kentucky Refugee Ministries in Lexington last Wednesday. Pablo Alcala palcala@herald-leader.com



Amberly Raider, right, taught Daisy Johnson, a refugee from Burma, at Kentucky Refugee Ministries. Pablo Alcala palcala@herald-leader.com

If the number of displaced were a country, the U.N. said, it would be the world's 24th most populated.

Lexington got its first organization dedicated to refugee services — from providing housing to offering education and job counseling — in 1998. Kentucky Refugee Services was established in Louisville in

1990.

“I really did not have a lot of refugee qualifications, beyond a desire to do it,” said Kleine, who would become the first employee of the Kentucky Refugee Ministries’ Lexington office.



Rehani Mbula, right, helped Fnu Sadiqullah and his sons, Emal Kahn Alkozai and Ajmal Alkozai at Kentucky Refugee Ministries in Lexington last Wednesday. Sadiqullah and his family recently arrived as refugees from Afghanistan. Mbula is a refugee from the Congo who recently moved to Lexington and studies accounting at the University of Kentucky. Pablo Alcala palcala@herald-leader.com

For years the office was at Maxwell Street Presbyterian Church, one of the refugee service's early

Lexington supporters. It now has an entire wing at Arlington Christian Church on North Limestone, where it employs 24. Its faith footprint now extends into other denominations, such as the Episcopal Migration Ministries and Church World Service.

The United States State Department requires organizations such as Kentucky Refugee Service to document that they have community support and local partners. As the Lexington office grew, Kleine was joined almost immediately by Dragana Zaimovic, now the program leader and employment case manager.

Kentucky Refugee Ministries operates with donations as well as grants. It is a registered 501(c)3 nonprofit organization that raised \$810,813 in 2014 and provided \$5.3 million in services.

While many Somalis and Sudanese settled in Louisville, Lexington has had more refugees resettled from the Congo, said Kleine. Kentucky Refugee Ministries gets three days to a month's notice of a refugee's arrival and is then charged with having an apartment that is safe, clean and on a bus line, as well as providing “a culturally appropriate warm meal.”

The organization provides coats and hats for winter, and is always in need of housewares for arriving refugees. It also is working to establish a social media presence so that refugees can stay in contact in more modern ways.

Zaimovic is still friends with the sponsors that helped her family when she first arrived in 1994, Bob and Libby Allen.

“We fit instantly, perfectly,” she said, even though they didn’t speak the same language.

Zaimovic, 60, has now lived a third of her life in Lexington. She lives with her 80-year-old mother.

“I feel like really a Lexingtonian,” she said. “There’s always people I know somehow.”



Refugee Nicole Tshibangu worked at a reception desk at Kentucky Refugee Ministries. The organization operates through donations as well as grants. Pablo Alcala palcala@herald-leader.com

Since 2000, more than 1,000 refugees have come to Lexington including Bosnians, Kosovars, Liberians and Congolese. While it hopes that refugees accomplish self-sufficiency within six months, Kleine said that some manage it in four months or less.

Some former refugees now work for Kentucky Refugee Ministries.

Rehani Mbula, 25, came from the Congo, first going to Tanzania and then to his family’s first U.S. home in San Antonio. Now he’s in Lexington, studying accounting at the University of Kentucky.

“Once I got here I found I really like the working,” he said. “People seem so social.”

Bosko Cupac, a Kentucky Refugee Ministries job developer, came to Pulaski County from Croatia in 2000. He attended the University of the Cumberlands, where he played soccer and then spent four years teaching biology at Whitley County High School before moving to Lexington.

While recent anti-refugee rhetoric has been difficult for supporters of Kentucky Refugee Ministries to hear, Kleine said there has been one advantage: “Our support here has nearly quadrupled. ... We are lucky because we get to see the good side. Welcoming the stranger, treating everyone with love and respect is really what we are called to do.”

“We know hundreds of amazing people who came as refugees. They are resilient and courageous and determined. What better people would you want as part of your community?”

For more information on the Kentucky Refugee Ministries, go to KYRM.org

This story was altered to correct information about Dragana Zaimovic's family members in Lexington.

<http://www.kentucky.com/living/article56445490.html>