

## Highlight

### Catholic News Service

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (CNS) -- When a family flees its homeland and resettles in the United States, the ordinary challenges of family life are dramatically intensified on all fronts.

That's why Catholic Charities of Tennessee began a pilot community program this March called Strengthening Refugee Marriages.

"Refugee couples have experienced so many stresses in their lives prior to resettling in the United States," said Holly Johnson, director of refugee and immigration services at Catholic Charities. "Once here, they face many new challenges as they struggle to establish themselves in a new country and adjust to a new culture."

In just the past two years, Catholic Charities of Tennessee has helped resettle more than 300 refugees, primarily from Africa, South Asia and the Near East. The marriage program, funded by a grant from the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement, includes a peer counseling program for refugee families and their children. It also teaches relationship and communication skills and appropriate parenting and family behavior.

As many refugee families discover, cultural attitudes in America toward parental roles, child-rearing and behaviors may differ from their native land.

"Our goal is to help refugees build strong and healthy families, to teach them new relationship skills and provide resources for them to get there," said Guy Muhire, program coordinator. He said the six-week program focuses on parents, children, adult relationships, change, problem-solving and passing on values to the children.

"We've found that refugees that come over here have too many stresses even before they arrive," said Muhire, who came to Nashville as a refugee from the Congo. "There's stress from the refugee camps because of rape and violence and war. Stress from the most basic violations of human rights."

He told the Tennessee Register, diocesan newspaper in Nashville, that many refugees may have lived for a long time in camps where there is a lack of adequate food, safety, education or employment. "Then once they arrive here, there is a whole new set of challenges like language and cultural adaptations that all affect family life," he said.

"The main problem is refugee families don't have the time to communicate with each other," Muhire said. "Back home, the husband may have worked while the wife stayed home, but here everything is expensive and everyone needs to work. That reduces the time available to communicate. And, when the husband comes home from his new work and is stressed, the last thing he wants to hear about is his wife's stresses, the children's stresses. So no one communicates during that period of adjustment."

He said children typically adapt more easily and learn the new language quicker than their parents do, but they also tend to forget cultures and traditions of their native land faster.

Muhire pointed out that the Catholic Charities program is not saying that marriage in refugee families is weak, but instead is attempting to "give support and strength" to couples in the process of adjusting to a new way of life.

Refugee couples have been recruited and trained as peer counselors through the program, and Catholic Charities is working with other refugee and human rights organizations in the Nashville area, including the Kurdish Human Rights organization, to extend the training materials and resources and share concerns and experiences.

The new program focuses on the need for couples to speak up about what is bothering them, to listen to each other and find a way to negotiate about family members' needs. It also deals with culturally sensitive topics.

"For example, many parents grew up with physical discipline and are used to doing the same with their children, especially in the refugee communities," Muhire said. "But, here, if you hit a child, you may find someone going to the police about it or the child may even be taken away," which is why the program offers alternatives to physical discipline.

That's why peer counseling is such a crucial component, Muhire added.

"Everybody has something to bring," he said. "Everybody comes to America bringing a gift that's really special to their new country. Peers meet with them on how they can share that gift, how they can maintain a healthy family relationship and a healthy marriage."

Nashville was one of four U.S. dioceses to pilot the program under a federal grant administered by Migration and Refugee Services of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. The others were the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis and the dioceses of Phoenix and Allentown, Pa.

In its second phase, the program has been expanded to another 13 U.S. Catholic dioceses, in addition to the first four.