

The Information Needs of Female Afghan Refugees

Recommendations for Service Providers

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INTRODUCTION

This report of recommendations for service providers consists of actions suggested from the research findings in my dissertation to help improve services for Afghan refugees (Smith, 2008). The research focused on how female Afghan refugees in the San Francisco Bay Area made sense of and sought help in the difficult and confusing situations women experienced during premigration, flight, resettlement, and adjustment (Dervin, 2003). The findings include specific needs for information the women had. The study also examines related communicative actions the women did or did not take to resolve their difficult situations. Most of the findings are also applicable to male Afghan refugees,¹ and some findings will likely be applicable to other refugee groups as well. This research is not specifically focused on the needs of second-generation Afghans, who grew up in the United States. An electronic copy of the dissertation, with the complete findings, is available at <http://csueastbay-dspace.calstate.edu/handle/10211.5/9>. Print versions are also available at the Fremont Main Library, the Centerville Library in Fremont, the San Francisco Public Library, and California State University, East Bay's University Library.

Of interest to service providers, the women interviewed said that many services exist to help Afghan refugees resettle and adjust to their new country and that they appreciate these services. Several agencies and individuals provide these services, such as government and professional organizations, community groups, and intimates (family, friends, and peers). The study did not examine the effectiveness of the professional organizations and community groups serving Afghans and other refugees. Yet from the viewpoint of the women, while some needs are sufficiently met, other information needs remain and their questions have gone unanswered. A few of the possible reasons why the information needs are not met include: the services are not provided to the community, demand exceeds supply, or the refugees are unaware the services exist. However, these possible reasons have not been formally studied and are not always considered in this discussion. Also, this research found that a lack of coordination seems to exist among organizations serving Afghans.

This report provides a brief background and then offers 30 recommendations for consideration by service providers.

BACKGROUND

This background consists of a summary description of the Afghan diaspora in the San Francisco Bay Area, an explanation of the qualitative research methods used in this study, and details about the interview sample.

The Afghan Diaspora

Afghan refugees fled Afghanistan from 1979 into the new millennium following the Soviet invasion, the Mujahideen takeover, the Taliban rule, and the U.S. led military action against Afghanistan's Taliban regime. Roughly one-third of the prewar estimated Afghan population of 15 to 16 million had fled for their lives to different parts of the world less than a decade after the Soviet invasion of 1979 (Sliwinski, 1988). Their numbers peaked in 1990 at more than 6.3 million refugees (UNHCR, 2000). The Afghan exodus has at times accounted for up to "one-half of the world's estimated refugee population" (Zulfacar, 1998,

¹ Findings specific to female Afghan refugees relate to special considerations some women encounter as widows, as domestic abuse victims or survivors, and as mothers who would need child care to attend an English language learning class or receive other services.

p. 59). The decades of warfare did not end with President Hamid Karzai's election in 2004, as violent outbreaks by the Taliban have continued.

Afghans resettled chiefly in the neighboring countries of Pakistan and Iran, with some in India, and with others in various parts of the world, including the United States. From 1980 through 2004, nearly 50,000 people from Afghanistan entered the United States as official refugees or asylees (Office of Immigration Statistics, 2006). The largest Afghan diaspora community in the United States settled in the Northern California area, centered in the City of Fremont in Southern Alameda County to the East of San Francisco. Up to 30,000 Afghan refugees may live in the S. F. Bay Area, not including native born children (Lindgren & Lipson, 2004; Robson, Lipson, Younos, & Mehdi, 2002; Yollin, 2002).

The Northern California Afghan population is "heterogeneous with regard to politics, social class, ethnicity," and "urban or rural origin" (Lipson & Omidian, 1993, p. 72). Although they share the Afghan nationality and most are staunch Muslims, San Francisco Bay Area Afghans range from conservative to moderate and from traditional to more cosmopolitan (Lipson, Omidian, & Paul, 1995). Afghan refugees arrived in Fremont, California, and the larger San Francisco Bay Area in two primary immigration waves. A steady influx arrived from 1980 to 1993 and a second, smaller wave occurred from the late 1990s to the present time. The earlier and much larger group of arrivals in general consisted of the more highly educated Afghans who often held government or leadership positions in Kabul, or were in professional roles such as doctors, business owners, or university professors. The second group of newcomers included large numbers of people from rural areas, who often had little or no formal education. Widows have also comprised a large part of this second immigration wave since 1999, when they were classified by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as "women-at-risk" (Robson, Lipson et al., 2002). Information needs were sometimes distinct for these two groups who differ in arrival times and sometimes in socioeconomic status (Neufeld, Harrison, Hughes, Spitzer, & Stewart, 2001).

Qualitative Research Methods

To understand how Afghan refugee women in the San Francisco Bay Area made sense of and sought help in their difficult and confusing situations, including their related information needs and communicative actions, an interpretive, qualitative approach was used. An interpretive, qualitative methodology provides the opportunity to explore a question or issue in depth, and to understand the women's problems and perspectives from their own frame of reference, which is important to understand their needs accurately (Berkowitz, 1996). The research was conducted through 40 in-depth qualitative interviews, averaging two hours each; a focus group; ethnographic participant observation in the local refugee community for more than two years; and consultation with key cultural informants. Consistent with a qualitative approach, the full dissertation describes the women's important situations and their needs in detail, integrates multiple viewpoints from the community, and explains various related communicative behaviors.

The Interview Sample

Ten gatekeepers provided entrance into the community for this research, through four distinct research sites. Most of these gatekeepers were interviewed by me, providing the perspectives of community leaders and professional helpers, and many of them referred from one to four people who I also interviewed to create a purposive sample (Patton, 2002), of 40

Afghans interviewed, a standard approach for qualitative research. Maximum variation was a goal of the sample, which included early, middle, and recent arrivals; self-described modern, middle, and traditional mindsets; 35 women and five men, ranging in age from their early twenties to late seventies; leaders, professional helpers, and laypersons; married, single, divorced, and widowed females; Pashtuns, Tajiks, Farsiwans, and Hazaras; college educated, high school educated, grammar school educated, and non-schooled people; and English speaking and non-English speaking respondents, who were interviewed by me through trusted and trained interpreters.² All interviewees spoke fluent Dari and seventeen participants were also familiar or fluent in Pashto. Dari and Pashto represent the two major languages of Afghanistan.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations that follow are based on the needs identified by female Afghan refugees during open-ended, in-depth interviews of their situations, understanding shared by Afghan professional helpers, knowledge gained through ethnographic participant observation experiences, insights from key cultural informants, and ideas from a literature review of relevant nonacademic sources (George et al., 2000; Ho, Cheung, Bedford, & Leung, 2000; Wong, 2003). These suggestions are for consideration by government bodies, refugee service agencies, and community organizations to improve services to Afghan refugees and refugees from other countries where applicable. Footnotes often offer related background information selected from my dissertation. After explaining the key communicative concepts found in this study related to the recommendations, specific areas of information needs are discussed.

Key Communicative Concepts

This research has found four communicative themes that influence the ability of female Afghan refugees to resettle in and adjust to their new country successfully. A refugee woman adjusts best who goes through these steps:

1. Develops a trusting interpersonal relationship with one or more “point persons” as her primary source of information for all of her needs³;
2. Learns to speak fluent English⁴;
3. Gains an understanding of how she can directly⁵ navigate the U.S. information systems, such as the government and social service systems, to get things accomplished in the U.S. on her own (e.g., without relying on others); and,

² Future research should investigate the needs of disabled Afghan women and men by purposively including them in the interview sample—especially given that many have suffered from war injuries.

³ From the interviewees’ perspectives, interpersonal relationships—with family members, friends, peers, and professionals—are central to receiving answers to the questions they have in their premigration, flight, resettlement, and adjustment situations. The research revealed that the structure of the interpersonal relationships that helped the refugees the most consisted of an Afghan woman having one or more “point persons” as her main source of information for various needs. I use the term “point person” broadly to refer to a person who serves in this resourceful and supportive role for the refugee (see Recommendation 4 for further information).

⁴ This study found that learning English is a primary goal for many Afghan refugee women who are personally able to do so. They believe that learning the English language is the key to open the door for understanding “the system” and eventually coming to peace with culture clashes and generation gaps, as well as bridging gaps in their understanding represented by everyday information needs.

4. Practices asking questions of strangers and others in customer service and professional service positions, and learns to advocate for herself and her family.⁶ Step one is vital for the well-being of refugees who are not self-sufficient in the U.S. By completing steps two, three, and four refugees will become more independent in this country. These communicative themes are considered in the recommendations below.

Overview of Recommendations

The following table provides a brief overview of the recommendations. Then each recommendation is discussed separately.

Table 1
Overview of Recommendations

Information Needs	Recommendations
Family Reunification	1. Advocate to the Government for Policy Changes on Behalf of Refugees
Immigration, Migration, and Mobility	2. Develop a Comprehensive Refugee Information and Referral Resource Directory 3. Conduct Orientation Seminars for All New Refugees 4. Develop Pools of Trained “Point People” 5. Ensure that Each Refugee is Paired with a Trained Point Person 6. Ensure that Point People Receive Ongoing Support 7. Establish Funding for Point Person Programs

⁵ Afghan refugees come from a society with traditionally tribal structures in the rural areas and authoritarian forms of government in the cities. In those settings, the average citizen is accustomed to being told what to do by family members or the government in many spheres of life. Individual decision-making and control, especially for some women and the young, can be nonexistent. For those who did make decisions, having technologically produced data or even much mediated information accessible at one’s fingertips to inform the decisions was not likely. As they enter the United States, Afghan refugees encounter a foreign information system that is directly accessible by individuals to a greater or lesser extent and in which independent actions and decision making are more often the expected norm. As an example, a professional helper, who is Afghan herself, states about many refugees she assists, “They don’t know the system.” A systemic gap in understanding exists in which her clients’ expectations often remain consistent with the old system in Afghanistan, to be told what to do or to rely on someone else take care of the details of one’s needs—if they are to be met at all. My study found that a major underlying gap or information need refugees experience is they usually do not understand how this direct system of information access functions in U.S. culture and society or how they can participate in it.

⁶ Difficulty in making the cultural leap to being individually empowered to ask questions and even ask for help, versus feeling collectively enmeshed and culturally constrained in part because of being embedded within the forces of honor and shame or traditional practices, was an underlying gap found in this research. Whereas the collectivist familial structure of society in Afghanistan largely supports the notions of honor and shame, the individualistic structure of society in the United States sustains and often rewards individual agency and question-asking.

*Table 1
Overview of Recommendations, continued*

Information Needs	Recommendations
Education and Schooling	8. Assess English-Level, Special Needs for English Class Placement 9. Evaluate the Adult School English Learning Program 10. Create Native-Language Specific Adult English Classes 11. Develop More Community English Classes 12. Create a Home Tutoring Program 13. Create Televised English Classes 14. Increase Government and Private Foundation Funding
Employment	15. Build Employable Skills 16. Establish Training on the Job Search Process 17. Create an Internship or Volunteer Work Program 18. Provide Training and Microloans for Business Start-Ups
Health	19. Create a Pool of Trained Afghan Medical Interpreters 20. Create and Expand Health Promoters Programs 21. Develop Strategic Health Education Outreach Programs for Broadcast Television
Mental Health	22. Create Additional Social Support Groups 23. Create Ongoing One-On-One Supportive “Point Person” Relationships (<i>see Immigration, Migration, and Mobility above</i>)
Transportation	24. Create a Driver Licensing Program
Human Rights	25. Help Men and Women to Learn English (<i>see Education and Schooling above</i>) 26. Build Employable Skills (<i>see Employment above</i>) 27. Develop More Educational Campaigns for Broadcast Television 28. Educate Young People through Standardized Curriculum at the K-12, College, and University Levels 29. Include Men in Discussions and Decision-Making
Community	30. Develop an Afghan Community Center

Each recommendation is discussed in the next section in detail.

Family Reunification Information Needs

An inherent part of the migration process for most refugees is separation from family members through death or displacement. When an Afghan refugee resettles in the United States, she likely has relatives remaining in Afghanistan or Pakistan’s harsh conditions and may have family members in other countries as well. A daily mental stress for refugees consists of their worry about the safety of their loved ones and their desire for family reunification.

The United States has an intermittent history of welcoming refugees and asylum seekers. In recent years, a 1996 law and the U.S. government's actions since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, have greatly curtailed the number of deserving refugees and asylum seekers⁷ allowed into this country. A deserving or qualified refugee or asylum seeker is one who flees his or her country because of a "well founded fear of being persecuted," such as being tortured, imprisoned, or killed (UNHCR, 1967, p. 16). The "Illegal Immigration Reform and Responsibility Act of 1996" erected three new procedural barriers for asylum seekers, resulting in thousands of qualified asylum seekers being barred from entry into the United States. They were sent back to their home countries for almost certain imprisonment or death. First, a "summary expedited removal process" gives the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) inspectors at "airports and borders – rather than trained immigration judges – the power to order immediate deportation of a person who arrives in the U.S. without proper travel documents"⁸ (Acer et al., 2002, p. 3). Many genuine asylum seekers do not have government travel documents because these are the "governments that have targeted them for persecution" (p. 5). Second, "mandatory detention" is required of "asylum seekers who are subject to the expedited process" (p. 3). Third, "a filing deadline . . . bars asylum claims that are not filed within one year of a refugee's arrival," thus the asylum claims of "many deserving refugees have been rejected or denied" (p. 2). In addition to making it more difficult for a person seeking safety to be granted asylum, since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the U.S. government has dramatically decreased refugee admissions into the country and refugee funding in general (The Refugee Council, 2005). Results of the procedural changes for granting asylum introduced by the 1996 law and the general curtailing of refugee admissions since 2001 means diminishment of our country as a safe haven for refugees and asylum seekers. Policy changes are needed to reverse this trend.

⁷ According to U.S. law, a person seeking asylum in the United States after entering the country is called an "asylum seeker," in contrast to a refugee who has permission to enter the country before arrival. Asylum seekers are detained until their status is determined and then they are either granted asylum or deported back to their homeland. Except for this recommendation, throughout the rest of this report the term "refugee" has been used as inclusive of both refugees and asylum seekers and as defined by international law, "a person who is outside the country of his or her nationality and is unable or unwilling to return to that country because of a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion" (*Eligibility for Refugee Assistance*, 2003; UNHCR, 1967, p. 16).

⁸ As the Human Rights First organization reports, "In fiscal year 1999, the INS deported 89,035 people under expedited removal, and 99.3% of those deportees were returned without a referral for further examination to determine whether a 'credible fear of persecution' existed or whether U.S. citizenship or another lawful basis existed for admission into the United States. In fiscal year 2000, approximately 85,338 people were deported under expedited removal. In fiscal year 2001, approximately 69,772 people were deported under expedited removal" (5) (Acer, Massimino, Savitt, Vladeck, & Danzig, 2002). It is unknown how many of these people were deserving of asylum, but "the cases we do know of raise serious concerns about the impact of the 1996 law on refugees" (Acer et al., 2002, p. 3).

1. Advocate to the Government for Policy Changes on Behalf of Refugees

As declared by the Human Rights First organization, “The U.S. should restore fairness to the asylum process so vulnerable refugees . . . are not unfairly denied a safe haven in this country” (Acer et al., 2002, p. 3). The U.S. should also increase the number of refugees allowed into the country and support family reunification. Thousands of Afghan refugee families in the San Francisco Bay Area are separated from loved ones who are still in physical danger.

Immigration, Migration, and Mobility Information Needs

Government and professional organizations, community groups, and intimates (family, friends, and peers) currently provide a wide range of information and services to assist recent Afghan and other refugees with resettlement. Even though services need improvement or are lacking, as highlighted in this report, many refugees upon arrival receive some help in the following areas:

- Meeting immediate food and clothing needs,
- Enrolling in public assistance,
- Securing affordable housing,
- Enrolling their children in school,
- Having an initial health assessment,
- Acquiring health insurance, and
- Being referred to English language classes.

Although many refugees receive some help, messages communicated about these areas do not reach other refugees. Several coordinated steps should be taken to improve outreach and services as described below.

2. Develop a Comprehensive Refugee Information and Referral Resource Directory

Service providers should collaborate to unify their information and referral lists into a comprehensive directory. The comprehensive booklet could also be available online for easy access by people serving the needs of refugees. The directory should be developed to include contact information for appropriate resources that fill the information needs above as well as information about how to access resources in the following areas:

- Refugee orientation seminars,
- Translation and interpretation services,
- Employment training centers,
- Driving schools,
- Mosques,
- Libraries,
- Physical and mental health clinics,
- Domestic abuse hotlines and counselors,
- Drug and alcohol abuse treatment centers,
- Culturally appropriate social support groups, and
- Community education programs.

Afghan community leaders should be consulted in developing the booklet. When complete, this directory will be useful for point persons (see below) as they help the new arrival to resettle and adjust to this country. The booklet will also show at a glance what services are provided for refugee communities and what services are lacking.

3. Conduct Orientation Seminars for All New Refugees

Classes should be held in person, broadcast over local Afghan television stations, or available in DVD format in their native language or using an interpreter on how to access and understand U.S. systems of:

- Transportation,
- Emergency services,
- Economics and business (including the nature of nonprofit organizations),
- Employment (including if and how professional credentials can be recognized),
- Education,
- Social life,
- Political processes (including a basic overview of the U.S. court system and how it functions),
- Health services
- Mental health services (including the professional's oath of confidentiality),
- Consumer information (including opening checking and savings accounts and setting up a line of credit),
- Welfare benefits and policies,
- Legal rights and responsibilities,
- Tax issues, and
- Family reunification policies.

If broadcasted over television, the information could take the form of brief public service announcements or longer seminar formats.

4. Develop Pools of Trained "Point People"

A special type of helpful interpersonal relationship was found in my research, in various ways and with various names, for those refugees who adjusted best to this country. The common elements were:

- The female Afghan refugee had an ongoing, trusting relationship⁹ with an Afghan¹⁰ or non-Afghan who was fluent in English and understood U.S. culture and information systems¹¹ (e.g., how to get things done in the United States),

⁹ An ongoing relationship allows time for building trust. These influential gatekeepers must be trustworthy, holding the Afghan refugee's problems in the strictest confidence to protect her from any community gossip and shame. Because of ethnic tensions, exposure to trauma, and any histories of personal betrayals, trust usually takes a considerable amount of time to build among Afghans, especially if the person is not part of one's immediate family.

¹⁰ Frequently the helpful person is someone who is an Afghan refugee herself or himself and thus in prior years has had experiences similar to those of the person being helped.

¹¹ To be most effective, the trusted person must be fluent in English and knowledgeable about how information flows in various segments of U.S. culture, such as in the economic, governmental, social service, and educational arenas. With this understanding, ideally the point person serves as a resource person and advocate who helps acculturate the refugee into her new life, step by step.

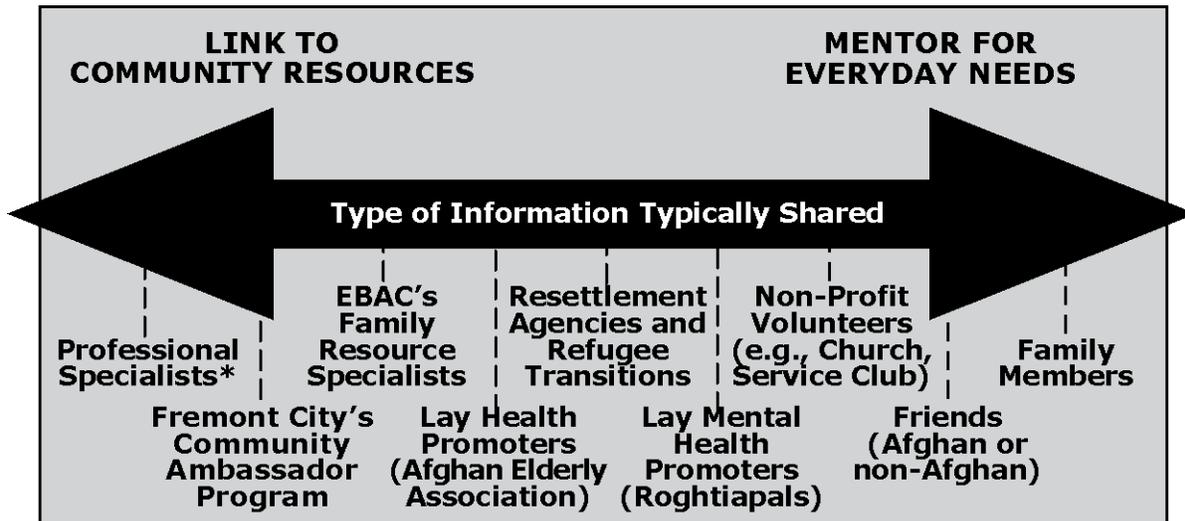
- The refugee turned to this person for most or all of her questions and needs and often for social support,
- The helper answered the refugee’s questions and showed her how to do everyday things (e.g., how to turn on the stove, how to take the bus, how to go shopping),
- The person also met the refugee’s needs by accessing community resources and services in the larger information environment for the refugee as a liaison or “go-between.”

I have used “point person” as an umbrella term in my study to refer to this knowledgeable person a refugee has a trusted interpersonal relationship with and turns to as her main source of information.

As an overarching concept, point person relationships can be represented on a continuum by the types of information the refugee typically seeks from that person (see Figure 1). On one end of the continuum is a point person who serves as the link for a refugee to the social service, educational, economic and other systems, helping the refugee to access community resources and services. On the other end of the continuum is a point person who offers social support to a refugee by helping her with everyday needs and offering a special kind of friendship. Clearly the nature of the friendship is not among equals, because the point person has much more knowledge about the English language and U.S. culture, so the power structure in the relationship is more characteristic of a caring and compassionate mentorship. Even though the information shared in a point person relationship typically emphasizes either (1) serving as a link to community resources and social services, or (2) becoming a mentor and friend to help with everyday needs, most of these relationships include some information exchange of the other type.

Figure 1

Point Person Relationships Continuum



* Professional Specialists are valuable, but not true point persons as defined here since their roles are limited to sharing information related to their area of specialty, such as about health or public assistance.

My research found that point person relationships formed formally through organizations and informally among family members and friends. Seven instances of formal point person pools revealed in my study were: (1) the City of Fremont’s Community Ambassador Program for seniors, in partnership with faith-based and cultural organizations;

(2) the non-profit East Bay Agency for Children's (EBAC's) Family Resource Specialists; (3) lay health promoters through the Afghan Elderly Association, comprised of trained Afghans who reach out to their family members and friends with education and support; (4) resettlement agencies, such as the International Rescue Committee and Catholic Charities USA, which serve refugees for their first four to eight months after arrival; (5) Refugee Transitions, with volunteer home tutors who are able to help some refugees after the four to eight month time period elapses; (6) lay mental health promoters ("roghtiapals"), similar to the health promoter model, comprised of a collaboration between the Afghan Coalition, EBAC, other Afghan groups, and Alameda County; and (7) non-profit volunteers, such as church groups and service clubs, who "adopt" a refugee family to help them become oriented to everyday life in the United States. The first two programs emphasize the point person serving as a liaison to community resources. The next four instances balance both community resource and everyday needs support. The seventh example focuses on the point person offering friendship and social support for everyday needs. Aside from these programs, most of the service professionals in formal specialties who helped refugees were limited by their professions or funding sources to provide assistance only in specific areas, leaving the refugee without a ready liaison in other areas and often without access to knowledge, resources, or social support.

Two patterns of informal or naturally occurring point person helping relationships that emerged from my research were: (1) with a relative who sponsored the family member to settle in the United States and (2) with an Afghan or non-Afghan friend or stranger who the refugee met after arriving in this country. These informal relationships also emphasized the social support or befriending model, but included connecting the refugee with needed resources. However, the relative or friend was usually not an expert in accessing community resources or the social service system.

Many refugees are not fortunate enough to have a point person so committed to their well-being in their new country. Therefore, the importance of encouraging, funding, and developing pools of "point people" should take high priority since these important interpersonal relationships are central to the ease of a refugees' successful adjustment. More formal "Point Person" pools should be developed and comprised of trusted Afghan and non-Afghan persons who know English and understand U.S. culture and information systems (e.g., how to get things done in the United States). Each pool can emphasize the community resource model or mentor model, but offer training of point persons to cover the spectrum for the most basic information needs. If a mentor model is developed, a previous study by Behnia (2007) discusses such "refugee befriending programs"¹² and how to overcome challenges in the recruitment and retention of volunteers.

A formal pool of point persons should consist of trained volunteers, of trained laypersons who receive stipends, or of professionals being paid as resource specialists. Each potential point person—whether a family member, friend, professional, or any resident who knows English and is trustworthy—should be willing to commit to the time for training and for service in advance. The training should be professionally developed, consulting with local

¹² "Befriending programs" have been developed for refugees in a variety of countries with the goal of easing integration. Volunteers "offer emotional, informational, and instrumental supports including assistance in learning about the new society and language," and "searching for a job" and housing (Behnia, 2007, p. 3).

experts and universities, and professionally conducted. The training materials and curriculum should include the point person:

- Receiving a copy of the *Refugee Information and Referral Resource Directory* (see Recommendation 2);
- Signing up to attend the series of orientation seminars for new refugees or viewing the series over television or by DVD (see Recommendation 3);
- Receiving cultural sensitivity training;
- Learning three of the key communicative concepts found in this research and how to help the refugee develop in these areas;¹³
- Comprehending the importance of professional boundaries (such as avoiding financial or romantic entanglements) and of keeping confidences; and
- Understanding the limits of his or her role and seeking guidance when needed (since they are usually not professional counselors or social workers, point persons should know how to seek professional guidance and refer the refugee to an appropriate person when a situation becomes too complex or difficult).

Formally developing such pools of caring point people and expanding existing pools will help resolve information and social needs for refugees. A pool can reach out to the general refugee population to develop point person relationships or a pool can develop for a specific type of refugee. For example, the Community Ambassador Program focuses on seniors. Other potential pools could specialize in the needs of widows or single parents with children, disabled refugees, or low-income families. The informal development of point person relationships among family and friends should also be encouraged, with an invitation to join a formal pool and receive training.

5. Ensure that Each Refugee is Paired with a Trained Point Person

In a formal point person program (see Recommendation 4), each Afghan refugee or family of refugees could choose at least one point person to go through training, such as his or her relative who arrived in the United States earlier, or be partnered with a point person of the same gender who is a volunteer or receives a stipend or salary.¹⁴ If professionals in specialized service positions decide to serve in volunteer point person roles they might become better equipped with comprehensive knowledge to continue to serve their usual clients in their areas of specialty. Grown children of refugees may also be well suited to serve as point persons. Ideally, the refugee or refugee family will build an ongoing relationship of trust with his or her specific point person that lasts for the months and years until the refugee can navigate resources and feel comfortable in this country on his or her own. Refugees already established in the United States who would like a point person should also be welcome to participate in the program.

News about a point person program could be spread by word-of-mouth, disseminated through organizations, and broadcast over local Afghan and non-Afghan television stations,

¹³ Over time the point person could teach the refugee about (1) the importance of learning English, (2) how in the U.S. system people can gather information directly from sources rather than relying on a family elder or leader, and (3) how to ask questions of strangers and others in professional service positions, as well as how to advocate for oneself.

¹⁴ Interview respondents sometimes expressed preferences for health care providers to be of the same gender when possible. By extension, same-gender point persons would also likely be preferred.

inviting refugees to request a point person and inviting Afghan-Americans and non-Afghan Americans to join as point persons.

6. Ensure that Point People Receive Ongoing Support

When formally organized, the pool of point people should ideally have access to a professional organization that continues to provide support and supervision for the point persons, serving as a “home base.” The organization’s staff should be committed to assisting a point person when the refugee has questions the point person cannot answer or a situation becomes too difficult, or more than a matter of just providing resource information. Yet, it is also understood that many relatives and friends serve informally as point people and so the choice would be up to them about whether they want to formally connect with and be supervised by such an organization. However, relatives and friends should be made aware that such support exists. The organization’s staff could provide telephone support to any point person who has a question, whether formally a part of the ongoing program or not.

7. Establish Funding for Point Person Programs

Government and private foundation funding should be increased to support systematic point person programs. Unlike most currently existing funding priorities, which typically pinpoint meeting specific categories of need, such as a health or youth focus, my research revealed that funding a variety of point person programs will support the manner in which Afghan refugees who adjust best to this country actually seek help and gain new information for a wide range of needs across the spectrum. Community-based organizations should educate local decision makers and funders about the need for point person programs. A documented case for funding should be made, using this research as supporting evidence.

Education and Schooling Information Needs

A major underlying need of female Afghan refugees and refugees in general is to learn to speak English fluently as this ability creates the opportunity for them to better meet their other information and service access needs,¹⁵ become more self-sufficient in this country, and keep family harmony. Ideally, they will learn to read and write in English as well. Some refugees, who are not literate in their native language or have little formal education, may not yet understand how crucial learning the English language is for their successful adjustment and so they often do not put much energy into the effort initially until a communication gap grows between them and their children over the years as their children attend school through the U.S. educational system. Then they greatly desire to learn English. Thus Recommendation 4 above includes teaching new arrivals about the importance of learning English (see Footnote 9 for more details). Many other women participants in this study expressed their desire to learn English since their arrival in this country, but they have encountered roadblocks hampering their efforts. They state that their primary barriers consist of: (1) their English teacher speaking only English, (2) being in a class with students at a variety of different English-speaking levels, (3) lacking transportation, child care, or both, which prevents them from attending classes. This section will focus on addressing the difficulties these females face in learning English

¹⁵ Of course immediate emergency relief and resettlement needs will remain for refugees even if they were fluent in English and in some cases longer term social services will still be necessary for a variety of reasons, such as being in a single-parent household or being disabled from the war in Afghanistan.

8. Assess English-Level, Special Needs for English Class Placement

Alameda County or a separate agency should conduct a formal assessment of the English speaking level and special needs of each incoming adult refugee, similar to how it has formalized the procedure for initial health assessments. Currently such an assessment does not exist. A couple of interview respondents have stated that they simply receive a list in the mail written in English of Adult School English classes they could attend. However, they were unable to understand the class offerings due to their limitations with reading and understanding English. The English assessment could be conducted with the health assessment or in coordination with another service that already exists, such as when families apply for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF; formerly AFDC) or get Medi-Cal. Care should be taken to clarify that speaking English is not a requirement for entry into the country. Rather, the approach should consist of informing the person that the assessment will help place them in an appropriate English class so they can succeed. In addition to evaluating an individual's English-level, agency personnel should also assess special needs, which may include the following:

- Whether the person is literate in her native language,
- How much previous schooling she has had,
- Whether the person is elderly,
- If transportation will be available to attend class,
- Whether child care will be required,
- Whether learning disabilities or neurological disabilities or both exist,
- Whether any special accommodations will be needed, and
- What class the person can afford.

The individual could then be referred to the appropriate university, college, adult school, or community class, or be connected with a home-tutoring program, if available.

9. Evaluate the Adult School English Learning Program

A formal review of the Adult School English Learning Program should be conducted to ensure classes are provided for refugees and immigrants tailored to the following areas:

- Their English-level (see Recommendation 8)
- Special needs (see Recommendation 8), and
- Native language (see Recommendation 10).

New classes needed to meet these objectives should be funded.

10. Create Native-Language Specific Adult English Classes

Interview respondents want their native language to be considered in Adult School English classes, especially at the literacy level when they cannot read or write in English, by either having:

- A bilingual teacher instructing a class of students who speak the same native language, or
- By having interpreters (whether volunteer or paid) available in the classroom to help interpret for the students (see *Project SHINE* for an example of college students serving in this role for service learning credit).

Unlike children in kindergarten through the twelfth grades, adult school education is not compulsory and the students are not immersed in an English-only environment all-day

long.¹⁶ Having bilingual speakers available will help the refugees to succeed and not drop out, especially if such a class is held near where they live and with child care available.

11. Develop More Community English Classes

In these classes, held by community and church groups, functional or conversational English literacy should be taught at a minimum. In addition to discussing in more depth the types of topics that might be covered in an Orientation Seminars for new refugees (see Recommendation 3), practical subjects could include getting health care, taking prescriptions, getting an interpreter at the doctor's office, going to the bank, accessing social services, going to the grocery store, using public transportation, using the library, calling the school office to report an absence, and asking for help. Lessons could cover the basic vocabulary and situations of each topic, using graduated repetition. In many cases, volunteer bilingual teachers or English-only teachers, with an interpreter, could teach the classes, keeping the classes low cost. Second-generation adult Afghans could be recruited to fill some of the instructor roles. Standardized curriculum should be selected or developed and funded (see the "LifePrints" curriculum by *New Reader's Press* for an example). Transportation and child care options should be made available to students who need assistance in these areas.

The City of Fremont's partnership with the Taiwanese Evergreen Academy could serve as a model of the possibilities. This academy operates a Saturday language program, catering primarily to elders and offering three levels of English classes, basic, intermediate and advanced. After the classes are held, a hot lunch is served followed by crafts, other social activities, or a guest speaker.

12. Create a Home Tutoring Program

An adaptation of the Home Tutoring Program model used by Refugee Transitions should be considered for expansion and implementation in the Southern Alameda County area, to be offered in conjunction with formal English Classes or especially for people who are unable to leave their home to attend English classes. People who might especially benefit from home tutoring include:

- Older refugees,
- Mothers,
- Widows,
- People with health limitations,
- Teenagers, and
- Children.

Afghan and non-Afghan adult volunteers should be sought as tutors for the Home Tutoring Program. In some instances, the tutor-student relationship has the potential to develop into a mentoring relationship for meeting everyday needs (see Recommendation 4). One source of volunteers might consist of college students of the same ethnicity and gender who are fluent in English and who participate for service learning credit. This program could serve as a way for them to assist refugees who are linguistically and culturally isolated, while decreasing the generation gap. The effectiveness of a Home Tutoring Program might be increased if the tutor uses a digital recorder or camcorder to record each lesson on a DVD for the student to

¹⁶ Even though the focus of the discussion is on adult refugees, learning English is also not easy for children. Afghan parents can help their children to learn English by marking "Yes" on the school registration form when asked if their children are second language learners. Rather than being labeled as unintelligent, their children will receive the English learning classes they need to succeed.

play back during the week as a review. Another effective approach could be to link the in-home tutoring with another form of language learning, such as the televised English classes discussed next.

13. Create Televised English Classes

Televised English classes broadcast over the local Afghan television stations in English and Dari should be included as part of a strategic mediated educational program to meet the many and diverse needs of refugees (see Recommendation 11 for topic ideas). Broadcast education is easily accessible for the students, who can study at home and videotape or digitally record the lessons for repeated playback until a lesson is mastered. The lessons could also be made available on DVD for check-out through local libraries or community organizations. These telecourses should include an option for completing homework and earning a certificate of completion. The Home Tutoring Program, discussed above, could be used as a supplement to the English class telecourse, allowing the student to practice English with the tutor and get feedback on his or her work.

14. Increase Government and Private Foundation Funding

Funding should be increased to support formal and informal English language programs and teachers, including a home tutoring program, to improve the array of important services offered and the quality of education for refugees. Community-based organizations should educate local decision makers and funders about the need for improved and additional English language learning programs. A documented case for funding should be made, using this research as supporting evidence.

Learning the English language is crucial for refugees and should be given high priority by the government, foundations, and refugee service providers. When people cannot speak the language of their host country, which takes time and commitment to learn, they stated to me that they “feel blind and mute,” even years after arriving in this country.¹⁷ They lack the ability to access and navigate local information systems for themselves and they can become disconnected from their children who grow up in this country, both leading to a variety of difficult situations on a daily basis.

Even though some refugees will not be able to learn English for personal reasons,¹⁸ refugees who are able to do so should be given the opportunity to learn English. As much as possible, we should remove the impediments from the service provision side that the women interview participants described. The United States has “a special obligation” to provide adequate English language education to refugees because they did not resettle in this country by choice (Wong, 2003, p. 78).

¹⁷ Raw data from a recent quantitative study conducted in the local Afghan refugee community found that 36% of Afghan refugees in the Bay Area speak little or no English and more than 40% read and write little or no English (see Stempel, 2009, for a summary of selected survey results). A newspaper article revealed that in the City of Fremont alone residents speak more than 137 languages (Johnson, 2006). From these statistics we can infer that first-generation refugees and immigrants from other countries may similarly have high rates of little or no English speaking ability, encounter barriers for those who attempt to learn English, and experience feelings of being “blind and mute.” Lack of English speaking ability is a major public health issue in our community.

¹⁸ Personal reasons for refugees not being able to learn English include being too old, having a learning disability, having too many family responsibilities, finding it too difficult to concentrate because of post-traumatic stress, or their husbands not allowing them to attend classes.

In sum, refugees should become aware of English classes available and, after an assessment, be placed in an appropriate level class—and a class that accommodates any special needs that may exist such as not being literate in one’s native language. Classes should be near where they live if transportation is difficult and child care should be provided when needed, or alternatives such as televised English classes, DVDs, or home tutors should be developed. In the class itself, the teacher should be bilingual or a bilingual interpreter should be available. Ideally, the students should be comprised of people who speak the same language in the same class.

Employment Information Needs

Many Afghan refugees are unfamiliar with the employment system in the United States and could benefit from assistance with building employable skills, training about the job search process, creating an internship or volunteer work program, and training and microloans to start their own businesses.

15. Build Employable Skills

A career counselor should assess the skills, qualifications, and education of each Afghan refugee and then refer the person for additional skill development as needed. For example, referrals could be made for vocational training or employment retraining. Ideally, universities and colleges could “organize short-term retraining courses for foreign-trained professionals” (George et al., 2000, p. 56). If the refugee has professional credentials, career advice should include if and how that person can take an exam or otherwise get her credentials recognized in the United States. Employable skills could be built not only for adult refugees, but for older children in the refugee family.

16. Establish Training on the Job Search Process

Workshops should be designed for Afghan refugees and taught by bilingual (Dari and English) instructors or English-only speaking instructors, with an interpreter, to teach the students about the individualistic-oriented U.S. employment-seeking system. In either case, the students should have at least a limited ability to speak, read, and write in English to participate in such a class and engage in a formal job search. In the workshop, they should be taught how to complete the following steps:

- Assess their interests and qualifications,
- Identify a career path,
- Conduct a job search,
- Create a targeted resume and cover letter,
- Practice mock interviews, and
- Create an interview follow-up letter.

Workshops can be designed in coordination with local One-Stop Career Centers, which are part of California’s Employment Development Department.

17. Create an Internship or Volunteer Work Program

Government agencies, community groups, and local businesses should collaborate to provide volunteer positions or internships for newcomers to help them gain U.S. work experience (George et al., 2000). Ideally, incentives for participation could be provided to the businesses. The business owner and staff members should also be trained how to interact in a sensitive manner with people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

18. Provide Training and Microloans for Business Start-Ups

Interested refugees should be trained in business communication and entrepreneurship skills, and then they should create proposals for a competitive bidding process in which the winners receive microloans to begin their own home-based or other businesses, called “microenterprises.” Typical microenterprises consist of gardening, specialty food production, childcare, “arts and crafts, and business and personal services such as computer repair or hair and nail care” (*AnewAmerica*). These businesses are often started to help families earn extra income to cover their expenses.

This step-by-step approach will help the refugees adapt to the U.S. system of work and become gainfully employed (see *AnewAmerica*, *C.E.O. Women*, and *Women’s Initiative for Self Employment* as examples).

Health Information Needs

The language barrier creates gaps for refugees in understanding health communication. Inaccurate language interpretation or limited English speaking ability in a health care setting can keep patients from knowing important information about their diagnoses, treatment plans, and medications as well as keep doctors from gaining an accurate assessment of the patient’s health difficulties. New arrivals often lack health education about the role of medicine, preventive care, a proper diet, and exercise. They also need assistance with accessing health insurance and the health care system.

19. Create a Pool of Trained Dari and Pashto Speaking Medical Interpreters¹⁹

Even though health care providers are required by California law to provide medical interpreters, a disparity exists. Afghans sometimes rely on family members to interpret for them at medical appointments or go without an interpreter at facilities in which the AT&T Language Line or a bilingual staff member is not available. A pool of Afghans and Iranians²⁰ should be trained in medical interpretation from a qualified program and be available on call when medical interpretation is needed (see City College of San Francisco’s *Health Care Interpreter Certificate Program* as an example). Afghans with medical backgrounds would be particularly well suited for such roles. They should be available to interpret for limited English speaking or non-English speaking Afghan patients and ideally receive a stipend, wage, or salary for their services. Consideration should be given to how to manage issues of trust between medical interpreters and patients to ensure that confidential information is not shared with others in the community and that patients have confidence that their personal information will remain private.

20. Create and Expand Health Promoters Programs

One effective approach to health education in the Afghan community, having lay health promoters, should be expanded. New health promoter programs should also be developed. More Afghan laypersons should be trained in the following areas:

¹⁹ Although not specifically found in this research, advisors have stated that trained bilingual court interpreters are also needed.

²⁰ Many Afghans who speak Dari (Persian Farsi) can understand Iranians who speak Farsi (a newer version of the Dari language). However, Iranians can have difficulty fully understanding Dari speakers.

- Preventive care,
- Basic health care for the most common medical problems among Afghans, and
- Accessing the health care system in the United States.

For a stipend, they could serve as community health promoters (a specialized, limited form of “point persons”—see Recommendation 4) in which they educate their family members and friends about these topics.

21. Develop Strategic Health Education Outreach Programs for Broadcast Television

This research found that the effective educational use of media from a communication perspective was rarely mentioned by interview participants and is possibly underutilized. Strategic entertainment education programs should be developed and implemented to teach the community in their native language about health issues, including domestic abuse, using an entertainment education format. Similar effective health campaigns have been developed in other communities and countries to teach the populace about issues including new prescription drugs and family planning, among others (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). The community engagement model for video production should also be considered (Murphy, Balka, Poureslami, Leung, Nicol, & Cruz, 2007). Other strategies already in use, such as a talk show or seminar format, should be further developed. DVDs of the programs could be made available for check-out through local libraries and community organizations.

Mental Health Information Needs

Common mental pressures for refugees stem from the shock over the death of a loved one, traumatic memories of war, the distress of living in a new culture, depression about previous losses, isolation, hopelessness about the future, and transnational ties with and worries about family members still living in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

22. Create Additional Social Support Groups

In addition to the existing social support groups in the community, such as the elderly women’s group, the elderly men’s group, and the sewing group, other social support groups should be developed. These groups should be started in neighborhood homes and apartments, near where higher concentrations of Afghans live, so people without accessible transportation can join. Groups should also be started with various ages and needs in mind.

23. Create Ongoing One-On-One Supportive “Point Person” Relationships

Linguistically and culturally isolated Afghan refugees should be partnered with a “point person” of the same gender who befriends them and who they can ask when they have everyday questions or need access to resources and information. The point person, who can serve as a volunteer or receive a stipend, wage, or salary, should speak English and understand U.S. culture and information systems (e.g., how to do things in this country). Ideally, the refugee or refugee family will build an ongoing relationship of trust with his or her specific point person through regular social contact that lasts for months and possibly years. This supportive social relationship can reduce mental health stressors. See the *Immigration, Migration, and Mobility Information Needs* section above for more details.

Transportation Information Needs

My research showed that lack of transportation is a barrier for refugees in attending daily English classes and gaining employment, and transportation is sometimes a barrier to receiving health care—however, family members, friends, and service providers do their best to provide transportation and make sure health appointments are kept. The public transportation system is sometimes used, but refugees—similar to other people—can have difficulty with paying for the expense and becoming tired by the number of transfers needed to reach their destinations. They also can experience feelings of disorientation or become lost, especially if they cannot speak, read or write in English.

24. Create a Driver Licensing Program

Some refugees desire to learn to drive. The Driver Licensing Service provided in Auckland, New Zealand, should be considered for implementation in our area. Refugees in New Zealand were identified who had the “greatest need to overcome” a transportation barrier (for example, homebound women) and who could “not afford to go to a private driving school” (Ho et al., 2000, p. 34). A community group arranged for a driving instructor at a reduced fee to provide “practical training on the road” and take the clients to “their driving tests” (p. 34). Two hundred people applied for the class, which was “restricted to only 40 participants” (p. 34). By helping refugees acquire a driver’s license, personal independence and self-esteem were promoted.

Human Rights Information Needs

Although defined differently in different cultures, human rights should universally be upheld to prevent various forms of domestic abuse within a family. Recommendations 25 and 26 below have been previously mentioned above and can indirectly help refugee females and males to disengage from systems of abuse over time. Recommendations 27 and 28 directly communicate information to help educate the community and others about this issue. The final recommendation in this section, to include men in all discussions and decision-making, represents a general attitude for approaching this issue.

25. Help Men and Women to Learn English

In the *Education and Schooling* section above, various ideas were recommended to help Afghan men and women to learn English. By learning English, Afghan refugees will be less isolated and become more self sufficient in their English-speaking environment, reducing stressors in the family. At the same time, the family may consciously retain cherished aspects of Afghan culture and language, and teach these aspects to their children, to stay connected with their valuable heritage.

26. Build Employable Skills

In the *Employment* section above, building employable skills through vocational training or employment retraining was recommended. Many refugees have lost the status they once enjoyed in Afghanistan. Even though some people have regained a level of professional status, others rely on public assistance or low paying jobs. If they had the opportunity to rebuild their careers and restore their honor, this employment could also reduce stressors in the family.

27. Develop More Educational Campaigns for Broadcast Television

One effective educational approach for reducing domestic abuse has been through various television programs, often in a talk show or call in format.²¹ Additional approaches could be developed to include public service announcements (PSAs) and entertainment education programs, demonstrating alternative ways of communicating and behaving.

28. Educate Young People through Standardized Curriculum at the K-12, College, and University Levels

Refugees, immigrants, and native-born children, teenagers, and young adults should receive standardized, age-appropriate education in non-violence, anger management, conflict communication and resolution, and peer mediation training so as not to repeat unhealthy communication patterns and behaviors of their parents, grandparents, or other elders.

29. Include Men in Discussions and Decision-Making

Several respondents advised that men should be included in all important discussions and decision making, especially when change is involved, for sensitive topics, and when the man is traditional. An Afghan nurse, Afsana (a pseudonym), speaks from experience, “Decisions should not be made without the men, even for women’s issues such as birth control or human rights education, or they’ll put a stop to it once they find out.” If men are included and understand the reasons for the change, they will feel much more comfortable with it.²²

Community Information Needs

In Afghan society, family life is central to culture and consists of kinship ties among extended family members, which can number in the hundreds. When their lives are disrupted by war, membership in what was the lifelong, stable kinship group rapidly changes as family members are killed, go to war, or flee. Ways should be sought to restore the deep sense of

²¹ According to Dr. Farid Younos, who broadcasts a weekly television program in Dari about domestic abuse, four components combine to exert tremendous pressure on the Afghan refugee family. These factors contribute to higher rates of domestic abuse among refugee families than the United States society at large. These components are: 1) Afghans are forced immigrants who did not choose to leave their country; 2) most Afghan refugees in the Bay Area are from middle and upper middle class, educated backgrounds, yet the professional credentials they held were not recognized in the U.S., forcing many men to get low paying jobs or rely on welfare; 3) Afghan families are independent from others and do not like foreigners interfering in their business; and 4) Afghans are a conservative, Muslim, tribal people who find it difficult to accept the liberal atmosphere here, which can lead to family quarrels. Afghan men who feel mental pressures that can lead to abuse need not just fear appeals, but education that it is possible to extract this unhealthy element and still retain healthier aspects of their religious and cultural identities (Smith, 2007).

²² The important role of men in a traditional and patriarchal society needs to be acknowledged for effective change to occur where tension exists in family relationships and when human rights are not honored. In this research, key cultural informants advised the following communicative approach when viable: (1) Afghan male leaders should educate other traditionally-minded men when change is introduced, preferably through the mosques and using the Qur’an; and (2) changes should be implemented slowly, by first identifying with a man and building a relationship of trust, then by taking changes step-by-step over time. These suggestions are intended to protect the honor and status of men, while promoting human rights and strengthening family relationships.

communal belonging for Afghan refugees that was a natural pattern of life before the wars in Afghanistan.

30. Develop an Afghan Community Center

A few of the key cultural informants and interview participants expressed the desire for an Afghan community center. Their vision for the center includes a “one-stop” place for new arrivals and other refugees to receive services, attend various classes and workshops, check-out DVDs, hold social support groups, participate in mental health clinical groups, and be linked to transportation and interpretation services for health clinic visits and other doctor appointments. Larger cultural gatherings and youth events could be held at the center. Separate male and female exercise facilities could also be provided. The India Community Center in nearby Milpitas, California, could serve as a model (see *India Community Center*).

CONCLUSION

Many of the recommendations for improvement of services for Afghan refugees presented in this report are applicable to other refugee groups as well. The need exists for government bodies, refugee service agencies, and Afghan community organizations, as well as other refugee groups, to review and enhance current programs that assist refugees with resettlement and adjustment. Afghan refugees and other refugees should be consulted and involved in developing and implementing any program designed to serve them. Financial and human resources should be sought and prioritized to establish a point person program, streamline English language learning, and provide for the needs of special populations (for example, widows, the elderly, non-schooled persons, and domestic abuse victims).

In sum, many recommendations are offered here for consideration. Development of any recommendation should include Afghan community leaders and representative laypeople. The possible role of mosques in planning and implementing these recommendations should be explored, as should the role of any government and ethnic community groups already actively involved in the discussion. Additional ways should be sought to strategically use mediated communication, especially television since it reaches both literate and not literate viewers. The needs of non-schooled refugees and the option of providing services not only in Dari but in Pashto²³ should be considered for any program.

For more than 20 years Afghan refugees comprised the largest refugee population in the world, with more than half of all refugees being Afghan. As of 2008, one out of every four refugees worldwide is from Afghanistan (UNHCR, 2009). With the events of September 11, 2001, and the U.S.’s subsequent involvement in the war in Afghanistan, we have the charge to assist our Afghan refugee neighbors with successful resettlement and adjustment.

²³ Nearly all Afghans in the local community speak fluent Dari, so services are sometimes provided only in Dari or Dari/English. However, Pashtuns—the majority ethnic group in Afghanistan—have Pashto as their first language and would appreciate services in their native tongue where feasible.

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